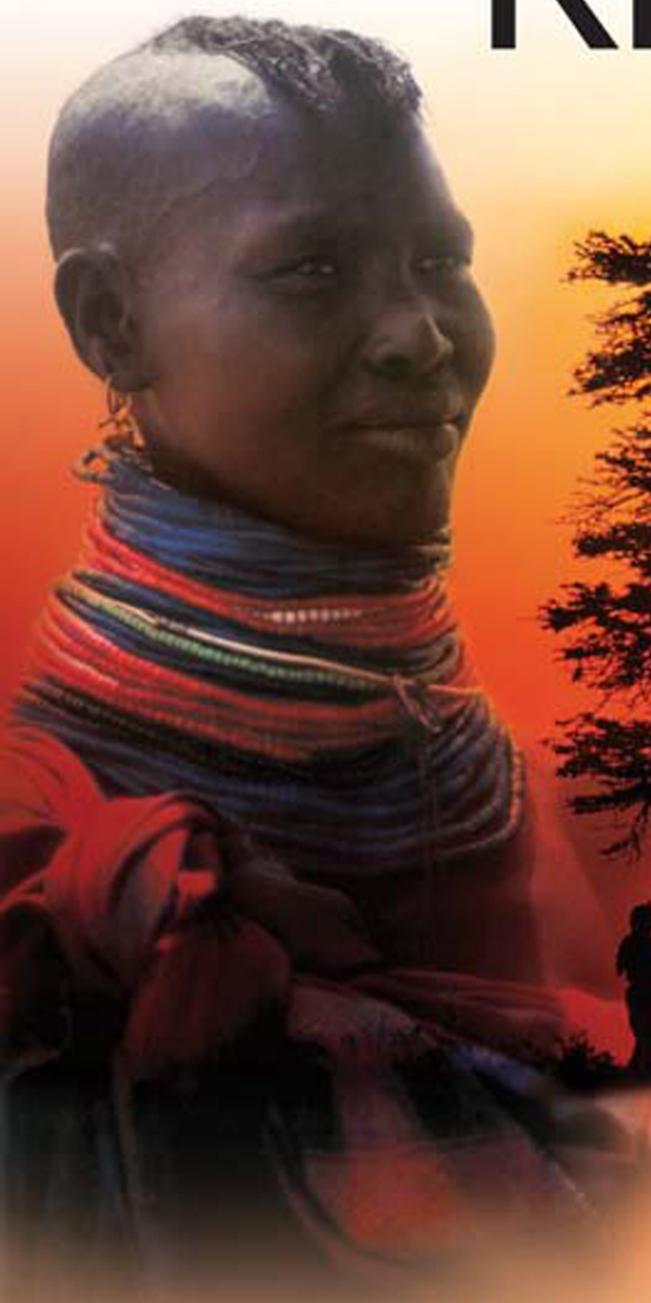


ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
**AFRICAN
RELIGION**



EDITORS
MOLEFI KETE ASANTE
AMA MAZAMA

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**AFRICAN
RELIGION**

EDITORS

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

AMA MAZAMA

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY



Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore • Washington DC

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Ekoi	Harvest	Kirdi
Ekpo Secret Society	Hathor	Kisalian Graves

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| Kurumba | Nganga | Pedi |
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| | Nkisi | Petwo |
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| Marriage | Ogboni Society | |
| Mawu-Lisa | Ogdoad | Queens |
| Medicine | Ogun | |
| Medicine Men and Women | Ohum Festival | Ra |
| Mediums | Okande | Rada |
| Mende | Okomfo Anokye | Rain |
| Min | Olodumare | Rain Dance |
| Montu | Olokun | Rain Queen |
| Moon | Olorun | Red |
| Mossi | Ontology | Reincarnation |
| Mountains and Hills | Opening of the Mouth | Resistance to Enslavement |
| Mount Cameroon | Ceremony | Rites of Passage |
| Mount Kenya | Oracles | Rites of Reclamation |
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| Muntu. <i>See</i> Bumuntu | Oral Tradition | Rivers and Streams |
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| N'domo | Ovaherero | <i>Sankofa</i> , Film |
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| Nehanda | Oya | |

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| Saramacca | Swazi | Vèvè |
| Sarcophagus | | Vilokan |
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| Seclusion | Tallensi | Vodou in Benin |
| Seers | Tano River | Vodou in Haiti |
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| Societies of Secrets | Transformation | |
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| Sopdu | Triads | Yam |
| Sotho | Tsonga | Yanvalou |
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| Suman | Umbanda | Zoser |
| Sun | Umbilical Cord | Zulu |
| Sunsum | Underworld | |
| Susu | | |

Reader's Guide

The Reader's Guide is provided to assist readers in locating articles on related topics. It classifies entries into 16 general topical categories: Ancestral Figures; Communalism and Family; Concepts and Ideas; Deities and Divinities; Eternality; Nature; Personalities and Characters; Possessors of Divine Energy; Rituals and Ceremonies; Sacred Spaces and Objects; Societies; Symbols, Signs, and Sounds; Taboo and Ethics; Texts; Traditions; and Values. Entries may be listed under more than one topic.

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Boukman
Chiwara
Fatiman, Cécile
Gulu
Guro
Imhotep
Makandal
Nanny
Nehanda
Oduduwa

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Abosom
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Ancestors
Ancestors and Harmonious Life
Birth
Blood
Bumuntu
Burial of the Dead
Children
Elders
Family
Family Rites
Fertility
Marriage

Placenta
Pregnancy
Procreation
Puberty
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Bantu Philosophy
Blessing
Calamities
Cosmology
Creation
Cultural Relocation
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Ontology
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Origin of Religion
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Akamba
Amen
Anubis
Anukis
Apep
Apis
Asase Yaa
Aten
Atum

Ausar	Ra	Mountains and Hills
Auset	Ruhanga	Mount Cameroon
Azaka, the Loa	Sekhmet	Mount Kenya
Bes	Serapis	Ocean
Bondye	Seshat	Plants
Chi	Set	Pythons
Danbala Wedo	Shango	Rain
Divinities	Shu	Rivers and Streams
Eleda	Songo	Rocks and Stones
Eniyan	Sopdu	Serpent
Ennead	Tefnut	Sky
Esu, Elegba	Thoth	Sun
Ezili Dantò	Tibonanj	Tano River
Ezili Freda	Wepwawet	Thunder
Faro	Woyengi	Trees
God	Yao	Water
Goddesses	Yemōnja	Waterfalls
Hapi	Zin	Wind
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Ngai	Nature	Bubembe
Ngewo	Air	Bubi
Nkulunkulu	Animal Images	Fatiman, Cécile
Nyame	Animals	Imhotep
Nzambi	Bats	Kings
Obatala	Birds	Laveau, Marie
Oduduwa	Caves	Makandal
Ogdoad	Clay	Queens
Ogun	Earth	Tauctona
Olodumare	Fire	Tutankhamen
Olokun	Food	Women
Olorun	Health	Zoser
Orisha Nla	Hunting	
Orunmila	Lakes	Possessors of Divine Energy
Oshun	Lightning	Babalawo
Oya	Moon	Bokonon
Ptah		

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Asante
Azande
Baga
Baganda
Bakongo
Bakota
Balanta
Balengue
Baluba
Bamana
Bamileke
Bamun
Banyankore
Banyarwanda
Bariba
Barotse
Bassa
Basuto
Batonga
Bete
Bobo
Candomblé
Chagga
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Convince
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Justice
Maat
Neb Ankh
Sacrifice
Seba
Shame
Transcendence and
Communion
Transformation
Triads

About the Editors

Molefi Kete Asante is professor in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. Dr. Asante has published 67 books; among the most recent are *Afrocentric Manifesto* (2008); *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (2007); *Cheikh Anta Diop: An Intellectual Portrait* (2006); *Spear Masters: An Introduction to African Religion* (2006), coauthored with Emeka Nwadiora; *Handbook of Black Studies* (2005), coedited with Maulana Karenga; *Encyclopedia of Black Studies* (2005), coedited with Ama Mazama; *Race, Rhetoric, and Identity: The Architecton of Soul* (2005); *Erasing Racism: The Survival of the American Nation* (2003); *Ancient Egyptian Philosophers* (2000); *Scattered to the Wind* (2002); *Custom and Culture of Egypt* (2002); and *100 Greatest African Americans* (2003).

He has recently been recognized as one of the most widely cited scholars. In the 1990s, he was recognized as one of the most influential leaders in American education. Dr. Asante completed his MA at Pepperdine and received his PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, at the age of 26, and was appointed a full professor at the age of 30 at the State University of New York at Buffalo. At Temple University, he created the first PhD program in African American Studies in 1987. He has directed more than 140 PhD dissertations. He has written more than 300 articles for journals and magazines and is the founder of the theory of Afrocentricity.

Dr. Asante was born in Valdosta, Georgia, in the United States, of Sudanese and Nigerian heritage, 1 of 16 children. He is a poet, dramatist, and painter. His work on African language, multiculturalism, and human culture and philosophy has been cited by

journals such as the *Africalogical Perspectives*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Journal of Communication*, *American Scholar*, *Daedalus*, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, and *Africaological Perspectives*. The *Utne Reader* called him one of the “100 Leading Thinkers” in America. Dr. Asante has appeared on more than 50 TV programs. In 2002, he received the distinguished Douglas Ehninger Award for Rhetorical Scholarship from the National Communication Association. He regularly consults with the African Union. In 2004, he was asked to give one of the keynote addresses at the Conference of Intellectuals of Africa and the Diaspora in Dakar, Senegal. He was inducted into the Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent at the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University in 2004, and he is the recipient of more than 100 national and international awards, including three honorary degrees.

Dr. Asante is the founding editor of the *Journal of Black Studies* (1969) and was the president of the civil rights organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee chapter at UCLA, in the 1960s. In 1995, he was made a traditional king, Nana Okru Asante Peasah, Kyidomhene of Tafo, Akyem, Ghana.

Ama Mazama is associate professor of African American Studies at Temple University. She was born and grew up in Guadeloupe, Eastern Caribbean. She received her PhD in Linguistics from the University of La Sorbonne, Paris, at the age of 26, with Highest Distinction. Before joining Temple, Dr. Mazama taught at the University of Texas, Austin, and Penn State, College Park, and was a visiting professor at Georgetown University and Howard University.

She has published eight books in French or English, including *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (2003), *L'Impératif Afrocentrique* (2003), *The Encyclopedia of Black Studies* (2005) (coedited with Molefi Kete Asante), and *Africa in the 21st Century: Toward a New Future* (2007), as well as more than 60 articles in French and English in national and international journals. Dr. Mazama's early work was on the African roots of Caribbean creole languages.

Dr. Mazama is the associate editor of the *Journal of Black Studies*, the top scholarly journal in Black Studies. In 2007, the National Council of Black Studies presented her with the Ana Julia Cooper and CLR James Award for her contributions to the advancement of the discipline of Black Studies.

Dr. Mazama has lectured nationally, throughout the United States and internationally, in Paris,

Vienna, London, Birmingham, South America, Benin, West Africa, Canada, and, of course, in the Caribbean, her place of origin. She is a highly sought after lecturer and workshop leader in the field of African and African American infusion in school curricula. An expert in linguistics and cultural theory, Dr. Mazama has been cited by numerous school districts for her work in Pan African culture.

In 2002, she was initiated in Haiti to become a Mambo, that is, a Vodou priestess. Thus, Ama Mazama's knowledge of African religion is not only academic but also, and most important, stems from a lived experience. The mother of three, Dr. Mazama is committed to recording and transmitting knowledge of the African cultural traditions to present and future generations.

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Introduction

The *Encyclopedia of African Religion* is the first comprehensive work to assemble ideas, concepts, discourses, and extensive essays on African religion. Over the years, there have been numerous encyclopedias on religion from other parts of the world, but African religion has often been relegated to “primitive religions,” “African mythologies,” or “tribal religions” sections of such works on religion. It is as if African religion is an afterthought in the eyes of the authors and editors of such volumes. Of course, these designations are clearly based on outmoded and problematic Western notions of Africa, and we have created this encyclopedia as a monument to the memory of those Africans who left us enough information from which to rediscover for the world the original beauty and majesty of African culture.

There were two objectives in advancing this work to the public. First, we wanted to provide the primary material necessary for further research, analysis, and exposition of the concrete beliefs of African people. Second, we sought to elevate the discourse around African religion, suggesting by the presentation of nearly 500 entries that there was still much we did not know about African culture. Africa is the second largest continent in the world. Yet its intellectual and cultural contributions remain among the least understood if we take the written records about the continent and its people as sources of knowledge about the continent. There are still those whose knowledge of Africa is grounded in the perceptions and attitudes of missionaries, merchants, and marines who have occupied the continent through foreign religions, trade, or guns. The enormity of African contribution to ideas of religion, spirituality, and ethics has gone unappreciated by religious scholars, although at the beginning of human history, Africa makes its case for the origin of religion in an official, formal manner. It is our hope that the

reflection on African religion occasioned by these entries will enhance our understanding of the African world and provide a new adventure for comparative studies.

Unquestionably, a work as innovative and comprehensive as this encyclopedia makes its mark in the area of intellectual inquiry by staking out new areas of knowledge. It provides the reader with new metaphors, tropes, figures of speech, modes of reasoning, etymologies, analogies, and cosmogonies to satiate the intellect. Only in such an encyclopedia as this can one truly grasp the enormity of Africa’s contribution to religious ideas. Thus, this work presents richly textured ideas of spirituality, ritual, and initiation while advancing new theological categories, cosmological narratives, and ways to conceptualize ethical behavior.

Given that we viewed African religion as one religion and the African continent as a whole, we were inclined to introduce classical African religious ideas, from the beginning of Kemet to the arrival of Christianity and later Islam in Africa, as significant forerunners of much of continental African thought. The same appeal to ethics, based on righteous character; the same search for eternal life, found in living a life where good outweighs evil; and the same openness to ancestral spirits, *kas*, as remaining among the community of the living, creates an appreciation of the recurring cycle of humanity. Correspondences of language and concept as with *Amen*, *Amani*, and *Imani*, which are transgenerational and transcontinental, remain vibrant parts of the African legacy of religion. When the Akan use the words *Kwame*, *Asare*, and *Nkwa*, they recall the more ancient *Amen*, *Ausar*, and *Ankh*. Several books, starting with the older works of Eva Meyerowitz, have examined these correspondences. Of course, in more recent times, Afrocentric authors such as Mubabinge Bilolo, Chinweizu Chinweizu, and Theophile Obenga

have identified other correspondences in the religious and philosophical traditions of Africa.

The fact that Western or Islamic categories, which come much later than African religion, have often been employed in the discourse on African religion means that we have not yet established enough concrete data for asserting the African religion. Because of this reality, much of African religious thought has been distorted and confused as authors have tried to force newly discovered or uncovered or different concepts into old and familiar classes. Therefore, as editors, we have avoided ironclad classificatory schemes and sought entries that revealed as closely as possible the actualities of African societies. What we wanted the entries to reveal was the thinking of African people about religion from the earliest of times.

The 20th-Century Rediscovery of African Religion

The extraordinary attention and widespread interest aroused by the publication of John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* thrust African religion into the modern discourse about ways that humans have experienced the sacred. Subsequent African authors such as Bolaji Idowu, Kofi Opoku Asare, Emeka Nwadiora, Ifa Karade, Wande Abimbola, and Laurent Magesa engaged the discussion on African religion with the idea of expanding and clarifying much of what was written by Mbiti in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, in most cases, these writers were, like Mbiti, Christians or newly reconverted Africans who were attempting to explain African religion in the context of Christian theology. Mbiti, for example, had been an ordained Anglican priest who was eventually elevated to canon in 2005.

Born in Kenya, Mbiti studied in Uganda and the United States before finally completing his doctorate at Cambridge. During his career, he taught religion in Africa and Europe and was the director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute. Although it was his intention to challenge Western assumptions that African religion was demonic and anti-Christian, Mbiti's work, written from a Christian perspective, had the impact of catering to Western ideas about Africa. As a parish minister in Burgdorf, Switzerland, Mbiti continued to advance the idea

that Christianity was more significant than African religion and never returned to the religion of his ancestors. Although this is not meant as a condemnation, it is nonetheless an awareness of the complexity and contradictions of Mbiti's approach to traditional African religion.

Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* remains a classic text in the historical sense, but it further complicates the discourse on African religion by insisting on a plurality of religions in Africa. A number of writers have contested this reading of African culture, claiming that the unity of African religion is uncontested by philosophy, practice, and ritual. Actually, Mbiti's original title to his book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, suggests his own ambivalence about the nature of this unity. "African religions" in his title is problematic, but "African philosophy" is not. One is an insistence on plurality, and the other is a statement of unity. In the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, we have taken as a starting point the unity of African religion, although we are quite aware of the diversity of expressions of that religion, much like one would see in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, or other human religions.

African religion dramatizes its unity in the universal appeal to the spirits that animate all of nature. Humans, stones, trees, animals, lakes, rivers, and mountains are conjoined in one grand movement toward the continuation of life. However, the entries that are included in our *Encyclopedia* have convinced us that the ideas of reciprocity, circularity, and continuity of the human community are essential elements in the discourse on African religion. At the core of this continuity is the belief that ancestors remain active in the community of the living. Almost all other actions on Earth are dependent on the eternal community that encompasses the unborn, the living, and the deceased.

The *Encyclopedia of African Religion* articulates a philosophical approach to this topic that situates African transcendent expressions in a unitary sense. Fractured by numerous cultural and spiritual intrusions, African religion has withstood the worst of human brutality and cruelty against other humans with solemn resilience. There are some beliefs and aspects of life and knowledge that are consistent across the continent. For example, human beings originated on

the continent of Africa, and the earliest human consciousness toward the awesomeness of nature and the mysteries of life and death was an African experience. In Africa, the world exists as a place full of energy, dynamism, and life, and the holding back of chaos by harmonizing the spirit world is the principal task of the human being in keeping with nature. In the African world, spirits exist. This is not a debatable issue in most African societies. The existence of spirits that are employed in the maintenance of balance and harmony represents the continuous search for equilibrium.

The idea that a creator exists is also at the base of this African reality. In fact, African people have lived with the name of a Supreme Deity longer than any other people because the first humans who responded to the unknown with the announcement of awe originated on the African continent. This is not just true in the sense of oral tradition, but in historical time we know that the names of Bes, Ptah, Atum, Ra, Amen, Khnum, Set, Ausar, and Auset are among the oldest names for divinities in the world.

Nothing in ancient African culture was more standard and more consistent than the belief in a First Ancestor. Whether one was in the Nile, Congo, or Niger valley, Africans accepted the idea of a Supreme Being or a First Ancestor. There is generally the belief that a Supreme Being or First Ancestor arrived with the first ancestor of a group of people in a region. Sometimes these two entities are the same being, and at other times they are separate. An Akan saying is "God is the Great Ancestor." A woman dies and she is remembered for what she did on Earth, and the story is passed down from generation to generation; in the transmission, the story is embellished so that a current generation revels in the supernatural deeds done eons ago. She becomes the First Ancestor. We are in the province of mystery here because the numerous powers that may be called on to explain various phenomena will have their roots in the ancestral world.

The African Supreme Being, however, rarely plays a role in the daily activities of the people. No one would even think of knowing this being or trying to know him or her as "a personal savior." The Abrahamic deity of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is quite different from the African God of Yoruba, Zulu, and Gikuyu. Who could fathom

the possibilities of the Creator being involved on a personal level with humans? How could one have a personal relationship with God? How could God be a dictator in human life? Thus, the myths, stories, legends, and narratives that are created by the various branches of Popular Traditional African Religion Everywhere (PTARE) are designed to approximate the nature of the God of Gods or, at least, to provide the necessary and attendant assistants in the process of maintaining ethics without the universe.

What is believed intensely all over the continent of Africa is that the Supreme Being, who could be male, female, or both, created the universe, animals, and human beings, but soon retreated from any direct involvement in the affairs of humans. In some cases in Africa, the Supreme Being does not finish the creation; it is left to other deities to complete. Among the Yoruba, this delegation of creation appears when Olorun, the Owner of the Sky, the Supreme God, starts the creation of the universe and then leaves it to Obatala, a lesser deity, to complete the task. Among the Herero of Namibia, the Supreme God, Omukuru, the Great One, Njambi Kurunga, withdrew into the sky after creating lesser divinities and humans. There are neither temples nor shrines to the God of Gods among most people in Africa. In most cases, the lesser divinities are worshipped, revered, loved, and feared. Why should an Akan person fear Almighty God Nyankopon or the Yoruba people become frightened of Olorun or the Herero be scared of Omukuru?

Only at the most critical moment when it seems the entire universe is topsy-turvy or the cosmos may fail will the African person appeal to the Creator God. Of course, this situation is not expected. It is probably best summed up by the behavior of the Ewe of southern Ghana, who do not invoke the name of Dzingbe, the Universal Father, unless there is a drought. With a drought comes the possibility that there will be no food, and if there is no food, there will be no life. It is a time of severe crisis. They might then say, "Universal Father, Dzingbe, who rules the sky, to whom we are grateful, mighty is the drought and we are suffering; let it rain, let the earth be refreshed, let the fields be resurrected and the people prosper!" Otherwise, they do not bother the awesome Dzingbe.

Ancestors appear more important on a daily basis than the Supreme Deity. It is the ancestors who must be feared, who must be appeased, and to whom appeals must be directed; they are the ones who must be invoked and revered because they are the agents of transformation. In effect, the ancestors know the people; they have lived among them and have a keen insight into the nature of ordinary lives. A person's life can change drastically if he or she does not pay proper homage to the ancestors. Some ancestors, as we shall see, are more powerful than others, but all are essentially concerned about the well-being of the society.

Is Egypt Part of Africa?

There has been a tendency for Westerners to speak of Egyptian religion and African religion as if these were two separate entities. What this creates is a false dichotomy on the African continent, where Egypt is divorced from the rest of Africa or, to put it another way, Kemet is divorced from Nubia, as if there is neither contiguity nor continuity.

What is clear from many of the authors who wrote entries for this *Encyclopedia* is that ancient Egyptian religion was African religion; one cannot isolate Egypt from Africa any more than one can isolate a Christian Rome from a Christian Britain. Two different nations that practice the same religion with different accents and inclinations can be found on every continent. Egypt, or Kemet as it was called in the ancient times, is an African nation in the sense that the continental memory and cultural products are similar to those found throughout the continent.

Forty-two ethnic groups or political units called *nomes* existed in predynastic Kemet. Each nome possessed a name for the Supreme Deity. Every local deity was considered universal, omnipotent, ever-lasting, original, and a creator who made all things in the world. Ancient African sages could see from their own situations that humans lived in families, and there was no reason that the gods could not also have families. So the creator god in a local nome was given a family that included an intimate circle who intervened from time to time in the creation plan or in the organization of the world. A common family for the Supreme Deity

consisted of a triad. In this pattern, there was a godfather, goddess mother, and godchild. The great religious seat of Waset had a triad of Amen, Mut, and Khonsu while at Men-nefer (Memphis) there was the triad of Ptah, Sekhmet, and Nefertum. The Council of Nicea in 325 AD spoke of the Christian triad as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The female entity found in African religion had been removed from what was later called the Christian Trinity. In terms of the female energy, Auset was replaced by Mary, who was not a deity, but a virgin.

Clearly for us, this *Encyclopedia of African Religion* is focused on the totality of the African record without regard to region. Therefore, our headword list had to include concepts and entries that dealt with the religious thinking of ancient Kemet, as well as the Kikuyu, the Yoruba, and the Zulu. What is significant about this is that once a reader understands the mythological and philosophical foundations of African religion, the concepts are easy to access; it is like cracking a combination to a complex lock. Once it has been cracked, there is a new world awaiting the reader, who is able to peer through the metaphorical or mythical veils of African narratives.

Polytheism or Monotheism?

In the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, our authors have shown that the question of monotheism or polytheism is not an African question. It is profoundly a Western question. Most Africans believe in a Supreme God who creates the universe or causes it to be created, although it is believed that this entity may remain distant because the Supreme Deity is not a manager, but a creator.

Although there is a unity to African religion, there are many variations to the characteristics, rituals and ceremonies, and details of practice related to the Deity. For example, the Asante, an Akan-speaking people of Ghana, and the Yoruba people of Nigeria believe in one great God and are politically monarchical, but have no regular worship of the Almighty. Yet both the Gikuyu people of Kenya and the Ibo people of Nigeria are individualistic and believe in one great God, but the Gikuyu make sacrifices to *Ngai*, who remains distant but respected, where the Ibo's Supreme God,

Chukwu, is not regularly worshipped in any sense. Using the African system of understanding, the nature of being one cannot conclude that there is only one divinity. Neither can one conclude that there are many creator deities. At best, one must accept that the nature of the divinity is one, but the attributes of the one are found in the numerous manifestations of the one as the many. To say that the nature of the divinity is one is different from claiming that there is only one divinity, although in most African societies, there is only one aspect of the divinity that is responsible for creation. However, polytheism in the sense of several superdeities responsible for human society does not exist. Yet there is every reason to believe that there is a divinity, spirit, or ancestor that is capable of relating to every human activity.

Even among the Gikuyu, when a taboo is broken or an injury is caused to someone by another person, one may appeal to the ancestors for the proper remedy. Ngai does not bother with the affairs of one person, but rather with the entire people, the whole ethnic group, and the entire nation. Thus, the Gikuyu are similar to other African people in terms of communion with the ancestors and ritual sacrifices. Nevertheless, the Gikuyu are not polytheistic.

The names of the Supreme God are many. Among the Masai, like the Gikuyu, their neighbors, God is called *Ngai*. Among the Mende, the name *Ngewo*, which means existing from the beginning, also means Almighty. The Asante believe in Nyankopon, who may be female or male. The Ga people of Ghana use the name *Nyonmo*, who is the god of rain, but is also Almighty. The Yoruba of Nigeria speak of God as *Olorun*, owner of the sky. The Ngombe believe in a supreme spirit called *Akongo*, the beginner and the unending, Almighty and inexplicable. The Baganda use the name *Katonda* for Almighty God. Among the Kikuyu, God is referred to as *Ngai*, the creator. The Kikuyu also use the name *Murungu*, which means the one who lives in the four sacred mountains and is the possessor of the sky. About 25 other ethnic groups use the name *Mulungu* or *Murungu* for Almighty God. The Baila people call God *Leza*. In Tanzania and Congo, the name *Leza* is often used for the divinity, the supreme. The Sotho say that the Supreme

God is *Molimo*, protector and father. To the Zulu, the Almighty is *Nkulunkulu*. The Efik or Ibibio people of Nigeria call the name of the Supreme God *Abasi*. But the Ijaw speak of *Woyengi*, the Mother Goddess, who created the universe and everything in it. Included as an appendix in the *Encyclopedia of African Religion* is a list of the names given by more than 200 African ethnic groups to God.

Attributes of the Supreme Deity

We have discovered that the attributes of God in Africa are quite numerous. Among the more popular attributes are the following: the moulder, the bringer of rain, the one who thunders from afar, the one who gives life, the one who gives and destroys, the ancient of days, the one who humbles the great, the one who you meet everywhere, the one who brings sunshine, the one on whom we can lean and not fall, the one who is father of little babies, the high one up, the immense ocean whose circular headdress is the horizon, and the Universal Father-Mother.

Unquestionably, however, the African idea of a creator God who brings justice to the Earth is the most consistent description of the Almighty. Among the Konso of Ethiopia, *Waq*, the Supreme God, originated morality, social order, justice, and fertility. *Waq* gave the breath of life to humans who had been formed, but could neither move nor speak. When *Waq's* wife saw the state of humanity, she pleaded with him to do something about human immobility and lack of speech. *Waq* then gave humans breath and humans began to speak and to move. Yet when humans die, they must give breath back to *Waq*.

The Akan *Nyankopon* had to deal with humans trying to reach God after he had retreated into a distant abode. A woman wanting to reach God had her children stack pounding mortars on each other until they almost reached God. They were one short of reaching God when the woman thought that the only way to succeed was to have one of the mortars taken from the bottom and put on the top to reach God. When this was tried, the whole thing crashed to the Earth. Since that time, no humans have been able to reach the distant abode of God.

The Yoruba God name *Olorun* is derived from *Orun*, which means “heaven,” and *Ol*, the prefix for owner. The myths of Olorun are less anthropomorphic than other divinities. He is considered a cosmic force, ruler over all other gods. Controller of all life and natural forces, he is the Supreme Being to whom man, nature, and lesser gods answer. It is possible that one other god, *Obatala* (Great God) or *Eleda* (Creator), which is also another name for Olorun, existed before him in the Yoruba construction of their pantheon. However, Olorun created the Earth and gave it to Obatala to finish.

Although seldom referred to in proverb and myths, Olorun is known by many names. Among them are *Eleda*—Creator; *Alaye*—living; Owner of life; *Elemi*—Owner of breath; *Alagbara gbagbo*—all powerful; *Olodumare*—almighty; *Oluwa*—Lord. The term *Oluwa* is used for other gods as well, but none are as depended on as Olorun. His importance is reflected in daily sayings such as *Olorun Yioju ni re*, “may God awake us well,” *Bi florin ba she*, “if God Goes it,” and *ishe Olorun*, “God has done it.” Despite his prevalence in the Yoruba daily life, there is no regular worship of Olorun. He is called on during times of great distress, when all other gods have failed.

The Supreme God stands alone in the African tradition. As the most ancient Africans believed, the aim of humans was to maintain balance, order, and harmony to continue to beat back chaos. One sees this at the beginning of religious history in the relationship of the people of Egypt to their divinities. This is possible because the Supreme God also made possible lesser divinities whose job it was to assist humans in the maintenance of harmony. A Supreme Deity is the progenitor of all other deities. For example, Nyankopon, the truly great Nyame, is personified by the sun in the culture of the Akan, the dynamic center of the state as the sun is of the sky. He is the creator of all gods, and so many golden objects are symbolic of his radiance. The Queen Mother is the daughter of the moon, but only the Supreme Deity is said to be a progenitor of gods.

A Vodun priest in Benin was once asked, “Where is the house of God?” to which he replied, “Here, all around us. God cannot live in a mere house made by men.” It was on the continent of Africa where humans first built temples hoping to

house the spirit of God. But this was soon abandoned as the philosophical understanding increased to the point where priests recognized that the Supreme Deity could not live in a finite house. One could not build a house massive enough to contain the creator. Karnak temple in Egypt is the world’s largest religious site. But after Karnak and Gebel Barkal, Africa built no religious structure as large ever again, and no other people have built anything as large as these two temples devoted to Amen.

The spiritual African knows that the Supreme Deity cannot be contained. Thus, Lake Bosumtwé is a huge, perfect circle lake, but it does not hold the Supreme Deity. It is sacred, but even the lake cannot house the Great Nyankapon. Nzambi Mpungu, the Supreme Creator of the Bakongo people of the Congo, is invisible and omnipotent, but he cannot be contained. He intervenes in the creation of every person, indeed, in the creation of everything. Humans render him no worship because he has need of none and is inaccessible anyway. Therefore, Nzambi, the sovereign master, cannot be approached. Yet it is Nzambi who watches every human being and then takes him or her out of life into death. Families have small shrines in many societies, and the father, mother, or head of family may simply salute the Supreme Deity who created Heaven, the sun, and the Earth, but for strategic living in the community of humans, it is the lineage deity and kinship ancestors that are most important.

The *Mwari Triad* of the Shona who live in the Belingwe region see the deity *Mwari* as the father, mother, and son. This deity is related to the legendary king, Soro-Re-Zhou, for whom a cave is named in the Matopo Hills of Zimbabwe.

Given the numerous titles found just among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, it should come as no surprise to the reader that the complexity and diversity of the idea of God in African cultures are fundamentally philosophical issues. For example, one can see *Mwari* as the Supreme Being above all men and nature, Creator of good and evil, the Source of Life, who represents fertility and at the same time know, as most Africans know, that *Mwari* is not a daily guide for humanity.

Other African people have shown that their names for the deity reflect their philosophy and way of life as well. For instance, the Xhosa of

South Africa have given the Supreme Being many praise names, but, in effect, the Supreme Deity is a Creator God. The idea of praise names is found throughout the Nguni-speaking culture and the Xhosa to the deity as *uMdali*, *uMenzi*, *uHlanga*, *iNkosi yezuluk*, *uMvelingquangi*, and *uNkulunkulu*, which are also used by the Zulu and other people, but the terms used for Supreme Being, *Qamata* and *Thixo*, are considered purely Xhosa terms.

The Nuer of Sudan call the Supreme Deity by the name of *Kwoth*, or Spirit. *Kwoth* is the omnipresent creator of the universe. He is identified with the sky, which makes all that is above sacred. He is also called *Kwot nbial*, Spirit of the sky. The Nuer say he is like the wind, you cannot see him, yet he is everywhere. He reveals himself through natural wonders, such as rain, thunder, and lightning. He is addressed in prayers as *Kwoth ghaua*, "Spirit of the universe." He created ritual and custom, providing some men with belief and others with nothing. Sustainer of life, he is called *yan*, a living being, whose *yiagh* is the breath that gives man life. Nuer believe *Kwoth* is their friend, whom they call on in times of sickness. He is their protector, often called *guandong*, ancestor, or grandfather. *Kwoth* can also be angry and is deemed distant because of his far-away presence in the sky. He participates in man's affairs, but does so through the aid of other spirits that haunt the gap between Heaven and Earth. *Kwoth* has the power to bring death and take and protect souls. When the Nuer die, they believe it is natural, but ultimately attribute it to *Kwoth*.

The Nupe people of Nigeria believe the universe consists solely of God, the world, the sky, and the Earth. Natural phenomenon is said to be *nya Soko*, or "of God." God is referred to as *soko* or *Tsoci* (Lord) and is *lokpa*, "far away." *Soko* is omnipresent and appealed to in the language of their daily lives. Although always near, they do not know exactly where *Soko* is or what he looks like. *Soko* is omnipotent, omniscient, the only God, creator of all things, good and evil. They believe all life comes from him and, when not incarnate, exists in the sky with him. *Soko* brings about that which is desired to come. Conception, birth, and ritual ceremony are his gifts. To seek further understanding of him is moot because there is no further knowledge to be learned.

All natural phenomena might be considered candidates for divinity. The so-called nature divinities appear in many varieties. These are mountains, rivers, and trees that represent certain powerful aspects of the supreme. For example, among the Asante of Ghana, the Tano River and Lake Bosomtwe are seen as divinities. Any natural phenomenon that has been consecrated by certain human achievements, actions, and experiences can become identified with the divine. Thus, the baobab trees that have protected travelers during particular dreadful droughts have become divinities. There are Ohum and Iroko trees, from which special signs have appeared to assist humans moving from one place to another. These, too, have become divinities. All living things have the potential of becoming consecrated as sacred. The gulf that exists between the secular and the sacred in the West does not appear in traditional African religion. When the waters of the Tano River do not seem to flow as they should, the drummer recites an ancient saying: Pure, pure Tano/If you have gone elsewhere, come/And we shall seek a path for you.

Nature gods are more common in West Africa than in Southern Africa. The western part of the continent is immensely rich in rain forests and rivers. It might be that the people of that region have had to deal with more intense natural phenomena and therefore are more apt to recognize the power of the natural elements. There is, however, among the Zulu of southern Africa, a female deity known as *Inkosazana* who helps corn to grow. *Inkosazana*, although not strictly a natural deity, does perform like a natural deity because she assists in the harvest, and the community can appeal to her for this assistance. However, *Inkosazana* is not like a river or mountain that has been deified.

Certain elegant trees such as the Iroko may have pots and leaf fences around them. Baobabs, the sacred trees of Senegal, remain a meeting place of the spirits, sometimes ritual sites of the priests and priestesses, despite the presence of Islam in the country. The forests are particularly full of spirits and divinities. But also in the deep bush are dangerous ghosts of men who have been lost, drowned, or burnt alive and have not received proper burial. Nonhuman spirits exist as well as *totsies*, *dryads*, *juogi*, and demons that prey on unsuspecting and unprotected people.

Snake, tree, and river often figure together in some religious rites. Some ethnic groups in Benin believe that snakes are ancestors incarnate. Snake temples are found along the coast of Africa. Pythons are kept tame in temples, and people will bow to them, put dust on their heads, and salute them as fathers. The vilest crime is to kill a sacred python in some places.

Africans accept that the most common experiences of human beings are with nature. Because nature interacts with humans on a daily basis, it is important to understand how nature figures in daily lives. All nature deities are useful in the recruitment of true believers.

Deities are not inconsequential. They are able to bring about healing or destruction. Sometimes their potency is expressed in charms, medicines, and rites of secret societies. Any force that appears to have magical qualities that are inexplicable must be considered in the realm of the divine. These powers are often like energy, abstract, and invisible; results are visible. They tend to be amoral and forceful, simply manifesting themselves in the Earthly lives of humans.

Indeed, the Earth is a living entity. The Ibo speak of Mother Earth, and the Akan say the Earth is *Asase Yaa*, Mother Earth. Among the Kru of Liberia, the Earth figures in all actions and can keep humans from seeing those who are taken out of the world, those who disappear or who are removed from the land of the living.

According to the Kru, *Sno-Nysoa*, the Supreme God, gave each of his four sons a necklace of leopard teeth. He sent them to visit Earth, but they did not return. When he inquired of Earth, he was told that they had been encouraged to return, but would not. Each time Earth told them to return, they told Earth that their new home was so beautiful they had no desire to return. One day, *Sno-Nysoa* ran into his sons and told them, "You have made me sad because I am alone and would like for you to return." They said, "But the new land is so interesting we cannot think of returning. There is so much food and Earth is very generous."

Sno-Nysoa grew upset with Earth and said to Earth, "I am going to get my sons back this very night. You will not rob me of my sons!" When the sons went to sleep, they slept soundly, and three of them woke up the next morning, but the eldest did not awake. Earth went to see *Sno-Nysoa* and

asked him to explain his secret power over the eldest son. He noticed that the eldest son was alive. Earth wanted to know how *Sno-Nysoa* had got the eldest son to return. But *Sno-Nysoa* said to him, "Don't worry about my sons, when any one of them does not awake, just bury him." In time, three of his sons slept the long sleep. One by one, they were found in the company of *Sno-Nysoa*. When Earth saw them, they were happy and quite pleased. When it was the turn of the fourth son, Earth decided that he would do everything he could to keep the fourth son, but in time, he also slept the long sleep. Earth then decided to go to *Sno-Nysoa* again to get his secret. However, on the way to *Sno-Nysoa*, Earth discovered that the ladder had been removed and he could not continue. To this day, no living person can see the abode of *Sno-Nysoa*. Now *Sno-Nysoa* could take people from the world, and the way to them remains barred because of the actions of Earth long ago.

Altars are made for the lesser deities. How is an altar consecrated? On the advice of a diviner, a priest may consecrate himself to the service of the religion. A woman may find something sacred in her community and build an altar to a deity with the soil surrounding the place where the object was discovered. Elaborate ceremonies are created for the training of priests and priestesses. In some instances, it may take a person 20 years or more to learn all the rituals, ceremonies, and sacred texts necessary to become a priest.

What does the popular expression mean that Africans are an incurably religious people? Is this a backdoor way of saying that Africans are superstitious? What is the meaning of superstition anyway? Are the things that we call superstitions realities for others and vice versa? Africans are not more religious than any other people; Africans have had a longer association with the supernatural because of the origin of humanity on the continent of Africa. This is not something special; it is simply a historical fact.

Understanding the origins of African religion assists the reader in understanding the connectivity of the philosophical stream underlying all of the ideas in this *Encyclopedia*. This allows the reader to have some appreciation for the dissemination of religious ideas throughout the continent. Our aim in the encyclopedia is to have the reader

ask, “What are the similarities, for instance, between the Nile Valley cultures and other African cultures?” Clearly, what is revealed in this work, written by scores of authors, is the idea that Africa is one, united, and spiritually related continentally. Although it remains true that Islam and Christianity have made significant inroads in Africa, the basic traditional values of the people are expressed in some of the most private occasions. Nevertheless, the elements of morality, ethical principles, and ancestor respect are seen throughout the continent as Africans rely on the ancient traditions of the ancestors.

Connective and Related Links

Eva Meyerowitz (1951) attempted to describe how the religious ideas of ancient Egypt were closely related to the Akan ideas in Ghana. Her work was groundbreaking, but found few followers at that time because of the more conventional Eurocentric interpretations of African culture. She argued that the similarities and correspondences between the ancient Egyptians and Akan people were so great that the relationship was clear. This line of reasoning should not have created a crisis in thinking in the West, but the rush to disbelief, as Basil Davidson calls it, introduced a disconnect in the thinking of European and American scholars about the connectivity and contiguity of ideas and cultures in Africa. They wanted an Africa that was separate, disparate, and isolated. Yet the overwhelming evidence of linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies has shown that Africans have been migrating from one place to another for thousands of years. There is no secret to the interaction between cultures.

What the authors of the *Encyclopedia of African Religion* have demonstrated is that the representations of deities in West Africa often share similarities with more ancient classical concepts. This was not intentional; it only occurred because as different scholars wrote entries for the encyclopedia the editors noticed the similarities from one culture to another. Consider the fact that in Benin, *Mawu-Lisa* of the Fon appear in representations as a joint deity with *Lisa* holding the Sun disk in his mouth and *Mawu* carrying the crescent moon. In various places in the Nile Valley, one could see representations of this symbolism, but it is not

only a classical African form because we also see it in other regions of the continent.

The Yoruba deity *Shango* has river goddesses as wives. In many ways, this is like the Asante deity, *River Tano*, who has wives as well as siblings. We know also that pots of sacred water sit in the temples for beautiful Oshun. The sea deity, among the Yoruba, is *Olokun*, normally found in the bronzes of Ifè.

Lake Bosumtwé in Ghana is a sacred lake; when the decaying matter explodes, the people believe the goddess is active. There are many sacred lakes in Africa; all are in some ways related to the Sacred Lake at the Temple of Karnak. In the country of Cameroon, for instance, *Lake Bamblime* is considered sacred.

Any encyclopedia is incomplete almost as soon as it is published because ideas, concepts, and terms continue to enrich the particular discourse. This will be the case with our encyclopedia as well. However, because our intentions are to set the highest standards of scholarship and capture the most important aspects of traditional African religion, we seek to establish a baseline for future examinations of African religion. Thus, our encyclopedia is the best representation to date of the comprehensive nature of the African response to the sacred. As you read, you understand our initial reaction to the phenomenon of religion in Africa was to view it as one single phenomenon with numerous manifestations depending on the ethnic community. When our authors began to write and we reviewed the entries for facts, quality, and contribution, we were amazed to discover that the authors appeared to confirm what we had intimated in our original proposal to Sage Publications.

The entries in this *Encyclopedia of African Religion* confirm the idea that religion is neither merely metaphysics nor simply morality. There is every reason to believe that the universe of African religious expression includes all that humans, in certain areas, know about how the world works, about what is necessary for humans to survive in community built in the midst of an environment that must constantly be coaxed to allow human settlement, and about what is known of the prospects of humans overcoming the conditions of humanity. Answering these questions and confronting these issues have occupied the minds of African sages longer than any others.

Our objective has been to bring to the public a major reference work that would grow as scholars and laypeople alike use it to advance their own research and understand the core beliefs and rituals of African culture. Naturally, we have had to rely on many sources, references, and scholars who have demonstrated commitment to an authentic African voice. This is not a comparative work because this is the first work of this type; however, comparison is now possible because of the existence of this *Encyclopedia*. It is to be expected that with the demonstration of the complexity, texture, and rhythms of the African religious tradition, future scholars will have a baseline from which to advance further research.

In editing the encyclopedia, we constantly reminded ourselves and were reminded by the authors of these entries that human consciousness is not simply a matter of rational thought, but something deeply informed by myth and the mysteries of human life. Furthermore, language has always been the lever of myth, and our experiences with African languages and African myths convince us that there are thousands of ways of expressing the creation or establishing a proper ritual to recognize an ancestor. One escapes all mutilation of consciousness by appealing to these incredibly rich and varied entries on traditional African religion for a deeper, more profound understanding of African culture in general.

Entry writers brought their own styles to the project. We have dealt with issues of language, for example, the idea of holocaust of African Enslavement, where the word *holocaust* has been seen as a word that refers only to the brutal experience of the Jews in World War II. In addition, we have had to deal with the issue of negative and pejorative terminologies such as *sorcerer*, *witch*, *primitive*, *cult*, and *fetish*. Given the impracticality of changing the entire reading public's image overnight, we have settled for the huge possibility

that this encyclopedia can be used as a background text for cultural knowledge. Only then will we have established the key ideas and foundational thinking necessary for moving the discourse on African religion forward.

We would like to acknowledge the tremendous assistance of Rolf Janke, acquisition editor, who expressed faith in our ability to bring this project to fruition from the beginning. In addition to Rolf, we appreciate the work of Yvette Pollastrini, developmental editor, and Leticia Gutierrez, systems coordinator, who made possible the smooth operation of the Sage SRT system and gave us encouragement and direction precisely when we needed it. Our work has been facilitated by Jacqueline Tasch, who has assisted with expert editing, and the guidance of Diana Axelsen. There is no way we could have completed this work without their constant attention to detail.

When we embarked on this project, we were fortunate to have the blessings of some of the major scholars in the world of culture and religion. We thank Chinua Achebe, Africa's greatest novelist; Kwame Gyekye, one of Africa's leading philosophers; Maulana Karenga, the foremost African writer on ancient Egyptian religion; Marta Moreno Vega, scholar of African religion in the Americas; Isidore Okpewho, the eminent African scholar of myths and epics; and Kofi Asare Opoku, author of many books and articles on African religion and one of the leaders in the field of African proverbs, for lending their names and reputations to this *Encyclopedia*. They gave their suggestions, waited for our work patiently, and have become some of our best supporters. Each of them accepted our request to serve as board members of the project without hesitation.

Finally, we dedicate this encyclopedia to our spouses, Ana and Garvey, and our children, Muswele, Tamu, Kiyaumuya, M. K., Jr., and Eka.

Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama

A

ABALUYIA

The name *Abaluyia* refers to a large ethnic and linguistic group that lives in Kenya and parts of Uganda. When speaking of one person, the Abaluyia use the word *Omuluyia*, and when referring to their language, they use the word *Luluyia*. Seventeen subnations exist among the Abaluyia. They are Abakhayo, Bukusu, Vugusu, Banyala, Abasonga, Abanyore, Abatsotso, Idakho, Isukha, Abakabras, Kisa, Logoli, Marachi, Marama, Samia, Tachhoni, and Wanga.

Although the Uganda speakers of Luluyia do not use the term *Abaluyia*, a term the elders in Kenya accepted and adopted from 1930 to 1960, the Ugandan Luluyia speakers recognize the Kenyan speakers as related to them. They share a similar culture with many of the same myths, rituals, and ceremonies. Most of the Luluyia speakers share in the story told by the Vugusu about the creation of the world.

According to these speakers of the language, the world was created when the almighty Wele Xakaba, the Supreme Being, made his own dwelling in heaven; to prevent it from falling out of the sky, he supported it with many pillars just as the builders of a house support the roof with many pillars. When Wele Xakaba had completed the creation of heaven, he made the moon, sun, and clouds and laced the heavens with them. Then Wele Xakaba created a large rooster and placed the rooster in heaven. This huge red rooster is the source of lightning and thunder. It lives among the

clouds, and when it moves its wings up and down lightning flashes; when it crows, thunder is heard on the earth. The creation of the rooster is followed by the creation of the stars, rain, rainbows, regular air, and very cold air. It took Wele Xakaba just 2 whole days to make these creations. But there was a problem: "For whom would the sun shine?" This led to the creation of human beings.

The first man was called by the name of *Mwambu*. However, because Wele Xakaba had created this man so that he had the ability to talk and see, there needed to be someone with whom he could talk. Therefore, the first woman, Sela, was created to be Mwambu's mate. Then Wele Xakaba created plants, oceans, lakes, rivers, plants, and animals. Cattle were also created by Wele Xakaba.

Soon Mwambu and Sela had two children, a son, Lilambo, and a daughter, Nasio. In 6 days, Wele Xakaba had completed the work of creation. On the seventh day, God rested because it was a bad day, probably the source for the negative relationship and taboos the Abaluyia have with the number 7.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Luo

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ABASI

Abasi refers to the Supreme Creator God in the language of the Efik people of Nigeria and Cameroon. The Efik people are a branch of the Ibibio, who are often called Calabar. The Efik have devised an elaborate narrative about the existence and function of the Almighty God, Abasi. Although there are variations to the account as given by the elders and priests of the people, the general contours of the account are the same.

According to the belief of the Efiks, the wife of Abasi, whose name was Atai, convinced him to allow their adult children, one man and one woman, to settle on the Earth, but to prohibit them from reproducing or working the land. The idea, according to Efik understanding, was that the children should depend on their father and mother for shelter, food, and protection. However, the children resented these prohibitions and soon returned to heaven when Abasi called them to eat food when they became hungry.

While they were in the sky with Abasi and Atai, the children explored many things; they learned to create, sing, make musical instruments, and make food. This was not pleasing to Abasi, and wanting to protect him, Atai did everything to prevent the children from exceeding Abasi in wisdom, power, and strength. Atai believed that if the children exceeded their father in knowledge and wisdom, there would be great chaos in the universe. The children, of course, like other children, wanted to see how far they could go without being chastised or prevented from their activities. Atai was so disturbed by this that she set her mind on preventing a rebellion at all costs. She loved the children but watched them carefully, yet the children eventually broke the rules that had been established by Abasi. They could not live in peace with Abasi and Atai and therefore were forced to leave the sky again.

The son and daughter returned to Earth with their limited knowledge and violated most of Abasi's rules. They had many children and

worked on the land creating many items for living. Soon they caused strife, heartbreak, tensions, jealousy, hatred, war, and death among their own children. Abasi and Atai were so disgusted with the happenings on Earth and with the affairs of their own children and their grandchildren that the two deities soon withdrew to the sky, leaving humans to deal with their own affairs.

This is why Abasi is not known to be involved in the ordinary lives of the people. He created the universe and all things that are in it and then, after failing to control his own human creation, retired to the far reaches of the sky. Therefore, for ordinary issues of taboos and rituals, the Efik people must rely on strong ancestral spirits, sometimes in societies of secrets, to assist them with the manifold problems and concerns of daily living. They have no possibility of coaxing Abasi to return to their society to give advice or wisdom; this is now the affair of lesser spirits.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Nkulunkulu; Nyame; Olorun

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ABELA

Abela is a simple form of greeting strangers and familiar people among the Ngemba people of Cameroon. It is usually interpreted as "How is it?" The response is "abongne," meaning "It is good." This is a common expression among the Ngemba, an ethnic group from the Northwest province, Cameroon. The Ngemba live in several important towns in Cameroon and comprise nearly 2 million inhabitants in Tuba, Mankon, Nkwen, and other towns in Western Bamenda province.

Among the Ngemba speakers are various family groups who use "abela" as a greeting. They

are the Pinyin, Mankon, Awing, Bambulewie, Bafut, Bafreng, Mandankwe, Mbili, Mbambili, Mbui, Bamunkum, and Kpati. To these people, the word “abela” has an ancient meaning attributed to the interactions with strangers and other people. It signals recognition of the person inasmuch as to ignore another human being is considered the breaking of a taboo. Thus, it is a vile act of neglect and disrespect.

Abela being a simple form of greeting has no other ritualistic origin; however, as a way of initiating conversation or generating familiarity and friendliness, it fosters social coercion among the Ngemba and outsiders who use it. The term “abela” is so popular that even people from other ethnic groups now use the term for greeting whenever they meet an Ngemba person. This is a sign of hospitality and politeness, and it is part of the grace of demonstrating connection, togetherness, and respect.

It is believed that the Ngemba migrated from a place called “Feulu” in Tibati near Banyo in the Adamawa Province of the Republic of Cameroon because of the frequent interethnic wars between the Ngemba and the Fulani, a large and powerful trading and martial people. The Ngemba left Feulu under the leadership of Aghajoo, a wealthy man with numerous victories in war, and made a brief, but significant, stop on the fertile and scenic plains of Ndop. Following tremendous competition for territory and warring feuds with other ethnic migrants, the Ngemba group left Ndop and continued their trek, settling by the great Mezam River where they organized their families.

Africans generally use greetings such as “abela” to ascertain the status of a person’s family, the economic well-being of a community, and the relationship with the ancestors and the spiritual world. Thus, the greeting “abela,” like similar expressions in other languages, speaks to the equilibrium between communities. To ask someone “How is it?” is to inquire about something more than the superficial presence of the individual, but to seek a deeper response about the condition and life of the community.

A typical greeting only begins with the expression “abela” and continues with questions about individual members of the family, relatives, and even animals. To really know “how it is,” one

must interrogate the entire universe of the person that you are greeting, and therefore it is not an easy, quick, raising of the hand and moving onward. It must be a sincere question, and the questioner usually receives a full and complete answer. This is the nature of reciprocity in the Ngemba culture.

Emmanuel Kombem Ngwainmbi

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ABOSOM

In the Akan tradition, abosom (deities/divinities/lesser gods; singular: obosom) are the children and messengers of Nyame (Creator). Similar in function to Yoruba orisha and Vodun loa, the abosom are spiritual forces evincing and operating throughout the Akan universe, assisting Nyame in the task of managing Creation, namely humanity. They are found throughout Ghana and are a major part of Akan cosmology. Abosom may be male or female or have the ability to embody both. Although the abosom often embody various manifestations of nature (i.e., wind, bodies of water, trees, mountains, hills, animals, etc.), these objects are used only as temporary dwelling places and should not be confused with the abosom themselves. The abosom are essentially spirit.

Descriptive Overview

Created by Nyame to fulfill specific functions, the abosom derive their power from Nyame and serve as the mediators between Nyame and human kind. Because the Akan believe that Nyame is too great to be reached directly, the abosom, who represent certain aspects of the power of Nyame, serve as intermediaries and immediate objects of reverence. Although their power is a function of that of Nyame, they have the full power to act in the realm of their specific area of specialization. Each obosom performs different functions and has the ability to reward, punish, protect, and guide human kind in all aspects of life.

Because they are innumerable, the abosom fall into various categories. First, there are those of a tutelary nature who are recognized at the national and/or community level and whose main function it is to protect the community from harm. They are known as *tete abosom*. Second, there are family abosom, sometimes known as *egyabosom* (father's deity), that are inherited patrilineally and govern and protect particular families. The primary function of the *egyabosom* is to assist their attendants in the actualization of their *nkrabea* (destiny; Divine function). There are also abosom associated with each of the various Akan clans (*Abusua*) who are connected with particular areas or localities. The Akan connect the *tete abosom*, *egyabosom*, and *Abusua abosom* with the origins of Creation and have thus recognized and revered them from time immemorial. However, the Akan also believe that in the same way that Nyame continues to create the universe, he continues to create abosom. These contemporary abosom can be thought of as a type of medicine in that they are "owned" by highly specialized spiritualists who use them in the manipulation of cosmic energy. The continued reverence of these abosom largely depends on their ability to satisfy their intended purpose.

As intermediaries, the abosom are fundamental to humanity's ability to maintain a connection to and relationship with Nyame. Nyame communicates with humankind through the abosom who carry messages on Nyame's behalf. These messages, as well as the specific powers and energies of a particular abosom, are invoked through rituals and ceremonies performed by *akomfo* (traditional priests; singular: *okomfo*), also known as

bosomfo (people of the abosom). After being "called" ("mounted"/"possessed") by a particular obosom, *akomfo* undergo an elaborately intense initiation, usually no less than 3 years in duration, in which they essentially "marry" the obosom by dedicating his or her entire life to the service of the obosom and learn the laws, taboos, songs, dances, and so on of the obosom.

Thus, *akomfo* are highly specialized spiritualists capable of communicating with and intermittently embodying abosom for the purpose of transmitting and sometimes translating Nyame's messages. To provide a space in and means through which humans can communicate with Nyame via an obosom, *akomfo* build *bosomfie* (literally "house of obosom"; shrine house) in or near the locality the obosom is said to inhabit. *Akomfo* are held with the responsibility of presiding over the *bosomfie*, which function as spiritual healing centers and houses of divination. It is here that *akomfo* perform rituals and other tasks required of the abosom and that members of the society visit to facilitate their connection to both the abosom and Nyame.

Some Key Abosom

The role of the abosom in the Akan tradition is of great importance. As such, there are multitudes of abosom found throughout Ghana, some well known, some less well known. What follows is a brief listing and description of some of the more celebrated abosom.

Akonnedi/Nana Akonnedi/Akonnedi Abena is a female obosom whose *bosomfie* is located in the *Larteh Kubease* region of Ghana. She is regarded as the mother of all abosom, the head of the pantheon, and is said to mete out justice and give the final decision in difficult disputes.

Nana Asuo Gyebi is a wandering ancient river obosom originally from the northern region of Ghana who resides in various places throughout the country, although he has made the *Larteh Kubease* region a special home. He also traveled as far as the United States to help the lost children of Africa reclaim their spiritual past. He is credited with bringing the Akan tradition to the United States because his priests were among the first to be initiated here. He is a male obosom who is a protector and a great healer.

Nana Esi Ketewaa is a deified female ancestor originally from the Akuapem region of Ghana. It is said that she became pregnant in her old age and died during childbirth. As an obosom, she functions as a protector of children and fertility. Women often seek her protection during pregnancy and delivery and after childbirth.

Nana Adade Kofi is a male warrior obosom of strength and perseverance and is from the Guan area of Ghana. He is said to be the youngest of Nana Akonnedi's children. He is the obosom associated with iron and metals, and his sword is often used to swear oaths of allegiance.

Tegare is the general name for a pantheon of abosom from the Northern region of Ghana. Popular throughout Ghana, Tegare lives in the forest and is a hunter who seeks truth and exposes liars, thieves, and evildoers.

Mmoetia is a system of abosom who are most often recognized as "dwarfs" whose feet turn backward. They live throughout Ghana in the forests and are highly skilled in the use of herbs. Considered the great spiritual gatekeepers of the Akan tradition, they specialize in working with nature spirits for the purposes of healing.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Akan; Nyame; Orisha

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ABUK

Abuk is the name of the first woman in the world according to the Dinka people of Southern Sudan. The Dinka believe that the Creator made Abuk and Garang, the first man, out of the rich clay of Sudan. Once Abuk and Garang were created, they were placed in a huge pot; when the Creator opened the pot, the man and woman were fully formed as good-looking beings, except that the

woman was small, much smaller than the Creator thought good. Therefore, Abuk was placed in a container full of water. She was left there for a time, and then when she had swelled up like a sponge to the size of a regular human being, the Creator was pleased.

However, Abuk and Garang were given only one grain a day for food, and they were always hungry. Soon Abuk used her intelligence and cleverness to make the one grain a day into a paste to make it last longer. She also decided that she would take one grain on alternate days and save it so that she could plant grain. She did this, and her work became the source of all grain.

Although this is a historical myth with real power in the explanation of the origin of Dinka society, the idea is also current in the lives of the people. In fact, the Dinka represent Abuk by a snake. Her favorite animal is a small snake, and her representation by a snake speaks to the concept of coolness and intelligence that is associated with women in many African cultures. Abuk is important in the Dinka culture, so much so that she has the responsibility to look after all women and children, fertility, the growth of trees, plants, and the productivity of the harvest. In addition, the supply of water is the responsibility of Abuk; hence, women are known as the keepers of the water. They go to the rivers for water and are responsible for making certain that the family has a good supply of water. Garang is placed in charge of everything else.

Of course, with so many responsibilities, Abuk was certain to run afoul of something in carrying out her responsibilities. She decided that she wanted to plant more crops in order to have more food to eat. Thus, she and Garang planted more grain and tried to be careful so that they would not harm the earth or create problems with the Creator who lived in the heavens. When Abuk took a long-handled hoe that reached to the heavens and began digging in the Earth, the handle of the hoe accidentally struck the Creator.

At that time, the Creator withdrew from the Earth because of the offense and sent a small blue-colored bird called *atoc* to cut the rope that humans had used to climb up to the sky. The Creator then left the ordinary lives of humans because the world had been spoiled by the actions of women and men. Everything has changed.

There is now illness, death, and trouble on the Earth as a direct result of the separation of the Creator from the people of the Earth.

Nevertheless, the Dinka honor Abuk as the first woman and see in her the creation and origin of all their traditions. As the first woman and the first mother, she is celebrated in the festivals and rituals of the Dinka.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Auset

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ADAE

An Akan term meaning “resting place,” *Adae* is the most important festival of the Akan. Connected to the meaning of the term, it is a day of rest for the living and the ancestors, and, as such, work, including funerals, is forbidden. As the paramount ancestral custom, it involves the invocation, propitiation, and veneration of ancestral spirits. These are special days on which the ahene (traditional rulers; singular = ohene) enter the Nkonuafieso (stool house), the place where the spirits of enstooled ancestors rest, and pour libation and offer food and drink on behalf of their people. Every 5 years, the Asantehene (paramount ruler of the Asante) hosts Adae Kese (big Adae), a 2-week period of celebration during which all those enstooled within the Asante nation unite in Kumasi (the capital of Asante) and reaffirm their allegiance to the Asantehene and the Sika Dwa (Golden Stool), the spiritual seat of the Asante nation.

It is through the celebration of the Adae that the Akan calendar is conceptualized: One year is represented by nine Adae. Following the Akan calendar, according to which each cycle constitutes a

period of 42 days, the Adae is celebrated on two occasions in each cycle—Akwasidae (“sacred Sunday”; Adae falling on Sunday) and Awukudae (“sacred Wednesday”; Adae falling on Wednesday). Distinct from the Adae Kese, Akwasidae and Awukudae festivals are more localized, celebrated by every ohene in his community among his people.

Akwasidae, usually celebrated as a public ritual, is the grander of the two festivals. However, the general public does not participate in the most important aspect of the festival, which takes place in the Nkonuafieso. On the Akwasidae morn, each ohene, accompanied by his elders and attendants, lowers his cloth to bare his shoulders and removes his sandals as a sign of humility and respect before the ancestors. Entering the Nkonuafieso, he greets the ancestors by calling each of their names, one by one, and offering them each a drink through libation. The ancestors are then offered a sheep, whose blood is smeared on the stools, as well as special foods prepared in their honor. The ohene then sits in state to receive his people. On these sacred days, personal and community disputes as well as important political matters are often addressed publicly in the presence of the ohene.

Equally important to Adae are the preparations for the festivals. The day before Akwasidae, Memeneda Dapaa, is considered a good or “lucky” day. On this day, all of the preparations needed for Akwasidae are attended to by all those involved in the celebration. This includes ritual drumming to announce the events of the coming day and the invocation of the spirits of ancestral drummers, seeking their cooperation and blessings for a successful Akwasidae. Also on this day, ritual drummers call upon the Creator, various abosom (deities), and enstooled ancestors in such a way as to recite the local history of the community.

It is important to note the relative significance of festivals for the Akan. Rather than arbitrary celebrations, festivals are reflective of the culture and traditions of the Akan and serve historical, spiritual, social, economic, political, cultural, and moral functions within the society. Thus, the Adae in particular teaches and reinforces not only the history of the Akan, but local histories as well; expresses continuity between the physical and the spiritual, the living and the ancestral; reunites

family and friends and provides a site for the settling of disputes; contributes economically to the locale via attendees' contributions; offers the people an opportunity to assess the efficiency of their ohene; and strengthens each person's role in the community.

On a more individual level, the Adae is also recognized through ritual by spiritual practitioners of the Akan tradition. Each Akwasidae, Akomfo (traditional priests; singular: okomfo) and their attendees hold an Akom. *Akom* is the general term given to a series of dances performed by the Akomfo. It is an intricate system of communication and healing that provides an opportunity for dancing to the specific cadences of religious drumming during what may be characterized as a spiritual gathering of the ancestors, the abosom, and the people gathered who sing, clap, drum, and dance.

The Akom may be thought of as an extraordinarily good time, as well as a precise and sophisticated formula for raising spiritual consciousness, and thus is an appropriate ritual for Akwasidae. In the spiritual tradition, all are encouraged to recognize and celebrate Akwasidae because it provides a communal means through which to maintain contact with the ancestors. Awukudae, which falls on the fourth Wednesday after Akwasidae, is primarily celebrated in the Eastern region of Ghana and is seen as the Adae on which people should work toward good causes (i.e., feed the hungry, make monetary donations, help the needy, etc.). During this Adae, particular attention is paid to the shrines of personal and family ancestors.

Adae emphasizes and further reinforces the essential Akan principle that the living require the cooperation of the ancestors in their daily existence. This periodic invocation and veneration of the ancestors keeps their memory and spirits alive in the minds of the people and the heart of the community.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Abosom; Akan; Ceremonies

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ADINKRA SYMBOLS

Associated most often with a multitude of symbols, the term “adinkra” is more accurately used to denote a symbolic funerary message given to transitioning and/or departed souls. The term “di” means “to make use of” or “to employ,” and the term “nkra” means “message.” Literally, then, adinkra means “to make use of a message,” but when spoken together, the term is understood to mean “to leave one another” or “to say goodbye.” Moreover, because the term “nkra” has “kra” (life force; soul) at its root, adinkra is further understood as a message that a transitioning and/or departed soul takes with it on its return to Nyame. Thus, adinkra is a type of language.

Although it is clear that the Akan have used adinkra for many centuries, there has been much academic debate over the exact origins of the symbols. The most commonly accepted legend comes from the stampers (those who create/produce adinkra). Legend has it that the symbols gained their name from Nana Kofi Adinkra, the famous 19th-century king of Gyaman, located in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire. King Adinkra was said to have challenged the authority of the then Asantehene Nana Osei Bonsu Panyin by making a replica of the Sika Dwa (golden stool).

The result of this spiritual violation of the Asante nation was the Asante-Gyamn War in which the Gyamans were defeated. The Asantehene was said to have admired the craftsmanship of the replica Sika Dwa, which was adorned with various symbols, so much so that he forced the defeated Gyaman craftsmen to duplicate the symbols and also teach Asante craftsmen how to produce them themselves. So begins the Akan legacy of adinkra symbols.

The Akan believe that the entire world is composed of two realms—the physical (living) and nonphysical (spirit). In their cosmology, there is no clear distinction between the physical and spiritual



Close-up shot of two adinkra stamps carved out of calabash gourds, from Ghana. Used mainly when someone dies, the adinkra symbols are stamped on fabric worn on funeral occasions.

Source: Karen Low Phillips/iStockphoto.

worlds—the two complement each other and often overlap. The physical is directed by the power of the spiritual—Nyame, the Abosom (deities/divinities), and the Nsamanfo (ancestors). Each individual transitions through these two realms by way of the Akan life cycle: birth, puberty, marriage, physical death, and rebirth.

Thus, the Akan do not regard physical death as the end of life, but as the transition from Earthly life to spiritual life. It is a transition that each individual must make to reach the spiritual world and continue to live as Nsamanfo. Physical death instead renders family relationships eternal, and the rituals performed by the living Abusua (family) emphasize the unbroken bonds between those living on Earth, the departed sunsum (spirit), and Nsamanfo. It is the responsibility of those living on Earth to perform the Ayie so that the sunsum can properly transition to the Asamando (ancestral world); if not, the sunsum

will transform into an unsettled and malevolent spirit and may come back to harm the family.

Thus, great satisfaction is derived from the performance of the Ayie, and the community looks down on those who do not properly bury their kin. Unlike in Western society, where the dead are generally mourned by friends and family, in Akan societies, the entire community mourns the loss of one of its members. Communal performance of appropriate rites helps to strengthen the bond between the living and the Nsamanfo. The Ayie is performed in four stages: (a) *Adware* (preparation of the corpse), (b) *Adeda* (lying in state) and *Siripe* (wake-keeping), (c) *Asie* (burial), and (d) *Ndaase* (thanksgiving). In contemporary times, the Ayie usually takes place over the course of a weekend.

To demonstrate the grief caused by the loss of a loved one, family members must wear black and refrain from wearing white or any bright colors, jewelry, or any adornment that may be perceived

as “flashy” until the Ayie has been performed. During the funerary rituals, the wearing of particular and appropriate cloths demonstrates the attendees’ spiritual and emotional state—that of mourning. Those who attend the funeral must wear colors of mourning, which include dark red, brown, black, and maroon. If the person dies at an old age, mourners may wear white; and often to connote extreme mourning, chief mourners (close relatives) may wear bright red.

During the initial stages, it is appropriate for close relatives to wear solid black cloth, whereas friends and distant relatives may wear cloth adorned with hand-painted and hand-embroidered adinkra symbols. The wearing of adinkra cloth communicates farewell messages to the transitioning/ departed soul and furthermore informs the larger community in attendance of the message that particular attendees wish to offer.

Many of adinkra symbols are representative of Akan cosmology. They represent symbolic illustrations of Akan proverbs that portray the ontology, ideology, and spirituality of the people. Many express particular notions about Nyame and his or her attributes. Some examples of adinkra symbols that specifically encode Akan cosmology are shown as follows.



Figure 1 Asase ye Duru

“Asase ye duru se po.”
The earth is heavier than the sea.
Symbol of providence and the divinity of Mother Earth



Figure 2 Gye Nyame

“Abodee santan yi firi tete; obi nte ase a onim n’ahyase, na obi ntena ase nkosi n’awie, gye Nyame.”

This Great Panorama of creation dates back to time immemorial, no one lives who saw its beginning and no one will live to see its end, except Nyame.

Symbol of the omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and immortality



Figure 3 HYE WO NYHE

“Burn; You do not Burn”
“Because God does not burn, I will not burn.”
Symbol of permanency

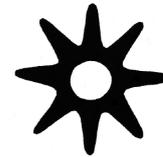


Figure 4 Nsoroma

“Oba Nyankonsoroma te Nyame so na nte ne ho so.”
A child of Nyame, I do not depend on myself.
My illumination is only a reflection of His.
Symbol of faith and dependency on a Supreme Being

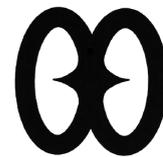


Figure 5 Nyame Biribi Wo Soro

“Nyame biribi wo soro na ma me nsa nka!”
God, there is something in the heavens,
pray let it reach me!
Symbol of hope and inspiration



Figure 6 Nyame Dua

Tree of Nyame
Symbol of the presence of Nyame and Nyame's protection



Figure 7 Nyame Nwu Na Mawu

“Nyame Nti, menwe wura.”
Since God exists, I will not feed on leaves [like an animal or beast].
Symbol of faith and trust in Nyame

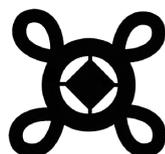


Figure 8 Sunsum

“I Live not when Nyame is not!”
Symbol of the perpetual existence of the human spirit



Figure 9 Nyame Nti

“The Spirit”

Symbol of spirituality, spiritual purity and the cleanliness of the spirit

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Abosom; Akan; Asamando; Color Symbolism; Nyame; Sunsum

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ADU OGYINAE

Adu Ogyinae is the name of the first man in Akan mythology. Among the Akan, a group of people who occupy portions of Ghana and Ivory Coast, it is believed that they descended from a group of people who entered the area around 2000 BC as farmers. Stone-using villages have been discovered in this region, which suggests that they kept livestock and cultivated crops.

In the area of Brong, Adansi, and Assin, a matrilineal Akan group emerged and spread to inhabit most of the land between the Volta and Comoe Rivers. They found Guan people, the accepted early owners of the land, already in some of those places. Nevertheless, around 500 BC, the Akan had begun to establish their social and political institutions. It is about this time that the mythology of the people began to take shape and the elders had created legends and narratives that explained the people's origins.

According to a traditional libation in Adansi, it is declared that Adansi was the first Akan state and that it stands at the head of the Akan Nation. In fact, the cosmogony given by the elders of Adansi state that Adansi was the place that Adu Ogyinae came into existence.

In the tradition of the Akan, the Great Creator, Odomankoma, another name for Nyame, made everything in the universe. Thus, Odomankoma made Awo, Abena, Aku, Aberaw, Afi, Amen, and

Awusi, corresponding to the English Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. However, it is in Nyame's transformation as Nyankopon that we see the relationship with Asase Yaa Afua and the creation of humankind. The first man, Adu Ogyinae, did not simply appear without the necessary cosmogony; he represents all of the abusua of the Akan. Many of the deities of the clans are symbolized by bodies of water. For example:

<i>Deit</i>	<i>Motif</i>	<i>Day</i>	<i>Water</i>
Bosom Muru	Python	Tuesday	Muru
Bosom Tano	Elephant	Saturday	Tano
Bosom Pra	Leopard	Wednesday	Pra
Bosom Twi	Monkey	Sunday	Twi Lake

In addition to the bosoms, there are two Adae, ritual holidays, every 42 days for recognition of the ancestors. Every sixth Sunday is the large Adae for the Royal Ancestors, and then every sixth Wednesday is the Adae for the non-royal ancestors.

According to the Akan, a large worm opened a hole in the ground and seven men, five women, one leopard, and one dog came out of the hole. These names are normally repeated on a Monday or Tuesday, which are called Nykli days. The names of the original people are as follows:

<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Adu Ogyinae	Takyuwa Brobe
Opoku Tenten	Aberewa Noko
Adu Kwao	Aberewa Samanate
Adu Kwao 2nd	Aberewa Musu
Kusi Aduoku	Abrade Kwa
Ankora Dame	
Odehye Sabene	

Of the people who came out of the hole, only Adu Ogyinae seemed to understand. Everyone else was stunned and bewildered by what they saw on Earth, and they were fearful. It was then that Adu Ogyinae began to lay his hands on the other people to give them strength.

Adu Ogyinae organized them into work teams to build houses, and in a few days they had built places to shelter themselves. It was while he was engaged in felling trees that a tree fell upon Adu Ogyinae and killed him. This is the beginning of the Asante *wukuda* oath, which says, "I swear by the name of Adu Ogyinae."

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors

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AFRICISM

Africism is the term coined by Aloysius M. Lugira to refer to the system of African religious beliefs, ritual practices, and thought concerning the Supreme Being, suprahuman beings, human beings, and the universe. Africism is the autochthonous religion and philosophy of Africa. It is *autochthonous* because, from time immemorial and independently from developments in other cultures, it intrinsically pertains to Africa.

In this age of growing globalization, attention has been increasingly directed to the acquisition of objective knowledge about the religion of Africa. In pursuit of an objective understanding of the religion of Africa, African scholars have been encouraged to adopt the African American approach pioneered by Maulana Karenga, as stressed by the principle of *Kujichagulia*. This Kiswahili term means "self-determination," that is, Africans' ability to "to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves." This entry describes the geo-ontological approach to the naming of the religious and thought systems of Africa, highlights the salient features of Africism, and describes the development of the concept.

Africism: A Geo-Ontological Approach

For many years, the religious and thought system of Africa was perceived through the highly subjective and often contemptuous lenses of outsiders and failed to reflect the African reality correctly. The geo-ontological approach has as its goal the adequate naming of African religion and philosophy, the concepts behind the religious and thought system that is indigenous to Africa.

The components of the term *geo-ontological* are the prefix *geo-*, which means “Earth,” and *ontological*, an adjectival form of “ontology,” the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of being or existence. A geo-ontological approach to the naming of the religious and thought system of Africa, therefore, means naming it on the basis of the origin and relationship of its being, within the context of its geographical reference point. A name is a point of identification for the bearer of the name. Africism reflects a geographical belongingness to Africa because this is where the religious and thought system of concern here originates.

An etymologically clarifying note about Africa may be helpful. Africa is the name of the continent. It is derived from the people of North Africa, whose name was *Afer* (sing.)/*Afri* (plur.). After the homeland of the *Afri* was colonized by the Romans in 146 BC. the name of the homeland was changed from Carthage to Africa to mean “the land of the *Afri*.” *Afric-* stood as the root word to which suffixes are added to determine the meaning. The suffix *-ca* added to *Afri-* results in *terra Africa*, that is, “land of the *Afri*.” Originally, *Africa* signified what today is called the former Roman province in North Africa. In the course of time, through metonymy, the figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of a part for the whole thing, the term *Africa* was applied for the whole continent of Africa.

Similarly, the suffix *-ism* can be added to the root word *afric-*. Linguistically, it is sound to employ the suffix *-ism* in forming the name of a system, of a theory, or of a practice that can be religious, ecclesiastical, and philosophical depending on the situation at hand. Thus, the term *Africism* was coined. It is an umbrella term that, by essence, represents the oneness of African religion, as manifested in the diverse religious expressions observed in Africa.

Salient Features of Africism

The salient features of Africism include concepts about the Supreme Being, suprahuman beings, human beings, and the universe. They are the springboard from which a substantive reflection on Africism is made.

The Supreme Being

In Africism, God is the Supreme Being. This supremacy is recognized through the numerous African primary sources that, from time immemorial, have consistently been handed down, in African folklore, from generation to generation. Until the globalization of literacy started taking effect in Africa, most Africans depended primarily on oral methods and visual texts to convey and transmit knowledge about their religious and thought system. The end result of all this was the promotion of African sagacity and sages.

Within the context of Africist authenticity, a sage is a person whose upbringing qualifies him or her to be regarded as an educated person. The two main ingredients expected to be found in such a personality are religion and wisdom, which have been acquired through the oral depository of African mythology, legends, proverbs, riddles, tales, songs, names, artfulness, ritualistic performances, and so on. Out of such cultural storehouse, Africans have drawn conclusions that have directed them to the sensing of the hierarchical orderliness around them. They have identified the source and origin of such orderliness to be what they regard as the Supreme Being above which there is no other being. In Africism, the Supreme Being is the pyramidal apex of the African concept of God.

However, this one God is known by many names, according to the cultural peculiarities of African peoples. The many names by which Africans express themselves about the uniquely one Supreme Being do not, in any way, turn their understanding of the Supreme Being into many Supreme Beings. Here the concept of the Supreme Being enjoys the unity of essence, on the one hand, while it entertains the diversity of the manifestations of the names, on the other hand. By unity, the Supreme Being is expressive of Monotheism in the religious and thought system of Africa. Because monotheism is the recognition of the existence of one God, so, Africism is a monotheistic religion.

Suprahuman Beings

Suprahuman beings are spiritual inhabitants of the spirit world. Some of them are deities and/or secondary gods, others are specified as ancestors. Others are considered to have been deified to assume the spiritual positions of guardians and intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings. Spirits of the departed inspire a sense of superhumanity. For that reason, the presumption in Africism is to handle the spirits of the departed with care.

Among some Africans, superhuman beings are recognized as ancestors. Among other groups, spiritual entities are specifically and honorifically grouped in pantheons. *Pantheon* is the term under which gods of a particular African people are grouped and recognized together as the gods of that particular people. Some of the most recognizable pantheons in Africism include the *Orisa* (i.e., the Yoruba Pantheon), the *Lubaale* (i.e., the Baganda Pantheon), and the *Vodun* (i.e., the Fon Pantheon).

Some have argued that Africism is polytheistic because of the existence and veneration of lesser divinities and ancestral spirits. It must be noted, however, that Africism recognizes the Supreme Being to be the one God, above all gods without any admixture. Africism is more correctly understood as henotheism, that is, the acceptance of the existence of secondary deities and lesser spirits, without being distracted away from monotheism, that is, the idea of a Supreme Being.

Human Beings

Speaking about human beings in terms of Africism brings to mind the African concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* has to do with compassion and consideration for others. It is summed up in religious philosopher John Mbiti's frequently cited observation about the African view of man/woman: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is a dynamic statement that accentuates the communalistic disposition of Africans. Within the context of Africism, Africans are by nature communally religious.

Their hierarchical identification with the Supreme Being, the suprahuman beings and the ritual activities around them, are visibly expressive of their religiosity. The rites of passage and other communal rites are clear instances of how

religion saturates all aspects of African life. The rites of passage are practices, customs, and ceremonies that people perform to move people smoothly through stages of life, from beginning to end. The stages include birth, childhood, puberty, initiation, marriage, aging, death, last funeral rites, and processes of reincarnation.

The Universe

In Africism, the foremost attribute of God is Creation. Creation is the Universe. When the Buganda of Uganda look around and observe the orderliness that surrounds them, they conclude by calling the originator of the Universe *Kawamigero* to mean "the Greatest Dispenser of Orderliness." Religiously and philosophically, Africism identifies the World and/or the Universe to be the base of sacred space, sacred time, and all sacred elements therein.

The Development of the Concept

Sserinnya bbi lissa nnyini lyo is a Luanda proverb that means "An inadequate name disadvantages its bearer." Inadequate names, which reflect inadequate understanding, have not done justice to African religion. Even today, Western mainstream newspapers may continue to misrepresent Africism. An article on religion in Sudan, for example, may indicate that its residents include Muslims, Christians, and "Animists." Animism, according to the original definition given by the creator of the concept, the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, is "the religion of lower races." It is precisely because of such challenges that the term *Africism* was coined, as an attempt to redress the imbalances of past and erroneous approaches.

In 1950, Edwin William Smith published *African Ideas of God*, the proceedings of a symposium on the religious system of Africa. Ten years later, in 1960, the International African Institute of London published *African Systems of Thought*, also the proceedings of a seminar on the subject. During that period of time, these pioneering activities led to serious academic studies on religious and thought systems of Africa. African universities also participated in the rigorous study of African religion under the leadership of the

University of Ibadan in Nigeria, the University of Legon in Ghana, and the University of Makerere in Uganda. Since then, there has been a vigorous study of the subject, and this has helped bring about a renewed awareness and appreciation of the dignity of the African religious and thought system. African religion today enjoys dynamism because it is regaining followers in both Africa and the Diaspora.

Aloysius M. Lugira

See also Animatism; Animism

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AFTERLIFE

The idea of the Afterlife first appears in ancient literature in ancient Kemet. In the Maatian tradition of ancient Egypt (Kemet), the afterlife played a central role; the people of Kemet called it *wHm anx* (wehem ankh), repeating life. It was considered a spiritual and ethical goal and a reward for a righteous life on Earth—in a word, the divine gift of immortality. Moreover, a theology of “coming forth” evolved, which contains several basic concepts and is found in various sources, including funerary texts and autobiographical texts. The funerary or mortuary texts that provide a vivid portrait of the Maatian afterlife include the *Pyramid Texts*, the *Coffin Texts* (The Book of Vindication), and the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, commonly called in Egyptology *The Book*

of the Dead. Other sources include the more esoteric texts such as *Books of the Underworld*.

The Maatian concept of afterlife or immortality and the theology that undergirds and informs it can be discussed under five headings: (1) resurrection, (2) ascension, (3) judgment, (4) acceptance, and (5) transformation. This entry describes each of those phases.

Resurrection

The concept of resurrection is rooted in the tenet that everyone will rise from the dead and be judged worthy or unworthy of eternal life. This evolves from the narrative of Osiris, the divine spirit, who was unjustly murdered, raised from the dead, and, because of his righteousness, given eternal life. Through this spiritual act, each person was given the possibility and promise of resurrection and immortality through righteousness.

Thus, in the *Book of Vindication*, the resurrected one declares, “I die and I live for I am Osiris.” Moreover, the texts say, “O’ seeker of vindication, the earth opens its mouth for you; it opens its jaws on your behalf.” Also, the *Pyramid Texts* say, “Rise up O’ vindicated one. Take hold of your head. Gather together your bones; collect your limbs and shake the dust from your flesh.”

Ascension

Next, the concept of repeating life involves ascension. Whereas resurrection is rising from the dead or “waking up,” ascension suggests rising into the heavens. Indeed, the *Book of Vindication* says, “Hail vindicated one. Come that you may rise up in the heavens.” Or again, it says “the doors of heaven are opened [to you] because of your virtue. May you ascend and see Hathor [Divinity of Love, Divine Mother].” Several modes of ascension emerge from its depiction in the texts.

The first is rising as a spirit. Thus, in *The Book of the Dead*, it says, “You ascend into the heavens, you cross [the firmament].” Other means are ascending by “lifting up” or via a ladder or stairway that is placed for the departed to ascend into the heavens. The *Book of the Dead* says, “You are lifted up into the heavens . . . you rise . . . on the path to everlastingness on the way to eternity.” The

Book of Vindication says, “For you, a ladder to the heavens shall be assembled and Nut [Heaven personified] shall extend her hand to you.”

Also, in the *Pyramid Texts*, it says, “I place the stairway. I set up the ladder and those in Amenta [paradise, heaven, place of afterlife] take hold up my hand . . . [and lift me up into the heavens].” Or again the text says, the divine spirits in heaven, “Take hold of the hand of this vindicated one and carry him to heaven that he may not die among men and women.” Finally, a fourth way that a risen person ascends is through flying up into the heavens. Thus, the *Pyramid Texts* say, “Lo, the flier flies, O’ men and women [of earth]. I [rise] and fly away from you.”

Judgment

The third and most essential concept in the theology of afterlife or immortality is the notion of judgment. It is one of Kemet’s and ancient Africa’s most important contributions to the development of the moral and spiritual thought of humankind because it introduced and led to the concepts of personal responsibility, free will, determinism, reward, and punishment in the next life for everyone. It also determined the afterlife possibilities of the wealthy, powerful, and the ordinary person, thus offering a kind of moral restraint on those who otherwise might be less inclined.

Central to the idea of judgment is the aspiration for immortality through living a righteous or Maatian life. The concept of Maat is polysemic, but includes such meanings as truth, justice, righteousness, and order; essentially, it means rightness in the realm of the Divine, natural, and social. It thus requires right relations with God or the Divine, nature, and other humans. This inclusive requirement is found in the Declarations of Innocence by Pharaoh Unas in his *Pyramid Text*, in which he states that he “wished to be judged by what he has done” and that he has done Maat (the good, the right) and has not done isfet (the evil and wrong). He concludes saying that no divinity, man, woman, beast, or bird accuses him, reflecting his concern for being justified before the Divine, nature, and humanity.

The Book of the Dead, chapter 125, provides a clear and elaborate picture of the process of judgment and justification. The time of judgment

is called “the Day of Assessing Characters” and the “Day of Great Reckoning.” This reflects focus on character as a means of living and judging a Maatian life. It involves first coming into the Hall of Maat, declaring that one brings Maat and has done away with evil. Second, one declares oneself innocent of 36 and 42 offenses against the Divine, nature, and humans before 42 judges. These include declaring one has not mistreated people, lied, killed, ordered killing, injured others, blasphemed, stolen, turned a blind eye to injustice, had illicit sex, harmed the vulnerable, misused nature, slandered or cheated, coveted, or caused strife. These are called the Declarations of Innocence, but were mistakenly called the Negative Confessions due to the phrasing, which begins, “I have not . . .” They are not confessions of wrong, but rather declarations of innocence. For example, “I have not done isfet to people” is the first Declaration of Innocence required. In a word, one confesses wrong, but declares innocence.

After declaring innocence, one’s heart is weighed in the Divine Balance of Ra, God, which measures righteousness. A person’s heart is weighed against the feather of Maat; if one’s good deeds outweigh one’s bad deeds, one receives eternal life; if not, one is consumed into nonexistence by a being called Ammut (literally consumer of the dead). In the *Husia*, in the *Book of Merikara*, it says, “A person endures after death and his deeds are set beside him as a portion. As for one who reaches them [the judges] without having done evil, he will exist there as a divine power, striding forth freely like the lords of eternity.” It reminds its readers that “one day is a donation to eternity, and [even] one hour is a contribution to the future.”

Acceptance

The fourth phase of the process of vindication for eternal life is being declared mAa xrw—maakheru, that is, true of voice, innocent, vindicated, and victorious. If one is vindicated, the Djehuti, the divinity of justice, law, and reckoning, records and announces the verdict, saying, “Hear this word of truth. I have judged the heart of Osiris [X]. His soul stands as witness for him. His conduct is righteous according to the Great Scales.

And no fault has been found in him.” In *The Book of the Dead*, the Great Nine Divinities respond by saying, “What you have said is true. The Osiris X is maa kheru [justified] and might. . . . Ammut shall not be permitted to have power over him.”

Having been judged maa kheru, one becomes an Osiris and, like Osiris, gains immortality and is welcomed in the afterlife. After weighing and judgment, then, the Osiris X is led by Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, before Osiris. Horus reports to Osiris, saying, “I have come before you ‘O Wennofer [Good Being], having brought you Osiris X. His heart is righteous [Maatian], having come forth from the Balance. . . . Djehuti has recorded it in writing. . . . And Maat the Great has witnessed it.” (Maat here is the divinity that personifies truth, justice, etc.) After this, the Osiris speaks again declaring his or her Maatian character and then says, “Grant that I may be like those in your following. . . .” He or she then kneels before Osiris, presents his offerings, and is received into the afterlife and otherworld (Amenta). The *Book of the Dead* contains this prayer for acceptance, “May the Lords of the sacred land receive and give me three-fold praise in peace. May they make a seat for me besides the Elders of the Council.” Again, it says, “Let it be said to me ‘welcome, come in peace’ by those who shall see me.”

In addition to immortality in the heavens, the ancient Egyptians sought immortality on Earth and in the hearts and minds of the people. One writer wrote in his autobiography,

May Ra put love of me in the hearts of the people so that all may be fond of me. May he make my name last like the stars of heaven and my monument last like those of his followers. May my Ka [divine essence] be remembered in His temple day and night. May I renew my youth like the moon and may my name not be forgotten in the years that come after.

Transformation

Finally, the process leading to the afterlife or immortality involves transformation into a living and eternal spirit. A prayer in *The Book of the Dead* asks, “May I assume whatever form I want in whatever place my spirit wishes to be.” Here

the vindicated is transformed into various powerful and glorious spiritual forms or Axw—akhu. Indeed, in the *Book of Vindication*, it is said of the vindicated one, “I am transformed into one whose spirits are mighty. I am one with Ra, Lord of His Two Lands [Kemet] and am she [he] who is placed behind Him.” In an autobiographical text, it says that the vindicated has been found maa kheru, “therefore may you welcome and transfigure him as a reward for his virtue.” The conclusion of this process can be summed up in the following passage from the *Pyramid Texts*: “Ra has received me unto himself, to heaven . . . as this star which lights up heaven . . . Never again will the heavens be void of me or the earth empty of my presence.”

Maulana Karenga

See also Ka; Maat; Reincarnation

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AGE GROUPS

Among many African peoples, members of the society are grouped according to age. Although the practice is not universal, it is widespread throughout the continent and impacts the social and religious attitudes of the people. In fact, the age group organization is woven into the fabric of the sacred lineage of some East African communities. Age group sets are the keys to establishing solid foundations for respect for elders.

Such a system is normally cyclical. Names are given to the age sets and may reappear in cycles of 100 or so years when the last person of that group is deceased. The initiation into an age set usually happens every 5 years and is dependent

on the willingness to participate, rather than descent lineage. Young people are not normally accepted into the age group organization until they have reached puberty; then they may join any of the age group sets that apply to their ages. Where age group sets exist, by the time a person is 15 years old, he or she has usually been accepted into an age group set.

There are a number of theories about age group organizations. Some believe that they were developed to deal with military situations. In fact, the Zulu military organization under Chaka was based on age group sets. Most East African societies that have age group sets also use them as military group and military organization. Among the Maasai and Nandi, the age group sets provided ready sources of military troops.

Of course, there are some people who do not tie their age group sets to military or legal systems; they are tied to social constructions. Another theory says that age groups reflect the way humans move into the ancestral realm, that is, with their age group cohorts. Because all members of an age group are close in age, this is a logical conclusion because the group creates a common approach to society, life, and ancestors. The age group set may provide the basis for community loyalty. The participation in the age group is at the core of the community's sense of purpose. Those who are in an age set work within a structure where age group loyalty trumps all others.

Normally if the particularly ethnic group practices circumcision, all the boys who are circumcised at the same time form an age set. Some groups practice female circumcision also, and girls who are circumcised at the same time are members of the same set.

Usually age set creation is accompanied by ritual ceremonies of initiation. Only those people who have been initiated can participate in certain age set activities. If someone violates the rules of the age set, then that person might be cursed or expelled from the age group.

The Tiriki age sets, for example, are given names according to age and responsibilities. Thus, you have elders who are deceased or senile (Kabalach), ritual elders (Golongolo), judicial elders (Jiminigayi), elder warriors (Nyonje), warriors (Mayina), initiated (Juma), uninitiated (Juma), and small boys (Sawe). One remains with

an age group until all members are deceased; then the next group becomes the oldest and wisest.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Rites of Passage

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AGRICULTURAL RITES

The manner in which different African cultural groups perceive and use land influences their agricultural rituals. In those societies that rely heavily on agriculture for both their sustenance and economy, compared with herding peoples, the rituals surrounding agriculture are central to the people and the most elaborate. They are sacred rites that secure the communities' continued survival.

In many cultures, the agricultural cycle, along with its accompanying weather, mark time and define the year: planting, harvesting, the dry season, the rainy season, followed by planting again. The names of months found among the Latuka people—"Let them dig!" "Grain in the Ear," "Dirty Mouth," and "Sweet grain"—show how agricultural cycles influence everyday time reckoning. People traditionally keep track of their ages in terms of how many agricultural cycles they have lived through. Children are named according to these cycles, such as Azmera, a female name from Ethiopia meaning harvest, and Wekesa, a male name from the Luya of Kenya meaning born during harvest time.

Agricultural rites can be divided into three general categories: those for the planting, maturation, and harvesting of crops. Planting rituals prepare the ground, seeds, tools, and people for the upcoming growing season to ensure the crop's success. Maturation rituals occur once the crops begin growing and address factors that can keep crops from ripening properly, such as not enough,

or too much water, insects, or animals. Harvest rituals give thanks for the crop and are the most festive occasions. All of the rituals in the agricultural cycle acknowledge and propitiate various spiritual forces involved in the producing of food. This entry describes rites in each cycle and looks at related mythology.

The Three Cycles

Planting Rituals

Rituals in preparation for planting are regarded seriously in communities that rely on agriculture because the proper timing and performance of the rituals are the difference between an abundance of crops and hunger or between survival and death. Timing planting rituals involves complex observations that include celestial bodies such as the moon and stars, the behavior of animals, insects, water, and air. Plantings are initiated when the outcome will be most favorable, not for the sake of one of these particular events. For example, the position of the moon can be a key factor in planting; however, if the conditions with water or the behavior of animals are not favorable, planting will not occur just because the moon is favorable.

Preparation also includes securing permission to plant. The Bobo ask permission from nature spirits and their creator god *Wuro* before planting because they believe that every act that takes something from nature has a negative impact. *Wuro* is responsible for nature's balance. Masks are used to chase evil from the community and purify the land. These rituals last for 3 days. In Senegal, sacrifices of millet cake are made in the evening. If, on the next day, the cakes have disappeared, the land can be cultivated. If not, the land must not be used for cultivation.

Sometimes restrictions are placed on people in the community. Among the Ik of Uganda, women are forbidden from felling any trees, burning grass, or quarreling before the planting lest an animal be slaughtered for the transgression. One restriction or taboo found in many cultures, such as the Dogon and Ndebele, is that cultivation and burial cannot happen on the same land.

Planting rituals include special attention to seeds. The Ik gather seeds from each family. The men gather on a nearby hill, plant a tree to symbolize the passing of the year without problems,

and the communal seeds are sown. Among the Dagara, each household brings sample seeds to the house of the chief of the earth shrine. Some seeds are known, such as millet, corn, and groundnuts (peanuts); others are not to be named. They are magical seeds. Naming them would destroy their power. They do not grow into plants, but help the other seeds.

The priest of the Earth shrine takes a single seed from each family's basket and places it on the Earth shrine. The following day, this ceremony would be repeated by men at their farms in the presence of their families. The women would then plant the seeds. The Lozi assemble at sunrise at an altar of sticks and clay. Each household places seeds, hoes, and axes on a dish on the altar. The chief then performs a ritual asking for blessing of both the seeds and the implements used in planting and harvesting. The Akamba, Gikuyu, Shilluk, Shona, Sonjo, Lozi, Lunda, Nuba, and Tikar have rituals to bless seeds and work implements. Other communities offer animal sacrifices when it is time to plant.

Maturation Rituals

After seeds are planted, it is important that they mature to plants and produce crops. Rains and protection from birds, insects, and animals are important factors. Rains are needed to both nourish the seeds and prevent birds from digging them up and eating them. Sacrifices are made by the Akamba and Gikuyu if there is a delay in the rains. After the communal seeds have been planted, Ik women present beer to the male elders who are waiting on a nearby hill. As the women proceed up the hill dressed in traditional goatskin skirts with leg bells, they sing joyous songs for the rains to fall. Once they reach the elders, the senior elder takes a symbolic sip, and then the other elders do so according to seniority. This is followed by communal dancing. In Burkina Faso, appeals are made to the ancestors to address caterpillars and crickets.

Harvest Rituals

These rituals often mark the New Year, which is a time of thanksgiving and joyous celebration. In Swaziland, the 6-day-long Festival of the First Fruits of the New Year, or *Incwala*, is an important

holiday in which the King bites and spits out specific plants and fruits of the first harvest. This signifies that it is now time to partake of the harvest.

Yam or New Yam festivals are similar rituals that occur throughout the continent because of the importance of yams in the diets of many groups. During these festivals, farmers bring their yams to chiefs who then offer them to deities, ancestors, elders, and clan heads before they can be eaten. Sometimes raw yams are offered to the ancestors and cooked ones for the living. An Ibo tradition requires the eldest male of the community to offer newly harvested yams to deities and ancestors first. The elder then eats the first yam. After these rituals, people are now permitted to consume the new harvest. It is taboo to eat the new harvest before these rituals are performed. During this time, old yams are discarded and contests are held for the biggest and best yams.

Once food supplies have been secured for the coming year, communities can afford a little merrymaking and the affirmation of relationships. In Ghana, at least 57 harvest festivals are held from late July through early October with these themes. The most widely observed among the Ga is the Homowo festival, or “hooting at hunger.” One family celebrates Homowo before all the others. This signals the start of the season. It is a time for family gatherings, gift giving, purification, rituals, meals, dances, and honoring the ancestors. Debt payments cannot be demanded nor can legal proceedings be initiated. On the eve of Homowo, people stay in their houses while the ancestors walk the streets. The Ga king sacrifices a sheep. The next morning, a ritual meal of fish stew and corn dough is prepared and given to the ancestors along with libations. Then the living family members eat. Afterward, the Homowo dance is performed. The next day, those who died the previous year are mourned by the women, and family and friends exchange wishes for the year.

Agricultural Mythology

In addition to cultivation for physical nourishment, there are ritual cultivations of crops. The cultivation of millet among the Ga is associated with the *kpele* gods, maize with the ancestors, and yam with *otu* gods, chiefs' thrones, talking drums, and twins.

The Yoruba divinity Osanyin brought all of the plants to Earth with their rich and varied shades of green and colorful flowers. In doing so, he also brought to the Earth beauty and sacred, which did not exist before. He also brought animals, but is more regarded for plants. One day, Ifa asked him to weed a garden; Osanyin began crying because the weeds he was asked to remove were beneficial as medicine. Since then, Osanyin is known as the doctor in the kingdom of Olodumare.

The Dogon say the *sene* seed is the first plant life and it carries with it elements from the first creation by Amma. Thus, sacrifices made to the *sene* tree bring good to all vegetation.

Denise Martin

See also Family Rites; Plants; Rocks and Stones

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AGWE

In Haitian Vodou, Agwe is an important spirit who represents one of the most powerful and well-respected forces in nature: the ocean. He is husband to Lasiren, a mermaid who resides with him in his underwater mansion, and cousin to her sister, La Balen, a whale. Although his main consort is Lasiren, it is said that Agwe was seduced by Ezili Freda at one time. Because some believe that Lasiren is really one of the many different aspects of Ezili, in actuality, he would have consorted with his *true* wife.

Although often overshadowed by his strikingly beautiful wife, Amiral Agwe, as he is called by some of his followers, is recognized as the only true patron of sailors and fishers. Haitians pray to him when embarking on seaward journeys. If his followers are faithful, he will guide them safely to their destination and provide a bountiful catch; however, if they are

negligent with libations and offerings, they will *tounen men vid*, come back empty handed and encounter turbulent seas among other misfortunes on their journey.

All water spirits are famous for their jealous nature and unrelenting anger. Although understanding, generous, and, in general, slow to anger, Agwe is also slow to forgive. Many envision him as a distinguished naval sea officer with ink black hair just beginning to gray and a well-trimmed beard; his eyes resemble deep pools of water. During the day, he sails a large stately ship and enjoys the refreshing mist of the ocean on his weathered face; at night, he descends to his watery abode under the sea. One might imagine that Agwe feels as a fish might feel out of water because he rarely ventures far from home, never wanting to leave any of his seven seas behind. A solemn deity, Agwe prefers the isolation of his underwater realm to the ostentatious Vodou ceremonies where the other *Lwa* or Vodou spirits manifest themselves to the faithful. It is because of this preference that he rarely reveals himself during a *sèvis* *Lwa*, a Vodou ceremony, or in other encounters with humans.

In Haitian Vodou, each *Lwa* has certain characteristics, preferences, and attributes. Agwe's colors are white and blue, just like the waves of the ocean. His day is Thursday. His tree is the *raisinier* (*cocolota uvifera*), and he likes to drink fine champagne and other expensive liqueurs, like Ezili Freda. Ordinarily, Agwe is offered cakes, white sheep, liqueurs or champagne, and white hens. He is part of the Rada family as a water spirit and also because of his overall kind and gentle nature. Unlike the gods from the *Petwo* family, Agwe is not easily provoked. His symbols are the fish, boats, and paddles.

Agwe is clearly a god of African origin, more specifically Fon, by his name (from the Fon *Agbe*, a Vodou divinity of the Hevioso pantheon), his personality, and place in the Vodou pantheon. Some other African gods who share a resemblance with Agwe are Hapi (Egypt/Egyptian), Olokun (Nigeria/Yoruba), Selket (Egypt/Egyptian), and Sobek (Egypt/Egyptian).

Kyrab Malika Daniels

See also Olokun

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AIDA WEDO

In the beginning, a large snake encircled the Earth to protect it from crumbling into the seas. When the first rains began to fall, the Haitian deity, *Aida Wedo*, the rainbow *Lwa*, appeared, and the serpent (who was really the *Lwa Danbala*) fell in love with her, and they married. It is said that the semen of men and the milk of women are actually the spiritual nectar of *Danbala* and *Aida Wedo* being passed through each generation. The two *Lwa* taught humanity about the link between life and blood, menstruation and birth, and the ultimate power of (blood) sacrifice in Haitian Vodou.

This sort of creation story involving powerful male and female spirits is not unusual. Many world religions share similar creation myths, where contrasting yet complementary forces join together to conceive the Earth and its inhabitants. Often these deities form close ties with their creations and share with them the great secrets of life in hopes that they might lead more spiritually meaningful and fulfilling lives. These unions are so strong that it becomes difficult to separate these deities and speak solely of one without touching on the other; such is the case with *Aida Wedo* and *Danbala*. Although *Danbala* is the more primary of the two, *Aida Wedo* holds her ground. Powerful of her own accord, she nevertheless is made even stronger through and because of her consort.

This creation tale also reveals the complexity of male and female principles in Haitian Vodou. The *Lwa* can be at once male and female, and this fluidity of gender pervades their sexuality as well; it is not unusual for goddesses to couple with goddesses, whether acting as female spirits or playing the role of a male deity. During ceremonies, women are routinely mounted by male

Lwa and men by female Lwa, blurring gender boundaries, as these devotees, *chwal* of the Lwa, take on these different gender and sexual roles with other participants.

Aida Wedo represents fertility along with Danbala, and together the two bestow luck, happiness, and wealth on those who serve them. Aida Wedo's colors are blue and white. Her day is Thursday. Her trees are the cotton and silk trees, and, along with her husband, worshippers offer her white foods: cauliflower, eggs, rice, hens, milk, and white corn. She dwells in springs and rivers along with Danbala, which makes their realm water; they are both part of the *Rada* family. Aida Wedo's symbols are rainbows and rainbow serpents; Danbala's symbols are snakes and eggs, which symbolize their role in the dawn of Life. Aida Wedo is commonly associated with fertility.

The couple Aida Wedo–Danbala Wedo owes its existence to the Fon couple Aida Wedo–Danbada Wedo from the Vodou tradition of Benin, West Africa. This comes as no surprise because many of the Africans who were taken to Haiti by force during the European slave trade came from that region of Africa. There are many parallels—“dual deities,” male and female creator-spirits—in other religions, although in each tradition the pair of dual forces varies from brother and sister to husband and wife or even rivals. In addition to the original Fon couple, other African creator gods and goddesses who resemble Aida Wedo and Danbala are Aido Hwedo and Mawu (Nigeria/Yoruba), Isis and Osiris (Egypt/Egyptian), Olorun and Obatala (Nigeria/Yoruba), and Papa and Rangì (Polynesia/Maori).

Claudine Michel and Kyrà Malika Daniels

See also Vodou in Haiti

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AIR

The earliest philosophical treatment of air is found in ancient Egypt in the form of Shu. According to the ancient texts, Shu was one of the ENNEAD that dwelled at the temple in On (Heliopolis) and represented one of the fundamental elements. The tradition says that the Ra, the Supreme Deity, created Shu and his sisters, Tefnut, Geb, and Nut, as the four basic elements of the Universe. Shu represented air, Tefnut represented moisture, Geb represented Earth, and Nut represented the sky.

Shu's function, like that of the other elements, was critical to the sustaining of the cosmic order put in place by Ra. Shu, as air, was responsible for lifting Nut above Geb, that is, separating the sky from the Earth. In this function, Shu assumes a crucial responsibility in maintaining balance. Should Shu disappear then the sky would collapse onto the Earth and humans would be unable to survive. Should Shu lift the sky too far away from the Earth then humans would also die because of the lack of protection from Nut. Thus, the role of air was one of sustaining life, maintaining balance, and protecting humans.

Ra's creation of Shu and the other elements set in motion the fundamental pattern of Africa's response to the environment. Shu's role, as understood by the ancient Egyptians, may be seen as that of protecting the sanctity of the environment. One can create chaos in the universe by disturbing the air. In this regard, the nature of air as something to be protected because of its relationship to the environment is one of the world's first environmental responses.

Humans have received the air as a gift of Ra, the Supreme Deity by any name, and should protect its cleanliness, purity, and energy with good aromas, elimination of bad odors, and ritual cleansing of the atmosphere.

Shu, in the ancient Egyptian formulation, had a duty to perform. In other African societies, Yoruba, Akan, Zulu, Kikuyu, Bakuba, and so forth, the air is a sustainer of life and also the container of numerous powers and energies. The discovery of air as an animating and energizing phenomenon is essential to the contemporary African appreciation of the environment as a spiritual context. What Shu

becomes by virtue of this pervasive emphasis on the fullness of the air with spiritual energies is something more than a physical energy; it is because of its capacity to contain the energies of the ancestors and the spirit world that the one environmental element created by the Supreme Deity to separate Earth and sky takes on the characteristics of mediating balance in the universe. Thus, air is the element that allows us to mediate conditions of maat on Earth and in the sky.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Shu

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AIWEL

In the belief of the Dinka people of Sudan, Aiwel was the founder of the priesthood known as the spearmasters. He was the son of a water spirit and a human mother. During his childhood, Aiwel's mother died, and he went to live with his father in a river. When he became a man, he returned to his mother's village with a beautiful multicolored ox he called by the name Longar. When the people saw him, they called him Aiwel Longar. Thus, there entered into the cosmology of the Dinka people one of their most important figures.

Aiwel Longar is representative of so many values, attitudes, and dispositions in Dinka philosophy that one could almost say that the Dinka measure other humans by the characteristics of Aiwel Longar. First of all, his narrative is epic and shows that he had arisen from a special condition of being from the spiritual and the human side. Second, he overcame all conditions of difference and established himself as the leader of his people. The story is told that Aiwel Longar performed many mighty deeds at his mother's village.

Not long after Aiwel Longar had returned to his mother's village, there was a terrible drought in the land. When the rains did not come, many people died because they could not find food. Crops died in the field. There was little grass in some places and no grass in even more places. Thousands of cattle also died in the land.

Aiwel Longar was greatly disturbed by the conditions he saw. Finally, he went to the people who remained in the village and told them that they should follow him to a new land because if they remained in their village they would die. His confidence increased to the point that he spoke directly to the elders. He said that they would have water and grass for their animals as well as for themselves if they followed him to the new land.

Although he had traveled where others had never gone, it was difficult for him to convince them of something they had never seen. Many people did not believe Aiwel. They refused at first to leave the village. They spoke against the plan, and Aiwel Longar decided that he had to leave so he began his journey with those who wanted to go with him and his family. These willing individuals trusted Aiwel's words. Some of the people who had challenged him soon decided that they would follow Aiwel.

But Aiwel was angry that they had not come in the first place; when they reached the river, he killed several people as they tried to cross the river to join him. The people with him begged him not to punish all of those who did not initially leave with the group. Persuaded that all of the people had not objected to his plans, and after the leaders of the revolt against his idea had been killed, Aiwel relented and allowed most of the people to join his group. He gave the men spears, and they became a part of his spearmasters clan.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Adu Ogyinae; Ancestors

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AKAMBA

Akamba are a Kenyan people who speak *ki-kamba* and are mostly found in the Central Eastern part of the country (Kitui, Machakos, Makueni, and Mwingi districts). Early pioneers in iron smelting within the region, the Akamba had advanced weaponry (e.g., iron-tipped arrows) that gave them an edge over surrounding communities and earned them a reputation as gallant warriors, great marksmen, and tradesmen. Trading mainly in ivory, beer, honey, iron implements, and beads, they bartered their wares with neighboring Maasai and Kikuyu, as well as with the Arabs along the coast.

The sociopolitical structure of the Akamba includes the family unit, *musiē* (both nuclear and extended), which subsequently is a part of the small and the big clan (*mbaĩ*). A clan traces its origins to a known hero. There are about 20 big clans, each distinguished by its distinctive animal totem, with members considered close kin who predominantly practice exogamy. Initiation/circumcision, *nzaĩko*, provides another basis of defining subsets within the population. Occurring between the ages of 10 and 15, it sorts the population into age sets/groups.

At the clan level, ad-hoc councils of elders, *nzama ya atumĩa*—men and women selected by virtue of their old age (senior most age group), perceived wisdom, and respect in society—govern both the administrative and judicial affairs of the community. The elders comprise the highest formal authoritative body and have the final say on community matters. In this capacity, male elders administer a special oath (*kĩthitũ*) with great mystic and magical potency meant to elicit information. Fear and respect for the medicine man (*mũndũ mũe*) and the controller of evil (*mũndũ mũoũ*) also served as a primary component of social control.

According to the Akamba creation myth, after creating the ancestral or spirits clan (*mbaĩya aimũ*), the Supreme Being (*Mũlungu/Mwatũangi*) created the first man and woman and placed them on Mt. Nzau in Machakos. Imprints of God's feet are said to still be visible there. Spirits (and the living-dead), *aimũ*, mediate between the dead and the living, as well as punish by inflicting illnesses

and physical damages. For this reason, sacrifices are offered to them. The spirits also play a crucial role in the continuation of the community because they are understood to form the fetus in the woman's womb. At death, the human soul departs from the body and goes to the spirit world, becoming a living-dead.

Sacrifices to the Supreme Being and the spirits were performed at designated shrines and usually included chickens, goats, sheep, cattle, and, on rare occasions, a human child. In the latter case, only during national disasters such as famines, epidemics, and so on was a child from the ancestral clan sacrificed (usually at the foot of the sacred *Mũkũyũ* tree). This was the price that the ancestral clan had to pay for their failure to make designated blood sacrifices to the Supreme Being.

Andrew M. Mbuvi

See also Maasai

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AKAN

The Akan are one of the best-known cultural groups in Africa. Currently 4 million strong, they are the largest cultural grouping of Ghana, representing approximately half of the country's population. The Akan *Abusua* (family), or clans, includes the Akuapem, Akyem (Abuakwa, Bosome, Kotoku), Asante, Brong-Ahafo, Fante, Kwahu, and Nzema. The Asante and Fante are the two largest of these subgroups. Although the political, social, religious, and customary practices of the Akan are similar, each clan shares a common cultural heritage and language, which, added to their historical tradition of group identity and political autonomy, contributed to the formation of individual nation-states during the precolonial period. This entry briefly describes their culture and then examines their ideas of spirituality in more detail.

Cultural Characteristics

Linguistically, the collective term *Akan* refers to a group of languages belonging to the Kwa subfamily of the Niger-Kordofanian language family spoken in both Ghana (south of the Volta River) and Côte d'Ivoire. What distinguishes one group from another are their linguistic variants (dialects) that include Akuapem, Asante, and Fante; the former two are referred to as Twi. Akan is the first language of approximately 44% of Ghana's population, with Asante Twi being the most widely spoken of the variants.

Making use of figurative speech, the Akan are probably best known for their proverbial wisdom. Proverbs are popular maxims used to express practical truths gained through experience and observation. They are expressed not only in words, but also through music, particularly traditional drumming, and dance, as well as through textile art, specifically adinkra and kente cloths. Proverbs constitute an important characteristic of the Akan language(s) and are used to imbue communication with life. Proverbs, metaphorical guides for righteous living, provide a better understanding of the Akan outlook on existence, both physical and spiritual. The following Akan proverbs are instructive in this regard:

True power comes through cooperation and silence.

Two men in a burning house must not stop to argue.

One falsehood spoils a thousand truths.

The one who asks questions does not lose his way.

No one points God out to a child.

A family is like a forest. When you are outside it is dense; when you are inside you see that each tree has its place.

The knot tied by a wise man cannot be undone by a fool.

If you hold a snake by its head, its body will turn to rope.

Even the teeth and tongue fight sometimes, although they live together.

Death has no cure. Be a good person and remember that you will die someday.

If someone takes care of you in childhood, take care of them during their old age.

If you know how to advise, advise yourself.

What distinguishes the Akan from many of the other cultural groupings in Ghana is that they are a matrilineal people. Every Akan belongs to a clan or abusua (family) and is bound to that abusua by blood relation. They believe that, during intercourse, the sunsum (spirit) from the father mingles with the mogya (blood) of the mother, giving rise to conception. This joining of spiritual and physical components gives rise to the mother-child bond and lays the foundation for the matrilineal system of descent by the Akan. As the Akan proverb informs us, "A crab does not beget a bird." Thus, a child born to a Kwahu mother and an Nzema father is a Kwahu.

Spirituality

Although Christianity and Islam attempted to colonize their spirituality, the Akan have not departed from their ancestral and spiritual culture, which defines them as Akan. Spirituality is the foundation on which Akan society and culture is built.

Cosmogony

A cosmogony is an account of how the universe (cosmos) came into being. It differs from cosmology, or the structure of the universe, in that the latter aims at understanding the actual composition and governing "laws" of the universe as it now exists, whereas the former answers the question as to how it first came to be. *Abrewa na ni mba*, the Old Woman and Her Children, is the name of the Akan creation narrative.

The Akan believe that, in the beginning, Nyame (Creator) lived in the sky, which was actually very close to the Earth, where the old woman and her children lived. Each day when the old woman would pound her fufu, the pestle hit Nyame. Although Nyame continuously warned the woman to stop hitting him or else he would move far away into the sky, the woman continued to pound her fufu. So Nyame in fact moved far away into the sky where the people could no longer reach him.

The old woman, determined to find a way to reach Nyame and bring him back, instructed her children to pile all of the mortars they could find on top of one another until the tower of mortars reached where Nyame was. The children complied; however, they were one mortar short of reaching Nyame. Because they could not find anymore mortars, the old woman told them to take one out from the bottom and put it on the top. When her children did so, the tower of mortars fell to the ground, causing mass destruction and killing many people.

The story of *Abrewa na ni mba* not only portrays the Akan conception of the creation of the universe, but also teaches a moral and ethical lesson. At one time, Nyame lived close to people, and it was easy for them to reach Nyame with their concerns and requests. Bothered by the old woman's action, he asked her to obey his request to stop hitting him with her pestle; but because she ignored his request and subsequently disobeyed him, Nyame moved farther away from people. Stubborn, the old woman was determined to reach Nyame anyway, but her disobedience had already sealed humanity's fate, causing people more pain and distance from Nyame. The lesson is that people must obey the wishes of Nyame or suffer the same consequences of *Abrewa na ni mba*. The Akan identify a constellation called *Abrewa na ni mba*, which is composed of an arrangement of seven stars, each corresponding to the seven matrilineal divisions of the Akan people.

Cosmology

Cosmologically, the Akan universe is essentially spiritual. All things, animate and inanimate within the Universe, are endowed with varying degrees of sunsum. One of the most important aspects of Akan cosmology is the reverence of the Nsamanfo (ancestors). In addition to their belief in a Supreme Being (Nyame), Mother Earth (Asase Yaa), and a host of intermediaries/deities (abosom), the Akan believe in the omnipresence of the Nsamanfo, made evident by daily acts such as the pouring of libation, throwing on the ground the first morsel of food, as well as periodic ancestral ceremonies (Adae).

Because the universe is endowed with sunsum, the Akan consult the Nsamanfo before making and acting on many daily decisions. For example, if a person wants to build a house, he or she cannot just go to the forest, cut down trees, and begin to build. The trees contain sunsum, and the person must first ask the Nsamanfo permission to cut down the trees.

Additionally, Akan culture is ancestral: They believe that, although the Nsamanfo no longer occupy physical space on earth, they maintain important roles in each person's life. Most important of their roles is that of direct messenger to Nyame, as opposed to the Abosom, who are messengers *from* Nyame. When Akan pour libation or chant prayers, they do not reach Nyame directly. Instead, they invoke the Nsamanfo to pass their messages along to Nyame because they are the spiritual representatives of living people and are in closer proximity to Nyame.

It is believed that the Nsamanfo are spiritual beings with the power to bring good fortune to the living, specifically members of their lineage or, if dissatisfied, to show their displeasure by causing ill fortune, sickness, and so on. They may manifest themselves in human form, in dreams, or through trance, and their spiritual presence may be invoked to assist the living. Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices are most often offered to them to seek their blessings and avoid any misfortune.

Conception of Man/Woman

The Akan believe that each individual consists of certain material and spiritual elements. The honam (body) and mogya (blood; connection to matrilineage) represent the material or physical components, whereas the kra (life force/soul), honhom (breath of Divine Life), and sunsum (spirit; connection to patrilineage) represent the spiritual or nonphysical components. Nyame (Creator) bestows these material and spiritual elements on us at conception and birth; however, when we "die," the honam and mogya join Asase Yaa (Mother Earth), whereas the kra, honhom, and sunsum return to Nyame.

Good health is contingent on balance and harmony between both the material and spiritual elements. If one is injured, the other is affected.

When a person falls ill, Akan concern themselves not only with the physical manifestations of the illness, but the spiritual aspects as well.

According to the Akan, individuals are made up of *kra* (soul), *honhom* (breath of Divine Life), *sunsum* (spirit), and *mogya* (blood). The *kra*, the “life force” or the soul, emanates from Nyame. The *kra* is said to be the small bit of Nyame that lives in every person’s *honam*. Given at birth, it is the spiritual component of our consciousness and influences all of our actions. On an individual basis, the *sunsum* is the basis of one’s character and personality and originates from the father. It is a functionary of the *kra* in that when Nyame gives us our *kra* at birth, it is the *sunsum* that escorts the *kra*; and on physical death, when the *kra* returns to Nyame, it is again escorted by the *sunsum*. Therefore, the *Kra* and the *Sunsum* are purposeful counterparts of one another.

Libation: An Everyday Prayer

Given the Akan conceptualizations of Nyame, the *Abosom*, and the *Nsamanfo*, and the close relationship among them, libation functions as a specialized method of communication with Nyame through intermediaries. If the living want to send a message to Nyame, they do so through libation because Akan have the power and ability to reach the *Nsamanfo* directly; but if they wish to receive a message from Nyame, Akan consult a traditional priest (*Okomfo*) because priests have the power and ability to reach the *Abosom*, who carry messages from Nyame. The *Okomfo* then conducts rituals, one of which includes libation. Outside of rituals performed on behalf of others, libation is used by *Akomfo* (plural of *Okomfo*) to invoke the spirit of the *Abosom* that they follow.

Generally speaking, libation represents the means by which the Akan connect to the *Nsamanfo*. When they want to honor and pay respect to their ancestors, they do so through libation. When they want to ask for peace, blessings, and forgiveness or to give thanks to Nyame, they do so through the *Nsamanfo*, and they do so through libation. Libation, therefore, is an important thread in the Akan matrix of cultural values.

Libation does not involve reciting a memorized prayer. It relies on the art of improvisation inspired by the occasion. Although libation offers the performer a wide range of creativity, there is a general technique for the pouring of libation. To pour libation, one requires liquid in some form. Palm wine was traditionally used in the past. More currently, Schnapps, a brand of liquor, and water are used most often. Traditionally, two people are involved in the ceremony—the one who actually pours the libation and the one who assists. After the “officiator” taps the top of the bottle, the “assistant” opens it and pours the liquid into a container held by the “officiator.”

When performed by a male, the officiator lowers his cloth if he is wearing traditional attire, and if female, she removes her headgear as to be open to the reception of spirit. Shoes are also removed as a sign of respect to Nyame, the *Abosom*, and the *Nsamanfo*. The officiator then lifts his or her right hand and calls on the intended spirits in ritualized order. The reason for pouring libation is offered and specific prayers are then announced. After each step, a little drink is poured and the assistant, as well as the participants, respond to what the officiator conveys to the *Nsamanfo* by either saying “Hiao” (may it be so) or “Nsa” (drink). Overall, libation serves to foster the relationship between man/woman and the *Nsamanfo* and the unification between the world of the living and the world of the spirits.

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See also Adae; Adinkra Symbols; Asamando; Asase Yaa; Nyame; Sunsum

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AKHENATEN

Akhenaten (1353–1336 BC), whose name means “he who praises Aten,” was an 18th dynasty king and philosopher who changed his name from Amenhotep, meaning “Amen is satisfied.” Although he was not the first African philosopher, no other thinker of the ancient period was as significant as Akhenaten in establishing a persona that has reverberated through the ages. None of the earlier philosophers such as Imhotep, Merikare, Duauf, or Amenemhat left the enduring reputation for creativity as did Akhenaten. Yet this popularity has been questioned by numerous African scholars and can best be viewed by examining an array of facts surrounding the life and times of Akhenaten. This entry outlines the religious and political contexts in which Akhenaten arose, discusses his reign, and looks at what happened to his work after his death.

Amen and His City

During the 18th dynasty in the Upper Egyptian city of Waset, called Thebes by the Greeks, the god Amen was supreme. No god had dominated the ancient land as Amen did; his name would ring eternally through the ages as Amen and sometimes in combination with Ra as Amen-Ra. Indeed, the 18th dynasty of Kemet, named Egypt by the Greeks, was the Age of Amen’s supremacy. Any god raised up against the might of Amen would surely be struck down. Any scribe, *seshesh*, or, more precipitously, *Per-aa*, Great House, called *pharaoh* by the Hebrews, who dared to question the predominance of Amen would find himself or herself resigned to the margins of Kemet history and assaulted by 1,000 defenders of the Hidden One.

In the city of Amen, called Waset, the spoils of 100 war victories swelled the coffers of the Almighty and made God Amen all-powerful, in fact, incalculably awesome. Thus, Amen was also wealthy, the richest of any deity the world had ever known. Avenues of sphinxes, grand pylons of massive stones, decorated the city of God. Treasures from foreign capitals, including gold from the kingdoms of Nubia, timber from

Assyria, and spices from Punt, elevated Amen as paramount king of all the gods, the god of gods. So great and foreboding was he that neither the *Per-aa* nor the high priest could lay claim to this bounty. It had not been won in the service of mere humans; the wealth of Amen was the precious treasure won in service to the Hidden One.

There were no gold or silver coins in Egypt, one of the few civilizations that grew to maturity without metal coinage. But the temporal possessions of Amen were immeasurable. Donations of real estate, boats, vineyards, and livestock from the people of Kemet were constant and an indication of the popularity of the Supreme God, Amen, during the 18th dynasty.

But even Amen, as powerful as he was in the inner sanctum of his mighty temple, could not run his own operations from his hidden domain. Here even a God needed people, clerical and administrative, to hear the word of God and to do his bidding among humans, to carry out his rituals, to punish the disobedient, and to receive his gifts. It was also necessary to have people to manage the increasing stores of goods being shipped daily into the treasures of Amen. As mighty as he was from on high, Amen depended on a company of priests to carry out his will.

Imagine what numbers of functionaries must have been employed to run this large operation. The complexity and comprehensiveness of the priesthood of Amen had no equal among the major deities of Kemet at this time. In fact, some of the deities, such as Maat, had no priesthood at all. Every day more than 3,000 functionaries went to work at the Temple of Amen. As Waset grew in importance, made so by the ceaseless energy of the 18th dynasty kings, so did the significance of the worship of Amen.

Therefore, Waset’s energy and dynamism created the spiritual and religious contexts that would exist for most of the 18th dynasty. This was part of the context of the king who was born Amenhotep IV. Perhaps no period in Egyptian history was as glorious as this, and even the glories of the next dynasty, the Ramsessid, dominated by the greatest king in Kemet’s history, Ramses II, would be judged by the standards of the 18th dynasty.



Circa 1350 BC, King Akhenaten and his Queen Nefertiti worship Aten or Aton, the Sun God. Originally named Amenhotep IV, the king changed his name to Akhenaten ("Glory of Aten"), whom he worshipped as the one true god.

Source: Getty Images.

The Ahmosian Family

Amenhotep IV would mark out his territory in the history of the period as if he knew precisely what he had to do to establish a singular personality in the impressive lineage of Ahmose, Amenhotep I, Amenhotep III, Queen Tiye, Tuthmoses I, Tuthmoses II, Hatshepsut (Maat Ka Ra), and Tuthmoses III. Already by the time of his accession to the throne, he would be in the company of men and women who were larger than life. They had been the sponsors of God Amen, and their victories had been the victories of Amen. The Ahmosian family of the 18th dynasty was every bit the family of Amen as the Windsors are the family of the Christian God or the Saudis are the family of Allah.

Ahmose the Liberator had opened a new era in the Nile Valley when, in 1560 BC, he expelled the Hekar Khasut, usually called Hyksos, from all positions of power and reestablished an indigenous Egyptian dynasty over the entire country. Ahmose and his successors created at Waset, called Thebes by the Greeks, one of the greatest cities in antiquity. Here the shrine to Amen, in the holy of holies, erected by Senursert I (1971–1925 BC) and called *Ipet sut*, most select of places, stood as the centerpiece of a spiritual and architectural revival coinciding with the liberation of the land. To the south was the shrine of Ipet-rs'it, the southern select place, also dedicated to Amen. Across the Nile River to the west was the massive mortuary temple of Mentuhotep I (2061–2011 BC) adjacent to the spot where Hatshepsut's temple would later be built. To the north lay the tombs of the Antefs, ancestors of Mentuhotep. *Waset*, the city, took its place alongside the city, *Men-nefer*, called Memphis by the Greeks, and the city of *On*, named by the Greeks Heliopolis, as one of the ruling cities of Egypt.

The Wasetian kings went about their business increasing the importance of their native city. Today, the evidence remains quite clear of the grandeur of the ancient city as more than one third of all of the existing major monuments from the antiquity are within 40 miles of the city, now called Luxor.

But the glory of the 18th dynasty was not achieved without effort. The modeling of the 18th dynasty was in many ways the work of Tuthmoses I (1525–1514 BC), Tuthmoses III (1504–1451 BC),

Hatshepsut (1502–1483 BC), and Amenhotep II. The first of these personalities conceived an empire, the second made the conquest to create the empire, the third established imperial diplomacy, and the fourth nearly lost the empire. But even so, Amenhotep II (1453–1426 BC) was perhaps the first king in African history born with an empire ready for his use. He exhibited a flamboyantly imperialistic attitude toward his neighbors, often ridiculing those he defeated in battle.

Amenhotep II

Comparing himself to his father Tuthmoses III, perhaps the greatest conquering leader of the ancient world, Amenhotep II claimed to have “entered his northern garden” and took his bow and shot four targets of Asiatic copper while riding in his chariot. The text says that he appeared on his chariot like Montu in his power. He took his bow, grabbed a fistful of arrows, and drove north, shooting at each one of the targets like the bold Montu in his regalia. He hit every one of the targets. Supposedly, “It was a deed never seen before.” In reality, his father Tuthmoses III is said to have done deeds so marvelous and numerous that they are too many to be mentioned. According to a text, Tuthmoses III shot seven lions in the space of a moment and bagged 12 wild bulls in 1 hour. That his son would compare himself with his father demonstrates the level of Amenhotep II's confidence in his own reign.

Although Men-nefer remained a place where the kings held residence, by the third year of his reign, Amenhotep II had already begun to turn his face toward permanently establishing Waset as the seat of his power. This was the source of the best soldiers in the Egyptian army, a convenient place for recruiting Nubian archers, the famed Ta-Seti fighters. Furthermore, Waset was deeper into Egypt than Men-nefer and could more easily be protected from outsiders.

Amenhotep III

By the time of Amenhotep III, the legacy of his conquering ancestors had spread throughout the known world. He created a court proverbial for its elegance and luxury. Amenhotep III was truly the Dazzling Sun Disk, the Sun-King, as he called

himself. He was king of kings, ruler of rulers, Heru *par excellence*, and he who created the foundations of the land. Never before had the world seen such absolute power, such audacious authority, such exuberant wealth, and so much elegance as Amenhotep III assembled at Waset in the name of service to the God Amen. It would be about 1,500 years later and the time of the Roman caesars before this type of accumulation in the name of conquest would be seen again.

Amenhotep III married a young commoner named Tiye. She was the daughter of Tuya and Yuya. Her father, Yuya, was a lieutenant general of chariotry in the Egyptian army. Tiye became, notwithstanding her ordinary origin, the Great King's wife, the head of all of the king's spouses, and one of the greatest power wielders in Egypt's history. She would ultimately be the wife of a king, the mother of a king, the aunt of a queen, and the grandmother of a king. Her titles multiplied during her lifetime. She was the heiress, greatly praised, mistress of all lands who clings to the king, lady of rejoicing, mistress of upper and lower Kemet, and lady of the two lands.

The beautiful Tiye was queen at the height of Egypt's power. Its boundaries of influence stretched from central Sudan to northwest Iraq. Her husband, Amenhotep III, was no stranger to the ladies of those lands, marrying Babylonian, Nubian, Mitannian, and Syrian princesses. Although he may have been kept busy making children or counting children, it would only be the six children of Tiye, the great king's wife, who were targeted for the succession. Four were girls and two were boys.

The oldest girl, Sat-Amen, seemed to be her father's favorite, and you could almost hear him say during this most patriarchal of ages, "I wish she had been a boy." She had the spunk, intelligence, wit, matter of factness, understanding, personal strength, and insight that he wished for his boys. Soon Amenhotep III elevated her to the rank of the great king's wife like her mother, giving her authority and influence in the inner circle of the kingship. The eldest boy, Tuthmoses, had been slated for the kingship, but, soon after being elevated to the rank of priest of Ptah at Men-nefer, he died and the way was prepared for Amenhotep IV to become king of Kemet.

Amenhotep IV in Ascendancy

Thus, in the fifth month (January 1377) of what had been the 38th year of the reign of Amenhotep III, his second son, Amenhotep IV, ascended the great Heru seat as the Per-aa of Egypt, becoming the holder of the throne of the living king of kings, lord of lords, ruler of rulers, mighty in power, given life, health, and stability for ever and ever. His coronation name would be *Neferkheperura*, that is, the transformations of Ra are beautiful. He would add the epithet *wa-n-ra* (unique one of Ra) to the coronation name. He would take the *nesut bity* name as king of upper and lower Kemet.

Amenhotep IV, following his father, was crowned at Karnak, the chief place of the God Amen, which means that he was not in open revolt against the priesthood of Amen at the time of his coronation. However, shortly afterward, Amenhotep IV began the gradual process of replacing Amen with images of the deity Aten in the construction of temples and chapels. The so-called *talatat* blocks, decorated with a lively artistic style, began to define the early technique of the artisans of Amenhotep IV. A graffiti at Aswan written by Bek, the chief sculptor for Amenhotep IV, claimed that the king taught them the new, realistic technique. The 12,000 *talatat* blocks that the Franco-Egyptian Center for the Karnak Temples extracted from the demolished ninth pylon set up by Horemhab give us the best example of Amenhotep IV's art style for the few years he was in Karnak.

The Transformation of the King

Already by the second year into his reign, the king was questioning the norms of art, religion, and philosophy of the society. The king looked to his first jubilee when he would display his prowess and show that he was still fit to lead. In his second year, the idea of an *sd* festival crystallized in his mind, and Amenhotep IV, moving rapidly, wanted to set the time to coincide with his third anniversary of accession to the throne. The repairs and decorations that he completed during this early period would eventually be eradicated or his name eliminated.

This was perhaps the beginning of the real heresy of Amenhotep IV. The jubilee was never celebrated in the third year; it was normally celebrated in the 30th year of a king's reign. To break this tradition meant that the king could break any tradition. Of course, the king knew what others did not know at the time: that was he was planning his move to a new capital. He called his sculptors around him and ordered Bek, the son and successor of his father's chief sculptor Men, to begin the construction for the *sd* festival.

Four major structures were to be erected: *Gm-(t)-p3-itn* Gemti pa Aton (The Sun-disk is found), *hwt-bnbn* huut benben (the Mansion of the benben-stone), *Rwd-mnw-n-itn-r-nhh* ruud menu n Aton r neheh (Sturdy are the monuments of the Sun-disk forever), and *Tni-mnw-n-itn-r-nhh* teni menu n Aton r neheh (Exalted are the monuments of the Sun-disk forever). Although these buildings were mentioned time and time again, their purposes were not disclosed, and they are nowhere described in detail as far as I know. Nevertheless, references to the sun disk appear in the early instructions.

A New God and a New City

Waset was becoming quite uncomfortable for the king by his fourth year. During that year, he visited a site he claims was "revealed by the Aten himself" and he called it Akhetaten, "the horizon of the sun-disk." Amenhotep IV laid out the city with 14 boundary stelae, 11 on the east and 3 on the west. This was to be a new Waset, perhaps even with certain elements of old On, a new Heliopolis, because he had built a private royal necropolis and a cemetery to the Mnevis bull.

Imagine what it must have been like when Amenhotep IV, named after his famous forebears, announced that he was abandoning Amen and elevating the priesthood of Aten as the national religion. What terror was struck in the heart of the Amen priesthood? What confusion existed in the vast bureaucracy at Waset that had been increasing in size since the days of Ahmose? What would this official pronouncement mean to the keepers of the sacred place, the holy of holies? Did the king know what he was doing? Had he lost his mind? Was he really an Egyptian? How would the

royal bureaucrats at Men-nefer and Waset take this sudden change in their status?

Such massive transformation called for a new title for the king: He proclaimed his new name on the inscription on the boundary stelae on the east at Akhetaten. He changed his Heru name from "Mighty bull, tall of feathers," which was too closely connected to the previous kings of Waset, to "Mighty bull, beloved of the Aten." His Two Ladies name, "Great of kingship on Ipet-sut," became "Great of kingship in Akhetaten," and his Golden Heru name was changed from "He who uplifts his diadems in southern On" to "He who uplifts the name of the Aten." He kept his coronation name, but changed Amenhotep to Akhenaten, meaning "he who praises Aten," thus completing a universal overhaul of his theological existence by comprehensively replacing Amen with Aten.

When Akhenaten took the royal authority to the new town of Akhetaten, he did not take with him the old religious authority. He took with him the royal court, and chief among his advisors were his mother, Queen Tiye, and his wife, Nefertiti. The *mansion of the benben* stone in Waset was given over to scenes of Nefertiti's dominance over the enemies of Egypt, but yet she is never mentioned in the diplomatic correspondences of the king. Her influence declines noticeably in the public record at Akhetaten. His daughters and his mother are mentioned frequently, and she may have been separated from her husband given the fact that one of her daughters, Meritaten, appears to have taken the ceremonial place alongside the king and later married Smenkhara who succeeded Akhenaten as king at Akhetaten.

It is good to remember what the king had left behind in the glorious city of Waset. Although Amenhotep IV did not particularly care for the high priests Her or Suti, he was in many ways a child of Ipet-sut more than he was of any other temple or place. The death of his father, Amenhotep III, coincided with the maturity of the great temple of Amen at Karnak. An entourage coming down the river from the Temple of Mut and turning into the canal leading to the great temple could see a monumental entry with the pylon of Amenhotep on one side and farther south constructions built by Hatshepsut.

There were other edifices built by Amenhotep III, including chapels to Montu and Mut, indicating his love for Amen and his dedication to the temple complex. Every king wanted to honor Amen, Mut, or Khonsu at this place above all other places. Even Amenhotep IV, on his accession, had found a single obelisk in a workshop, neglected for 25 years, since the death of Thutmose III, and had it decorated and dedicated to Ra-Harakhty. In addition, he continued work on the two pylons erected but not completed by his father, Amenhotep III.

His Impact and Legacy

What Akhenaten did may not have been a revolutionary change, nor was it some new revelation in religion. Musicians and poets may have been influenced by Akhenaten's contemplations during the Akhetaten period; certainly Egypt had a history of philosophical and artistic responses to national political developments. The society was not nearly as static as some early scholars had contended.

Indeed, powerful movements have always affected the social, architectural, and artistic life of a society. Take the impact of Akhenaten's Great Hymn to Aten. Some compare it to Psalm 104 in the Bible. There are similarities in structure and style. But the significance of Akhenaten's hymns must be in the known drama of his transformation, that is, whereas Ra, the Almighty God, was identified with the sun, Akhenaten reaches for a new solarization based on a common ground of religious experimentation started in the Middle Kingdom.

It is excessive to speak of Akhenaten as creating monotheism. Amenhotep IV chose to worship the visible aspects of the sun, whereas Ra, represented by the more invisible power of the sun, had been seen as the Almighty much longer.

The Words of the Philosopher

So what is meant by these words from the tomb of Ay, where Akhenaten says of Aten:

“How great are your deeds,
Though hidden from sight,
Only God beside whom there is none other!”

Or when he says,

“You alone, shining in your form of living
Aten,
Risen, radiant, distant, near.
You made millions of forms from yourself
alone.”

Or when we read,

“You are in my heart,
There is no other who knows you,
Only your son, Neferkheperaru, unique one
of Ra,
Whom you have taught your ways and your
might.”

Few scholars would make the claim today that Akhenaten was the “father of monotheism.” The fact is that there is no such person, male or female. The originality of Akhenaten must be found in the turning of the rays of the sun into a physical reality. He gave the world a creator who had physical hands that reached within the range of humanity. Indeed, he had Aten's name placed in a *shenu*, cartouche, like that of earthly kings. The image was easy to understand, and he did not have to rely on a trained clergy to teach people about the everyday fact of the sun disk and its rays. It could be seen with a person's own eyes. Accordingly, Aten provided humans with an immediate appreciation of the divine, in contrast to Amen, who was hidden.

The Last Years of His Reign

In the last 3 years of his reign, Akhenaten seemed to have had a coregency with Neferneferuaten Smenkhare, who may have ruled alone for an extra 2 years. Nevertheless, the last days at Akhetaten are confused in the literature because of contradictory evidence. For example, there is a scene in the tomb of Merire showing the image of Akhenaten, Smenkare, and Meritaten together, yet there is almost nothing about the life or the reign of Smenkare. The town of Akhetaten was abandoned when Tutankhamen took over the throne from Smenkhare. The body of Smenkare, who died at 20, was found in a tomb in the Valley

of the Kings, but evidence suggested that it was a hasty reburial. It is conceivable that, during the reign of Tutankhamen, many of the Akhetaten royals were reburied in the same tomb.

Clearly at the end of Akhenaten's life, there were two male heirs, Smenkhare and Tutankhamen, who may have been sons or nephews of Akhenaten. Each was a legitimate heir to the throne because each married one of the king's daughters. When Tutankhamen inherited the throne at the age of 9, he married Ankhesenpaaten and lived first at Akhetaten.

Tutankhamen moved the royal residences back to Men-nefer and Waset soon after he became king. It is probably the fact that the return to orthodoxy and the worship of Amen took place under the influence of the Divine Father Ay, who guided the steps of the young Tutankhamen. He issued a famous edict restoring the traditional priesthoods and encouraging the nation to rise from the mistakes of Amenhotep IV. Tutankhamen returned the worship of Amen to its pre-Akhenaten state and called himself "the Living Image of Amen."

The king who closed down the Akhetaten age, destroying as much as he could of the image of Akhenaten, was the general of Tutankhamen, Horemhab, who became king on the death of Ay. He was called Djoserkheperura Setepenra Horemheb Meryamun, "Beloved of Amen," underscoring the finality of the return to Waset.

No great temples exist at Karnak that show Amenhotep IV's presence in art or religion. The vast complexes of Amen, Mut, or Khonsu reveal little of Akhenaten, but some representations in battle and images on recycled *talatats* were used in construction by other kings. Part of the destruction of Amenhotep IV's memory at Karnak was the use of *talatats* from his era to erect the Ninth Pylon at Karnak erected by Horemhab. It would be Horemhab who would bring an end to the Akhetaten era.

Thus, the first 5 years of Amenhotep IV's rule were basically eradicated from the memory of Waset by his successors. There are no memorials or temple carvings, steles, or chapels that remain on public display at Karnak. Without these major material pieces of evidence, the life and activities of the Per-aa at Waset cannot be written, and he languishes in virtual Wasetian oblivion. This was precisely the intention of his successors.

A connected, logical narrative was created from the years at Akhetaten, called Amarna. There are enough records there to give scholars some appreciation of the immense activities of the king, and this is what they use. Although he was not a warrior king, he was not a pacifist as some have claimed: A small representation shows him sacrificing his conquered enemies in the traditional depiction as the relief on the façade of the Third Pylon at Karnak, but also on the *talatat* blocks where even Nefertiti was seen brandishing the White Mace over the heads of vanquished enemies. Even with these skimpy examples of art at Karnak, it can be seen that Karnak was not his place and Waset was not his city.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akhetaten

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AKHETATEN

Akhetaten is the name of the city built by the king Akhenaten when he abandoned the capital city of Waset in a theological and political dispute with the leaders of the Great Temple of Amen. Akhenaten, who had been named Amenhotep IV after his father Amenhotep III, began practicing a religion that elevated the deity, Aten, to the highest position in the Egyptian pantheon. This action created deep divisions within the spiritual leadership in the main worship center of Amen, Waset. Because the entire history of the 18th dynasty until the time of Amenhotep IV had been based on the great power and energy bestowed on the people by their devotion to Amen, the action by the young king was unforgivable and challenged

the authority of his lineage, as well as his support among the masses who believed in the triad of Amen, Mut, and Khonsu.

Given the resistance that Amenhotep IV faced in Waset, and he did receive resistance, he soon had to leave the city where his fathers had ruled for centuries. Masses revolted and burned the temple he had built in honor of his newly authorized deity, Aten, and the priests, Her and Suti, at the temple saw him as a heretic. He changed his name to Akhenaten to reflect his devotion to the new deity, appointed priests to officiate in the rituals to Aten, and decided to move the royal family, indeed the royal capital, from Waset to a city in northern Upper Egypt to escape the daily strictures of the officials in the capital city. Akhetaten lasted from 366 to 354 BC.

Thus, 6 years after the beginning of his reign, Akhenaten moved the capital to Akhetaten, meaning "The Horizon of Aten." In some senses, this 12-square-mile city located on the Nile about 100 miles north of Waset was meant to convey newness in the fact that no other deities had been worshipped in that location. Here Akhenaten could convey his love of and appreciation for the Aten, unfettered by history and politics. Nearly 400 tablets were discovered in the 19th century, attesting to the richness of the city in art and culture. Indeed, the poems that we now know as reflecting the culture of Akhenaten court, the Aten hymns, were discovered during this period.

Akhetaten flourished as the capital city because artists who wanted to please the king journeyed to its walls. They produced art reflective of the new religion of Aten and were well regarded and rewarded by Akhenaten. In the meantime, it is believed that, although he lived behind the well-guarded pylons of the city, many other activities in the kingdom were left untended to, and soon Waset began to reassert itself as the true heart of the country. With the death of Akhenaten and the rise of Tutankhamen, the son of Akhenaten, the empire went back to its center, and the royal house was gladly received at the gates of Amen.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akhenaten

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ALAFIN OF OYO

Alafin of Oyo is the title given to the supreme political ruler of the Yoruba. During the height of the Yoruba kingdom in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Alafin once ruled an empire that stretched from the Niger Delta to Togo, reflecting his military-political reach within Western Africa. The Alafin of Oyo, like many African leaders, is considered legendary and sacred, and there are many regulations and rituals that go with his position. The Alafin is a divine person who must live apart from ordinary people who in the past were not allowed to see his face or to speak to him directly because he was a god. He was never seen eating or drinking in public. In fact, he did not die. The Alafin passed from one village to another village, but death was not a part of his existence. In this way, the people are protected in their daily lives, and the stability of the nation is directly related to the stability of the Alafin of Oyo.

There were occasions when the Alafin was forced to commit suicide, particularly if the people felt his divinity has slipped away from him because of some violation of a taboo or some gross irregularity that threatened the kingdom. Normally, however, no one dared to disrupt the Alafin's rule because his enthronement was enough to ensure his divinity. He was god in human form. This entry looks at the context in which the Alafin ruled and describes some leaders who held this title.

Historical Background

To understand the role and place of the Alafin, one must appreciate the fact that the Yoruba are an ancient people who presently live in southwest Nigeria, but whose mythology claims a legacy from East Africa. Their history is long, and there are oral traditions that trace the origin of the

people to the Nile Valley. One historian has written that the precise origin of the Yoruba is ancient Egypt. In many respects, the great body of customs and rituals of the Yoruba reflects their religious beliefs that are contained in a system called *Ifa*.

This system of *Ifa* is a philosophical corpus related to the myths of origin, ethical ideas, and cosmological understandings. Contained in 256 *odus*, the *Ifa* can be used by a *babalawo* to give insight into the ethical decisions that one makes in ordinary life. This system is responsible for keeping moral, cultural, and political order among Yoruba. No Alafin of Oyo rules without adherence to the traditions of *Ifa*.

In the tradition of Yoruba people, two leaders emerged as the principals of the society: the Oni of Ifè and the Alafin of Oyo. Ifè became identified with the spiritual and ethical life of the people and reflected in many ways the Yoruba's belief in the presence of cosmological influences on the life of the people. Thus, the Oni of Ifè is usually referred to as the spiritual leader of the Yoruba nation. In contrast, the Alafin of Oyo was centered in the political capital of the kingdom and enshrined the notion that the nation could not exist on spirit alone.

Some Key Leaders

Indeed, the Alafin of Oyo embodied the living power of the ancestors and carried forth the idea of the invulnerability of the people based on the political will he inherited from ancestors. In fact, the Alafin had to be a direct descendant of Oranyan, one of the founders of the nation. In his capacity as Alafin, directly descended from Oranyan, the political ruler was divine, that is, he was an ever-living presence who would never die so long as Alafin succeeded him, took the same power, and made the same oaths he had made to the ancestors and the people.

The Alafin may have used his power to create innovations. For example, it is said that Alafin Ajagbo, who reigned in the mid-17th century, ordered a theatrical contest by masking the societies of Oyo for his entertainment. On the occasion, a Nupe man nicknamed Gbarada made two spectacular masks, a male and a female, that danced, sang, and made comic remarks. When all of the other performers had paraded before the Alafin and gave their performance, the one that

the Alafin remembered most of all was that of the Nupe man, Gbarada. His name was "he who stole the show." As a close friend of Oyo Aso, one of the grandsons of Alafin Ajagbo, Gbarada went with Oyo Aso when he went to settle at Egbado. The tradition of *Gelede* was introduced among other Yoruba people because of the actions of Alafin Ajagbo and his grandson.

Another Alafin was responsible for changing a custom among the Yoruba as well. He was the Alafin Ajaka. At one time, the Yoruba practiced twin infanticide. They believed that twins were signs of a bad omen and consequently had to be put to death or left in the forest to die. However, during the 16th century, the Alafin of Oyo, Alafin Ajaka, married, and his wife gave birth to twins. He refused to kill them or abandon them to the forest, but ordered the mother to take her twins to another part of the kingdom to raise them. The banished wife went with her children to a remote part of the kingdom, and the twins rose up to be rulers of the present dynasty of the kingdom of Ondo.

During times of political or military stress in the nation, it is the Alafin who unites the people by appealing to the subkings of Yoruba to support the mission of the nation. Should Yoruba go to war, it is the Alafin who manages to harness the strength and vitality of the Yoruba people. A history of skilled Alafins added to the expansions of the Yoruba population, but they were unable to prevent many Yoruba from being enslaved by Europeans during the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet the vibrancy of the cultural and political roles of the Alafin was not forgotten.

Thus, the Alafin of Oyo is a powerful title of the political and military ruler of one of the great peoples of Africa. As such, he reflects the popular traditional African idea of the divinity of the king who embodies the spirit of the first ancestors.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Kings

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ALTARS

In African societies, the object that stands between humans and the divine is often made of wood, clay, stone, or metal. In fact, the altar may also be at the base of an ancient tree or the base of a mountain or giant stone. Of course, most altars are built by humans, that is, they are constructed with the idea of god in mind. The idea is that there is a physical connection between humans and the divine, and the altar serves as a repository of the power of the divine. It is not to be considered the site of god, but rather the place where the power of god can be captured and used for the benefit of the society.

This is so even if an image of the deity is carved and sits on the altar. One does not assume that one is actually seeing the god, but the sacred emblem, symbol, or representative of the god at that place. It is a mistake to assume that the altar is the dwelling place of the divinity; no one knows the place where the divine dwells. The altar is where the human goes to contact the power of the divine. Thus, a priest or priestess is usually the only person allowed to officiate at the altar.

Such altars as exist in traditional African religion are often hidden from the masses. There are occasions when the priest or priestess will go to the altar and then return to the people after having made sacrifices and prayers. Shrines to ancestors located in homes may also serve as altars in some cases. Upon this altar might be the traditional objects that were used by a deceased ancestor.

The most ancient Kemetic tradition has the altar in the Holy of Holies, the sacred place in the sacred grove or temple. It is here that the priest goes before the deity, and it is here that the deity makes known the power and energy that are necessary for the community. For example, the holy bark of the deity may adorn the altar as it did at Edfu or Kom Ombo and many other sacred sites. One cannot determine the extent of the deity's power simply by seeing the altar because it has to be infused with power to have meaning. This power comes from the many years of appeal by the priests or priestesses who officiate in the name of the people and the deity. Sacrifices are left at the altar for the god.

Most traditions understand that the god of the altar will eat the sacrifice, and therefore the sacrifice is left at the altar. In many societies, there may

be one major altar where the divine communion is made on special days. When this time comes, the people assemble and the priest and priestess dance before the people in an effort to contact the divinity. This is done with all the ritual precision collected from many years of experience. Once the time is ripe, that is, the deity has been contacted, the officiating religious figure goes to the altar to have communion with the deity.

It is possible that certain members of the community, particularly kings, and elders also might be allowed into the holy place. This usually depends on the nature of the occasion. If it is a national occasion, then the special guests might be invited to view the sacrifice. Rarely, however, will the guests be asked to participate. Otherwise the slaughter of an animal for the sacrifice is strictly a matter for the priest and priestess. Once the sacrifice is made, the priest and priestess may consult again with the deity for information about future activities of the community. Here the deity responds, sometimes through an oracle, and sometimes through the priest or priestess in ecstatic trance. All of this takes place at the altar, the place for sacred things, and the objects that are used by the officials at the altar are also a part of the sacred accoutrements of the occasion.

The function of the altar is purely spiritual. Its shape is according to the priest's capability, interest, or expertise. Creation of an altar may be the work of an artisan who is commissioned to make an object that might be sanctified by the priest and made ready to receive the power of god. Among the Akyem people of Ghana, the great altar is located in a cool valley near a river at the foot of a great Iroko tree. It is protected by the priest, and no one can go there on his own without dire consequences.

Some groups have been known to make the mummified bodies of their dead kings packed in clay their altars in the sense that one is standing on the foundation of the society. Others have used objects such as masks, walking canes, statues, and fine works of jeweled art to decorate their altars.

During the New Kingdom in Kemet, the altar was the place for the deities Amen, Ra, Ptah, and Atum. In one of the greatest achievements of the sacred tradition by a living king, Ramses II, *Usermaat ra, setep en ra*, had his own image seated next to that of the gods in the Holy of Holies at the

Temple at Abu Simbel. Nothing seemed to prevent African religious leaders from exploring all forms of the sacred, and certainly if one examined the record from the ancient times to the present times in Africa this would seem to be the case. Altars could be erected, and were erected, where the people believed the sacred to be most manifest.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Offering

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AMEN

Amen (sometimes spelled Amun) is the name of one of the principal supreme deities of ancient Egypt. Alongside Ptah, Atum, and Ra, Amen is considered one of the central deities in the history of the Nile Valley civilization. Few deities have had as long a reign in the human imagination as Amen. Indeed, reverberations of the ancient African name can be found in the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian religions as each religious group ends its prayers in the name of Amen. This entry looks at the god and then describes his influence in the New Kingdom.

Name and Representation

The origin of Amen is lost in antiquity. However, Amen is one of the ancient Egyptian gods because we know he appears in some of the earliest texts. During the 5th dynasty, Amen was considered a primeval God within the *Pyramid Texts*. These were the texts written on the walls of some of the 100 pyramids in Egypt. It is written in the *Pyramid Texts* that ascending into the sky, the per aa (pharaoh in Hebrew) would, as the son of Geb, sit “upon the throne of Amen.”

Even then, Amen was different in a sense from the other deities in the fact that there was little

information about him. He was often described as hidden, an unseen creative power central in the Egyptian myth of world creation. Although the name “Amen” means “hidden” and “unknown,” this has not prevented human beings from seeking to make representations of the great god. Although it is true that the name suggests concealment, it could also mean invisible, hence Amen is the invisible force that permeates the sky, the Earth, and human beings and demonstrates his universality by concealing his true identity behind an epithet that means “hidden.” The ancient Africans in the Nile Valley referred to Amen as “asha renu” meaning “rich in names.”

The name Amen means “the hidden one” or “the unknown one” in the ancient Mdw Ntr, the divine language of ancient Egypt. It is a meaning that accompanied the name down the centuries. When people say the name Amen, they are pronouncing the most enduring name of a deity on Earth. Worshipped as the power that stood behind the achievements of the mightiest warriors of antiquity such as Senursert, Thutmose III, and Rameses II, Amen takes his place as the war god par excellence. But more so, because of the numerous offerings made in his name in the Nile Valley, Amen is the name most revered by the ancient priests of Egypt.

Representations of Amen in an anthropomorphic sense suggest a figure like a king. He often appears wearing a crown consisting of two high plumes. Each feather is divided vertically in two sections and horizontally in seven sections. Indeed, other representations of Amen show him as a man seated on a throne holding a scepter as a symbol of life, as a man with the head of a frog, as a man with the head of a uraeus, as an ape, or as a lion on a pedestal. Sometimes Amen is seen as a man with an erect phallus. His sacred animals are the ram with curved horns and the Nile Goose; both are animals associated with the creative or procreative energies of the universe.

The greatest temples of Amen seem to have been at Waset in Upper Egypt and at Gebel Barkal in Nubia. Here the living god was worshipped alongside his consort Mut and the child Khonsu, giving us the trinity of deities that were based on the original idea of Ausar, Auset, and Heru. In the processional road to Amen’s temple stood crio-sphinxes, ram-headed lions, each one with an

image of the pharaoh between its front legs. Amen stood supreme for 2,000 years in Kemet and Nubia, and even when the deity was temporarily superseded by another such as the case of Aton during the 18th dynasty, Amen always returned to his same prominence.

Power and Prominence

In the New Kingdom, the power of Amen was nearly absolute. Amen is paired with the sun god, Ra, and is referred to as “a fierce red-eyed lion.” He is called “the eldest of the gods of the eastern sky” in *The Book of the Dead*. No two priests were ever any more important in protecting the name of a god than two brothers, Hor and Suti, who were the masters of the Waset temple in the 18th dynasty during the reign of Amenhotep III. They were the architects involved in the construction of many of the buildings dedicated to Amen.

On a granite stela now found in the British Museum, the two brothers had written the hymn that begins, “Amen when he rises as Harakhti.” This added prestige to the deity Amen and thrust him in the forefront of the Egyptian pantheon. He is called “the king of the gods” at first in the White Chapel of Senusert I of Dynasty XII. Furthermore, “Amen-Ra king of the gods” *nesu netjeru* was a title given to illustrate the connection between Amen and the mightiest of the sun gods.

Many Egyptian leaders were given names that reflected the name of Amen (e.g., Hatshepsut Khenemet Amen, which means “united with Amen”; Amenemhat, which means “Amen is pre-eminent”; Amenhotep, which means “Amen is satisfied”; and Mery Amen, which means “Beloved of Amen”).

Hatshepsut called Amen “great in majesty” and had written on one of the obelisk (*tekenu*) set up at the Waset temple that Amen was her father. Indeed, the office of king that she held was given to her, she claimed, by the king of the gods, Amen, her father.

Thutmose III, not to be outdone by Hatshepsut Khenemet Amen, pushed the Egyptian army deep into Asia, claiming the territory in the name of Amen. In fact, Thutmose wrote the names of the vanquished kings on leather and had those names deposited in the great temple at Waset (Karnak) so that Amen would not forget

the king’s triumphs in the name of Amen. The gift of Amen to Thutmose had been nothing less than the complete domination of the world the Egyptians knew.

In one of the most written about battles in ancient history, the name of Amen comes into play again. Rameses II, the great monarch of Egypt, is on the battlefield of Kadesh by the river Orontes; when he finds himself in distress, he calls out to Amen to remember his paternal responsibilities. Rameses is surrounded by 2,500 enemy chariots. He asks Amen not to abandon “his son.” The situation looked hopeless, and Rameses chides the god, “Does Amen favor the Asians? Has not Rameses given Amen the spoils of war, chariots, monuments, endowments of lands, cattle, and wives? Did Amen count these gifts from previous campaigns as nothing?” According to Rameses, the god answered him by giving him the hand strength equal to 100,000 soldiers and the per aa cuts his way out of the hostile enemy territory. Of course, the reinforcements arrived just in time for Rameses to tell his story for history.

Nothing illustrates the power of Amen more than the two temples on the eastern bank of the Nile River in the town today called Luxor, but known in ancient times as Waset. There is the temple of Luxor, which is Mut’s main abode, but also a temple of Amen. Then there is Ipet-sut, the most sacred place where they count off places as tributes are brought. Here in a vast enclave of spiritual grounds and religious buildings, the name Amen reverberated for centuries and the people called the place “Akhet,” meaning “the place where the light of dawn first emerges” because it was a place of education and spiritual enlightenment. Amen was active here as the god who advises, instigates, and fights for Egypt.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also God

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AMENHOTEP

Amenhotep, son of Hapu, rose through the ranks of Kemet's religious establishment to become one of the highest-ranking officials during the 18th dynasty. He served at several temples, but is most known for his time at Athribis.

A talented individual from the time of his youth, Amenhotep, the son of Hapu, came to the attention of the royal house at an early age. In fact, he was born in the town of Athribis at the end of the reign of the great imperial king, Tuthmoses III. His father and mother, Hapu and Ipu, were probably farmers in the Delta area. As a young man, Amenhotep became a priest with the name Amenhotep, meaning one who pleases Amen. He soon had responsibility for overseeing the collection of materials, the organization of labor, and all emergency services for the king, the Per-aa. He held the title as Scribe of Recruits for the Per-aa and was given the job of ensuring that the projects were carried out according to the plans of the Per-aa.

Thus, while he was still in Athribis, Amenhotep, the son of Hapu and Ipa, was on his way to becoming a famous architect, priest, scribe, and public official. He was given charge of building projects in the Delta region and soon acquired a reputation for his skill, brilliance, and seriousness of purpose. When Amenhotep III was Per-aa, he supervised the building of the mortuary temple in Waset. There are two statues that remain from this mighty temple: They are the Colossus of Memnon.

Later he was worshipped as a god of healing during the Ptolemaic period. The people built a chapel in his honor and for his worship at the Deir el-Bahri Temple. At this site, he was depicted in one statue as a young person and in another as an old man.

What we know about Amenhotep, the son of Hapu and Ipa, is that he became one of the first historical human beings to be deified. Alongside Imhotep, who lived more than 1,000 years earlier, Amenhotep was worshipped as a god. Considered for his intelligence, wisdom, and phenomenal energy in the building of Kemet, he rose to the height of a great priest, a mighty saint, a demigod, and then finally someone to be worshipped.

Because of his indefatigable energy in supervising building projects throughout the country, many people came to him for counsel. Young men would consult with him about projects, spiritual conditions, and maat. As a master of maat, Amenhotep, the son of Hapu and Ipa, introduced protocols for construction projects that became the basis for many temples and tombs during the 18th dynasty.

It appears that Amenhotep was without peer during his time as a philosopher, counselor to Per-aa and ordinary people, architectural genius, and spiritual healer. No one in Kemet seemed to have had a greater reputation for piety and religious reflection than Amenhotep, the son of Hapu and Ipa. When his mortuary cult was established by a royal decree, it was because the people had already accepted him in their hearts as one of the most important human beings living in Kemet. The people would have made him a god if there had not been a decree given the legacy that he had established for excellence, community responsibility, and maat.

It is believed that Amenhotep died at the age of 80. Manetho, who wrote a history of Kemet for Ptolemy, the Greek ruler of Kemet, says that during the reign of Amenhotep IV, at his transition to Akhenaten, Amenhotep, who had been the main architect of Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III, committed suicide because he was disturbed by the manner in which Akhenaten had distanced himself from the Almighty Amen. Amenhotep, the son of Hapu and Ipa, could see nothing that would inspire him to maintain his relationship to Amen in Akhenaten's heresy.

There is another account found in the tomb of Ramose that says he may have died in year 31 of the reign of Amenhotep III. This would mean that he would not have seen the rise of Akhenaten as Manetho reported during the Ptolemaic era.

This much is certain: After the death of Amenhotep, son of Hapu and Ipu, the people felt a great loss. They honored him with song and poetry, raised his name aloud to their children, praised his brilliance, and enshrined him in their hearts. The reverence for Amenhotep as a philosopher and great architect, priest and counselor, continued to grow.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Waset

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AMMA

Amma is the supreme creator god of the Dogon religion, whose efforts initiated the formation of the universe, the creation of matter, and the processes of biological reproduction. The notion of a creator god named *Amma* or *Amen* is one that is not unique to the Dogon, but can also be found in the religious tradition of other West African and North African groups. It may be reflected in the word *Amazigh*, a name that is applied collectively to the hunter cultural groups who preceded the first dynasty in Egypt.

Like other important Dogon cosmological keywords, the word *Amma* carries with it more than one level of meaning in the Dogon language. From one perspective, it can refer to the *hidden god* of the Dogon, and yet, from another perspective, it can mean “to grasp, to hold firm, or to establish.” Among the Dogon, *Amma* is thought of as the god who holds the world firmly between her or his two hands, and to speak the name *Amma* is to entreat her or him to continue to hold it.

Similar meanings can also be found in association with the word *Amma* or *Amen* in the languages of the *Mande* and the *Yoruba*, among the sub-Saharan people who were roughly contemporaneous with ancient Egypt, as well in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages. In his *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, Sir E. A. Wallis Budge documents word entries with both of these meanings under the pronunciation *Amen*, although the more recent and academically preferred *Altaegyptische Worterbuch*

defines the Egyptian *hidden god* under the pronunciation of *Imn*, a word that is also found in the Ethiopian language.

Although commonly referred to as male, Amma is considered to symbolize both the male and female principles and, as a result, is more properly characterized as genderless or as being of dual gender. This dual aspect of Amma’s character is consistent with the broader cosmological principles of *duality* and *the pairing of opposites* that are expressed symbolically in all facets of Dogon religion and culture. It is also consistent with the male and female aspects of biological reproduction that Amma symbolizes.

The Dogon religion is characterized as an *esoteric* tradition, one that involves both public and private aspects. Although Amma could be said to embody great creative potential, she or he is in fact considered by the knowledgeable Dogon priests to be small—so small as to be effectively hidden from view—although this detail of Amma’s character is generally not spoken of in public among the Dogon. This perceived smallness of Amma is consonant with the instrumental role that she or he is said to play in the mythological processes of the formation of matter and of biological reproduction.

Perhaps the first important creation of the Dogon god Amma was the unformed universe, a body that is said to have held all of the potential *seeds or signs* of future existence. The Dogon refer to this body as *Amma’s Egg* and characterize it as a conical, somewhat quadrangular structure with a rounded point, filled with unrealized potentiality—its corners prefigure the four future cardinal points of the universe to come. According to Dogon myth, some undefined impulse caused this egg to open, allowing it to release a whirlwind that spun silently and scattered its contents in all directions, ultimately forming all of the spiraling galaxies of stars and planets. The Dogon compare these bodies to pellets of clay flung out into space. It is by a somewhat more complicated process that the sun and the moon were formed, one that the Dogon equate with the art of pottery. Consequently, the Dogon priests compare the sun to a pot of clay that has been raised to a high heat.

Amma is also credited by the Dogon with having created life on Earth. According to the Dogon

myths, there is a principle of *twin births* in the universe. However, it is said that Amma's first attempt at intercourse with the Earth failed, ultimately producing only a single creature—the *jackal*. This failure is seen by the Dogon as a breach of order in the universe, and therefore the *jackal* came to be associated with the concepts of *disorder* and *the difficulties of Amma*. Later, having overcome the difficulty, Amma's divine seed successfully entered and fertilized the womb of the Earth and eventually produced the perfect twin pair, the *Nummo*.

It has been noted by respected researchers of Dogon myth—such as historian Nicolas Grimal in his *A History of Ancient Egypt*—that there are likely symbolic parallels between key Dogon mythological characters and those of ancient Egypt. For instance, it can be argued that Amma is a likely counterpart to the Egyptian hidden god, *Amen*, much as attributes of the *jackal* of the Dogon myths present clear parallels to the *jackal god* of the Egyptian Underworld. Likewise, comparisons can be made between the Egyptian canid god *Sab* who acts as judge between *good and evil* and the *Pale Fox* (*vulpes pallida*) of Dogon tradition who is charged with the similar role of judging between of *truth and error*.

Laird Scranton

See also Amen

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AMOKYE

Amokye is the name that the Akan people give to the guardian of the threshold of death. In fact, among the Asantes, it is believed that Amokye can be compassionate and kind or difficult and cruel. There is a story told of Kwasi Benefo in illustration of this point.

It is said that Kwasi Benefo journeyed to Asamando, the place the Asante refer to as the world of departed souls. Of course, this is a story that shows Amokye in her role as the guardian of the threshold of death because Kwasi is a hero of great compassion. Kwasi was a farmer and a cattle raiser. He had many cattle and farmed on good land, his fields bringing in rich harvests each year.

He did not have a wife, however, to give him children or to care for his house. He was saddened by this because he wanted to have a wife to mourn for him when the time came. So one day he went looking for a woman to marry and in a village he discovered a beautiful woman who pleased him a lot. They got married, and soon the woman took ill and died. Kwasi Benefo grieved greatly about this loss. He bought her an amoasie, a small piece of silk cotton cloth to cover her genitals, and beads to go around her waist. She was buried in the amoasie and beads. Yet Kwasi could not forget her, and he went around looking for her in his house, but obviously he did not find her. Soon he was so obsessed with looking for her that his mind was no longer with the real world; he was in the land of make-believe.

Finally, his family tried to intervene. His uncle and brothers spoke to him to bring him back to reality. They said to him, "Kwasi, put it from your mind. This is the way it is in the world. People live and they die. You must find yourself another wife." Soon Kwasi seemed to gain comfort. He left his village and traveled to another village, where he found another young woman. He made arrangements for her to come home with him. She was content to live with him and he with her; she was a woman of good character and took charge of the household. She wanted to please Kwasi. He was happy and felt that life was worthwhile. Soon his wife was pregnant, and he was hopeful that she might give birth. She became ill after a while and grew very weak. Soon she

was dead. This second wife was buried with the amoasia and beads as well. Nothing could console Kwasi Benefo.

The grieving Kwasi sat in his house for days and refused to come out. People said to him that others had died and that people die all the time. They told him that he had to get up and go about his work. His friends pleaded with him to come out and mingle with them. In time, the family of the dead woman heard about Kwasi's grief and believed that he was grieving much too long. They said, "Let us give him another wife."

They invited him to their village and said to him, "Grieving is necessary but in time one must move on with life. We will find another daughter for you to marry." They told him that what was past was past and that he would be happy with the new wife. They said to him, "Let the dead live with the dead but the living must be with the living." Of course, Kwasi Benefo felt that his wife was not dead; although she had departed, she was a part of the ancestral world and called out to him from time to time. He wanted to know, "How can I take another wife and still hear the voice of the one who has died?" The family told him that in time this feeling would pass. Truly, when he returned to his village and started working his fields, the pain lessened. Then he went back to the village and married the daughter. She gave birth to a son who was celebrated throughout the land. He was happy. His life was good, and he shared his joy with his friends.

There was a day, however, while Kwasi Benefo was in his fields that some village women ran to him with news that a tree had fallen. They were in tears as they told him the news. "Who sheds tears over a fallen tree?" He knew that there had to be more to the story. They told him that something had been left unsaid. Then they told him. "Your wife was returning from the river where she had gone to get water. Then she sat beneath a tree to rest and a spirit of the woods weakened the roots and the tree fell on her."

Kwasi ran as fast as he could to the village, where he found his wife on a mat without life. He cried out, threw himself on the ground, and lay there as if life had left him also. He could not understand anything. He heard, saw, and felt nothing. Some people came by and said Kwasi Benefo is dead. The spiritual men and women

came and said, "No, he is not dead; he is lingering between life and death." They performed all kinds of rituals over him—they gave him herbs and rubbed his body to find the life that was still present. They were successful. Kwasi Benefo stood up and helped to make arrangements for his wife. The next day, there was a wake for the wife, and he bought amoasia and beads and she was buried in these things.

Kwasi plunged into the deepest of despair. There must have been evil lurking somewhere to cause him so much pain. He knew that no woman would want to marry a man who was so unlucky with women. Who would entrust their daughter with him? Even his friends began to speak of him as a person who must not have good character. Soon he left his village, his farm, and his house. He took his son to his wife's home and left him there with her relatives.

Kwasi Benefo then went into the forest and walked for many days aimlessly. After a long while, he arrived at a distant village, but left immediately and went farther into the forest, feeling that he had to get farther away from the place of his sadness. Soon he stopped at a place in the forest that seemed far away from people. He decided to remain there. Of course, he had to build a house, and he completed a crude shack. When he became hungry, this once prosperous farmer gathered roots and herbs for food. He made traps to catch small game. Soon his clothes were tattered and turned to rags. He killed animals and used their skins for clothes. His life was wretched, and he almost forgot how prosperous he had been.

Now it came to pass that Kwasi Benefo left the forest and went to a village where he was unknown. He began to farm and soon married a fourth time. However, when the fourth wife took ill and died, his will was completely broken. He wanted to know, "How can I go on with life." Once again he abandoned his farm, his cattle, and his house and journeyed back into his native village.

Many people came out to see him; they were surprised because they had thought he was dead. When his family and friends wanted to celebrate his return, he told them not to celebrate because he had only come back to die in his own village and be buried near the graves of the ancestors.

One night he could not sleep and thought that he should go to Asamando, the land of the dead, to see the four young women whom he had married. So he left his village and went to the forest place called Nsamando where the dead are buried. When he got there, he found no paths. There were no lights. All was nothing but darkness. He kept walking until he found a village with dim lights. The place was strange. There were no sounds, no voices, no birds, and no animals. He finally came to a river. When he tried to ford the river, he could not because the water was too high. He was sure that this was the end of his journey.

Just as he was about to give up for good, he felt a splash of water on his face and looked across the river. Sitting on the opposite bank of the river, he saw an old woman with a brass pan at her side. In the pan were beads and amosias for women. Then it was clear to Kwasi Benefo: He knew that the old woman was none other than Amokye, the guardian who welcomed the souls of dead women to Asamando and received from each of them amosias and beads. It was also clear that this was the reason women were dressed for burial as they were, so that they could use the amosias and beads at the river crossing.

Old Amokye asked Kwasi Benefo, "Why are you here?" He answered, "I have come to see my wives. I cannot live any longer because every woman who stays in my house dies. I cannot sleep, I cannot think, I cannot work, I cannot eat. I want nothing that the living world has for living people." Amokye said to him, "You must be Kwasi Benefo. Yes, I have heard of you. I have heard of your troubles and your sadness. However, because you are not a soul, but a living person, you cannot cross over." Kwasi said to Amokye, "Then I will stay here until I die and become a soul."

At length Amokye had compassion on Kwasi Benefo and said to him, "Because of your tremendous pain, grief, and suffering, I will let you come across." Amokye caused the river to run slowly. She caused it to become shallow. She told Kwasi, "Go that way. There you will find your wives. But they are like the air; you will not be able to see them, though they will know you have come. You will feel their presence and they will know that you are in their presence."

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akan

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AMULET

In Africa, many ethnic groups use objects that have been set aside as sacred for the purpose of protection. Thus, an amulet in this sense is anything that can be used to bring safety to the carrier of the object. Among some African people, such as the Tamashek of Mali and Burkina Faso, the amulet might be a tattoo on one's body. However, in most cases, it is a religious figure or some symbol that represents an aspect of the African religion that can be worn around the neck, ankle, or wrist.

The amulet is not simply worn; it is accepted as a living, vital symbol that acts as a protector of the individual wearing it. Among some African people, a stone, especially a gemstone, might be considered a guarantor of fortune, welfare, and prosperity. Indeed, the idea of the amulet is that it brings the benefits of the sacred to the living. Thus, all expressions of African religion on the continent and in the Americas rely on some form of amulets. Among the practitioners of Umbanda, Myal, Shango, Quimbanda, Voodoo, and Santeria, one finds various forms of amulets. In fact, some might think of the special drawings called *veves* of Voodoo as amulets or the various colors of cloth or candles as representing certain powers that repel evil or attract goodness. Among Africans in the Americas, particularly in the American South, it was common deep into the 20th century for children to have rabbits' feet around their necks or their ankles to ward off all forms of danger. Indeed, the African belief is that these items are endowed with special powers if the proper religious officials have authorized them.

The amulet is one of the oldest traditions in African religion. During the period of Pharaonic Egypt, the people discovered remarkable vitality in many of the arts and artifacts that were created by the priests. Nothing was so popular as an amulet as the ankh, which stood for the idea of

eternal life. When one carried the ankh, it was supposed to protect the wearer from all harm and danger. Alongside the ankh was the Khepri, the scarab beetle, which served as the amulet meaning transformation or becoming. Having originated in Africa, the ankh and the scarab are now found throughout the world.

Examples of clothes decorated with amulets such as the batakari shirts of Ghana abound in West Africa where leather amulets are said to have powers to prevent the wearer from being harmed in case of warfare. Some people have believed that the amulets would protect them from bullets. There are tragic cases of many Africans being killed when relying on this idea. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that people have found amulets to be useful in their own sense of personal safety and protection. But one is not just protected from supernatural forces by amulets, but from other people as well. Soldiers in African armies have traditionally worn amulets.

Amulets are also seen as means to attract personal affection, love, and prosperity, as well as means to protect against greed, envy, and disgrace. Those who sought the favor of the ancestors often carried around something that came from the ancestors' home. Therefore, a person might carry around a special tool, piece of fabric, instrument, or piece of jewelry that came from an ancestor. This was done to bring the power of the ancestor to bear on all conditions surrounding the living.

There is also the amulet used for healing purposes. It might be a medicine that is carried in a belt, on a chain, or connected to the body of the person with leather or string. Such a healing or medicinal amulet is usually organic and is made of plants or animal parts. African priests or priestesses who devote their energy and time to the description, development, and explanation of natural and supernatural powers are the final arbiters of any special energies or mysteries surrounding amulets.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Animatism; Heka

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ANANSE

Ananse is the name given to an Akan character who has become famous throughout Africa because of his insight, intelligence, and wisdom. One finds the names Ananse, Aunt Nancy, Anancy, Hapanzi, and Nanzi used for Ananse as well. He is one of the most important figures in the pantheon of cultural icons among West Africans. In actuality, Ananse is the functional aspect of the almighty creator Nyame and therefore may be seen to carry out the will of Nyame on Earth. He is able to perform many duties that are often attributed to Nyame. Thus, Ananse can cause rain to come, flowers to blossom, and maize to grow; he can prevent disasters from occurring to the villagers.

Along with his wife, Aso, Ananse can change form and may be depicted as a human, although his normal form is a spider. According to the Asante people, who are part of the larger Akan culture, Ananse can be a trickster, that is, a personality who teaches moral, ethical, political, or social values based on his ability to lead a person to the truth through example, puzzles, and the least expected turns and twists of fate.

Often associated in the Americas, especially in Suriname and the southern United States, with the spider or rabbit, the folklore surrounding Ananse appears to be quite extensive in the African communities throughout the Americas. For example, the Anansesem or Ananse-Tori, stories about Ananse's exploits, are at the core of many of the moral tales told to children in Suriname, much like the old Brer Rabbit tales were in the African American community up until the 20th century. Many of these stories have disappeared and are no longer remembered in the black communities of the Americas, but their relevance and value are undiminished in the Ghanaian context.

There are many narratives of power in the life of Ananse. He is credited in some stories with creating the sun, moon, stars, and planets. In others,

it is said that Ananse is the one who brought writing, agriculture, and hunting to the Earth, teaching humans in the process how to take care of themselves in a world surrounded by bountiful fields and forests. So smart was Ananse, according to one narrative, that he collected all of the wisdom of the world in a calabash to hold for himself because he did not trust humans with such potent knowledge and information. However, wisdom kept spilling out of the calabash, and he soon saw how futile it was for one person to try to know everything and to hold it for himself. In fact, it is far better, as Ananse understood, for knowledge and wisdom to be distributed among all people, and so that is exactly what he did. Consequently, now no people are any smarter than any other people because Ananse distributed wisdom from his calabash bowl.

Of course, Ananse is really the King of All Wisdom Narratives. Nothing escapes Ananse; he knows everything, and the Asante people tell the story of how Nyame made Ananse the King of All Wisdom Narratives. One day, Ananse, in his form as a spider, approached Nyame, the Sky God, and asked him to appoint him as the King of All Wisdom Narratives. Nyame was amazed at the audacity of the spider Ananse and thought that if he had the courage to approach the Sky God in such a direct fashion, then he must be given a chance to prove himself. Nyame said to Ananse, "If you can catch and capture the Jaguar Who has Dagger-like Teeth, the Hornets Who Sting Like Wild Fire, the Invisible Fairy of the Forest, you will be King of the Wisdom Narratives."

Nyame thought he had given Ananse a challenge that he would refuse because the likelihood of anyone achieving success with such challenges was slight. However, Ananse agreed to the challenge. Ananse went to the jaguar and asked him to play a game that would allow Ananse to tie him up with a rope. So the jaguar agreed, and Ananse got the rope and tied him up. He tricked the hornets by telling them that it was raining; indeed, Ananse could make it rain, and he told the hornets that they could hide themselves in a calabash that he had prepared for them. Once they went into the calabash, he put the lid on it. He told the invisible fairy to fight a tar baby and, when he did, he was stuck to the tar and could not escape. Confidently, Ananse took all of his prey to Nyame

and showed him that he had succeeded in doing everything that was asked of him, whereupon Nyame named Ananse the King of All Wisdom Narratives. No one has ever been able to exceed the achievements of this wise personality since the time he was made the King of All Wisdom Narratives.

There are versions of Ananse stories that show him being defeated or almost defeated. For example, once when he was tricked into fighting a tar baby after trying to take some food from the tar baby, he got stuck.

The lessons of Ananse are social, ethical, and moral and are at the core of most Akan cultural responses to society.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Maat

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ANCESTORS

Ancestors are those who once lived in human society and, having fulfilled certain conditions, are now in the realm of the spirits. One becomes an ancestor by living and dying in a particular way. In African religion, to become an ancestor, one must have lived an exemplary life, shown devotion to one's own ancestors, respected the elders, and had children. Among various ethnic groups, to become an ancestor, one must have died a good death, that is, one's death must not have been by suicide, accident, or other forms of violence, with the possible exception of heroic deaths on the battlefield. In most societies, those dying of epilepsy, leprosy, and lunacy cannot be considered candidates for ancestorhood. This entry discusses the general importance of ancestors in African



Ancient Benin bronze reflecting an ancestor figure in Nigeria.
Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

religion and morality and then looks at particular ways that reverence is shown. It concludes with an examination of how ancestor devotion influences ideas about death and dying.

Veneration Is Fundamental

The veneration of the ancestors is a fundamental part of African religion. There is a clear reason for such veneration. The ancestors are respected and venerated because they are elders and have walked the path that living people will walk. They are predecessors to all of those who are living and are in a spiritual state of existence that gives them power to assist those who are living. People have believed for a long time that the ritualized propitiation and invocation of ancestors could influence the fate of the living. This is a belief and practice that has been brought to a complex and elaborated level by thousands of years of African thinking.

Indeed, ancestors serve the living as the living beings serve them. Ancestors assist the living in court cases, in marriage, in mediations between family members, and in health situations; in return, the living offer ceremonies to feed the ancestors. Libations are usually offered through drink or food because the ancestors are believed to continue to live as they did when they were on the Earth. Thus, even in their spiritual state, they need to have sustenance. Offerings may be granted to them individually or collectively or by religious officials who perform on festival occasions.

Everything in life that matters to the order and harmony of society must be approached through the ancestors. This means that in African religion, there is always ancestral priority, presence, and power. The ancestral spirits are the most intimate divinities and must be consulted on important occasions. This is the reason that Africans regard the ancestors as the keepers of morality. One of the ways descendants of the ancestor maintain a balanced society is by avoiding the activities that were considered immoral by the ancestor. The living must do everything they can to avoid leaving the moral path laid down by the departed ancestors. If someone violates the moral path, then it is possible that the ancestors might bring about sudden death.

The social fabric of the African community is woven together by ancestor reverence. It is the source of many domestic and institutional relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to explain that it is not merely a reflection of the supernatural world; it is the only world lived in by many Africans. Thus, the manner of reverence among African people is relatively similar, which makes it possible to speak of the commonalities of ancestor reverence among Africans.

The Descent Line

The descent line is the basic structural component for all groups who practice ancestor reverence. People know whom they owe reverence by knowing to whom they belong. Constant ritualizing of the First Ancestors helps to reinforce the appreciation for a particular descent group. Sometimes the main descent group can be augmented by other ethnic or clan groups. For instance, the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe were originally a royal clan related to the Zulu of South Africa, but during their migration and conquest northward out of South Africa, they acquired new clans and ethnic groups who now appropriate some of the same ancestors.

Among many African people, the descent is through the mother—that is, matrilineal. In that case, many of the ancestors to be revered would come from the matrilineal side of the family. The husband would be a part of the family by virtue of his marriage to the direct descendant. In some cases, the husband may also revere the ancestors of his father. The idea is that the ancestor revered must be within the family structure. If the kinship structure is patrilineal, this means that the ancestors are from the father's side, and because of legal affinities, the wife may participate in the reverence as a member of the family.

African religion is preeminently a religion of reverence for the ancestors. The Swazi king appeals to the ancestors on behalf of the nation, showing himself to be the chief priest. The pattern of royal intercession is followed by many other African groups. What is also common and extensively practiced is sacrifice, which always implies obligation. Kofi Asare Opoku, a major African scholar on religion, has written extensively on the

question of obligation in African religion. Obligation among the Swazi people means that each year an animal must be dedicated to a specific royal ancestor and may only be eaten by the direct descendants of that ancestor.

Reverence Displays

Although it is true that ancestors are revered, it is also true that not all ancestors are revered in the same way. A congregation, that is, a kinship group, so to speak, does not provide ritual service or respect to every ancestor in all situations. One might say that the ancestors who are accorded respect in one situation may primarily be those who are exclusive to the honoring group. This helps them to distinguish between collateral groups, perhaps of the same ethnic group. However, some ancestors are more than family. They are national, that is, all families in the ethnic group are derived from them, and national ceremonies are held to commemorate those ancestors who may be the Yoruba *egungun* or the Asante *nananom nsamanfo*.

The complexity of the practice of ancestor reverence varies among ethnic groups. However, among most groups, the interconnections between religion and property, marriage, birth, death, and titles to membership and leadership of the corporate group are clearly tied to *geneonymy*. This word means commemoration of the ancestors by name. Everyone who calls the name of the ancestors must use the accepted geneonymic sequence because that is the only way the group establishes itself as a congregation. Another reason that *geneonymy* is important is the establishment of ancestral focus. Every member of the congregation knows exactly to whom he or she belongs. One calls the name of the ancestor publicly so that the ancestor's name is spoken again in the community of the living. Africans do not do this simply for the purpose of hearing the name, but also to instruct the young people of the community on the value of commemoration. Therefore, it is the highest form of obligation for the children of the ancestor.

Ancestor reverence or worship should not be confused with cults of the dead. For Africans, death in itself has no divine qualities. African

people believe something far more significant than simply the worship of the dead. In the popular traditional African religion, there is the idea that those who have lived in the community actually affect the lives of the living after death.

Universal Practice

Thus, the deification of the ancestral spirit is essential to the religion, but death must occur for the process of deification to take place. Ancestor reverence, therefore, is not the same as practices dealing with ghosts and spirits and Hob-Goblins. Some Western societies have believed in ghosts and shade cults, but do not have ancestor reverence.

There is widespread practice of ancestor reverence on the continent of Africa, and the practices vary in different regions of the continent. Among the Ga of Ghana and the Nuer of the Sudan, two of the several groups that do not have an elaborate system of ancestor reverence, there is still a strong belief in the veneration of ancestors on special occasions. The Ga have ritualized libations in the name of the honored dead during naming ceremonies, marriages, and the Homowo Festival. Their practice, and that of the Nuer, may be somewhat like the practice of the Jews and Catholics; both groups name ancestors on special occasions. The Catholics have masses in the names of the ancestor saints, and the Jews name ancestors on the Day of Atonement and their New Year Day.

In Africa, the Ibo of Nigeria believe that the ancestors profoundly influence all actions in society. Although they do not have kings of their towns (instead they have a group of elders who govern the community), they are nevertheless quite elaborate in their veneration of the ancestors. This has far-reaching significance in sociological terms. Among the Ibo people, sacrifice has to be offered regularly, and a person does not eat or drink without giving a portion to the ancestors.

The Spirits of the Dead

The spirits of the dead are the ancestors, and the forces of nature often represent their activities; they may be the powers behind the storms, rain, rivers, seas, lakes, hills, and rocks. They are not

just the rocks or water, but the spiritual powers capable of manifesting anywhere. There is no separation between the religious world and other spheres of human and supernatural activities because the relationship among the living, the dead, and the Supreme God is one of mutuality and connectedness. Humans are intertwined with the divine; there is no seam in the relationship. The spiritual world is interrelated with the natural world according to the Shona of Zimbabwe. Mwari, the Supreme God, is connected to the living through the ancestors and spirit mediums. The natural world, the world of trees, rocks, rivers, and so forth, has a direct connection to the spiritual world by way of moral geography.

To become an ancestor, death is necessary, but it is not enough. Most practitioners of popular traditional African religion make a distinction between the dead and the ancestors. In fact, among the Tallensi people, it is believed that those who die without offspring live a ghostly existence because they have no one to provide reverence for them. A more elaborate understanding of this distinction is given by the Fon of Dahomey. In fact, the Fon say that the dead (*chio*) are not the same as the ancestors (*tovodu*). As one would expect, the people of Benin (the African nation with the largest proportion of its population practicing popular traditional African religion) also have the most complex ritual system for deifying the dead and turning them into ancestors.

The Ritual Protocols

Clearly the practice of ancestor veneration among the people of Africa means that there must be a pantheon of deities. Of course, there exists in all of these congregations a pantheon, but most often a judicious and limited one. There are not thousands of deities, as among the Hindu people, or scores of them as among the ancient Greeks; there are only the robust ancestral spirits that have been properly called into service by ritual. They have been brought home again and have manifested themselves in the service of the community. Through prayers, rituals, sacrifice and incest prohibition, and other taboo injunctions, the community acknowledges the dead person as joining the cosmography of the ancestral world.

The Akan people of Ghana have a rather developed sense of ancestor reverence based on kinship. The matrilineal forebears can become ancestors and receive veneration. The Akan may have established this system because the philosophical tradition is based on the idea that the person is composed of the *ntoro*, the *sunsum*, the *abusua*, and the *mogya*. The father transmits *ntoro*, personality, to the child, but it does not survive death. The mother transmits the *mogya*, the blood, and the *abusua*, family lineage. Thus, in a matrilineal society, it is from the mother that one receives those things that survive and are transmuted to become the spirit of the ancestor. Spirit is a name attached to certain ritualized relics, such as a stool, which represents the validation of the proper ancestral lineage.

Among the Akan, ancestor veneration is more than a filial relationship to the father or mother; it is a kinship event with the backing of the political-philosophical system. Those members of the lineage who are heads of households or holders of office may become enshrined as venerated ancestors. What is true for the Akan matrilineal system is also true for the patrilineal system in terms of the rules of selection and veneration.

As an ancestor, a person is able to prolong his legal existence in his heir or co-heirs. He may have been a person of bad temper or poor judgment, but it becomes the inescapable duty of his heirs to venerate him because he continues to live effectively in the world. Accordingly, it does not matter what a person's relationship has been with the ancestor; once the person has become an ancestor, it is necessary to venerate him regardless of his successes or failures as a person. One ancestor is on equal standing with another so long as he has been ritualized into ancestorhood, which carries with it the power to influence lives and intervene in activities of his descendants.

The Tallensi people, along with many other Africans, believe that if a man has no sons, he cannot become an ancestor regardless of his virtue and success in life. Without an heir to venerate him, he is in danger of a grievous travesty. What holds for the ancestor holds for the descendants. The eldest son must officiate regardless of his moral condition or his intellectual capacity. No one can take away from him his right to lead the

eneration of the ancestors of his parents. He alone has the lifelong responsibility to carry out the functions of libation and sacrifices for the ancestor. If he fails to do so, he is in grave peril. Should others try to take away his right to fulfill his responsibility, they will be in peril.

Similarly, the ancestors behave the same way toward their descendants irrespective of either of their characters. Ancestors who were good behave just like those who were bad tempered during their lifetime. They intervene in the lives of their heirs regardless of the character of those heirs. An heir could be trifling or upright and thrifty, and yet the ancestral intervention will show no difference. They exact ritual service and veneration in accordance with the same rules of intervention.

None of this process is a matter of good or evil; it is a matter of holding back chaos in the world. In fact, the ancestors neither persecute their descendants, nor punish them for wickedness, nor reward them for goodness. However, the ancestors may harass or trouble the descendants for failing to provide religious submission or service. The ancestor is not a punishing authority, but a judge who is concerned with the prosperity of the lineage. He is therefore attuned to the needs of the people and provides corrective intervention where necessary.

Thus, behind the practitioner of ancestor veneration or reverence is a body of religious beliefs that are aligned with rules of conduct for designated authority in the social system of most African societies. Attending to the rites of ancestors is one way to continue to bind the people together in one community because ancestors show the continuity of the society and compel communal action if necessary.

Funerals and Death

Death represents a separation. But something always provokes, brings about a separation, in African belief; it does not happen without reason. Among the Swazis, it is believed that no one dies without some sort of sorcery. People do not die from sickness or old age; no one dies a natural death.

Among the Lovedu, the Rain-Queen is not supposed to die. She becomes divine by taking her own life. She takes poison, which contains the brain and spinal cord of a crocodile, among other things. The queen is buried in a deep grave,

standing upright and facing north, from whence came her ancestors. The body is wrapped in cloth and ox skin. It is buried with beads, water, a firebrand, a mat, and, in the ancient days, a male corpse. The grave is gradually filled up and is only completely covered when the head has decomposed after 6 months. A year later, the fires are put out and then ritually relit, and a new queen is installed. Sufficient time had to elapse before the spirit of the dead queen could rest.

Like other African ethnic groups, the Lovedu language of death is indirect. They say,

the house is broken
the king is busy
the mountain has fallen
the mighty tree is uprooted
the queen is elsewhere.

When it is said that “the queen is elsewhere,” the people are expressing a deep sense of loss, separation, and mobility.

In the past, the Asante kings were laid out and the seven openings of the body filled with gold dust. The body was put in a coffin over an open pit for 80 days so that the flesh was decomposed, and then charms were fastened onto the skeleton. The Swazi specialists squeezed the fluids from the body to prevent rapid decay. The Swazi king, divine in life, was apotheosized in death and entered the ranks of the ancestors.

Traditional African believers accept that ancestors are ever-living; they never die. This is not worship in the sense that the Christians or Muslims believe in their gods; it is rather that Africans accept supreme deities. Ancestors have additional powers; to obtain their blessings, people must avoid their anger and win their favor. Because humans are in the midst of primal struggle between good and evil, they need all the assistance they can gather. Who better to provide people with Earthly assistance in this struggle than their own ancestors, who have a stake in their survival and abundant living. Ancestors know their kin, and they know what is necessary to protect them. Every person is involved in the struggle for continuity, not just political heroes, and this means that people must pay special attention to rituals.

Heroes and Wars

It was a common practice for the Asante army to call on famous Asante warriors during battle. The names would be spoken, shouted, and sung as the army went into battle. The Yoruba called on a mythical god of war. Other ethnic groups have similar ways of expressing their connectedness to heroic ancestors. Inasmuch as ancestor reverence is considered to be at the base of all African ways of obligation, it is the fact that we are obliged to the ancestors that causes us to grant reverence.

With war comes death. The general attitude of the African toward the dead is one of respect. There are certain taboos among some ethnic groups about death. They do not even speak the word. A taboo is a socially sanctioned prohibition against performing certain acts. Most taboos seem to involve sexual relations with certain people and under certain circumstances. The incest taboo applies to a larger range of people in Africa than in Europe. In Africa, it applies not only to members of the same family, but also to members of the same clan or lineage. Taboos against marriage tend to be stronger and stricter than those against copulation. Yet the rules of exogamy, which are a direct result of these taboos, influence the social structure of African societies. The rules regulate the exchange of women and marriage compensation, which work to maintain a society's cohesion.

Taboos around death are the most troubling. Among the Akan people of Ghana, one does not speak of death, and one must certainly not say that the king is dead. These are taboos for which the person would have to make restitution in some ritual propitiation.

The Fear of Death

In all societies, there are people who are terrified of ghosts and people who have *thanatophobia*, the fear of death. This is different from the typical African's response to death. In African cultures, fear associated with death involves collective danger, not individual fear; thus, the idea of thanatophobia in some Western and other cultures is more an individual rather than a communal fear. Taboos are communal, not individual, and a person who breaks one actually violates the fabric of the society. It is like tearing a hole in a beautiful blanket. It must be repaired or everyone suffers.

Respect for the dead is a given among African traditionalists and believers. The Asante have ceremonies every 3 weeks for the ancestors. They are given water to wash their hands and soul food, that is, food for their souls. The Gikuyu elders put a little food on the ground for the departed spirits. The light of the ancestors is thought to stand in the place where they stood.

People do not pray to ancestors, they pray to god, but they ask ancestors for intercession. No Africans pray to their ancestors any more than they pray to their living fathers. Prayer is reserved for the gods. A person may pour libations to the ancestors to ask the ancestors for a special favor. For example, "Why do you treat us like this? Why did you give us this problem? What must we do to appease you?"

These are like scolding messages; they are not insults, but conversations that men hold with the spirits expressing disappointment for failures. At the moment of the conversation, one realizes the reciprocal nature of reverence for ancestors because, although the ancestors do not speak, they demand and desire more and more. Believers are obligated to carry out every sacrifice that is required to appease the ancestor.

In conclusion, it must be made clear that Africans do not debate whether the ancestors are gods; they know that they are ancestors, and this is a special category of belief. Historically, one can see that conquerors have often appropriated some of the ideas of the people they conquered, yet the conquering religions do not see ancestors as Africans have seen them. Death is a clear confrontation with reality because, in the view of Africans, it is where one crosses over to the ancestral world, and it is only by accessing the ancestors that the living are able to commune with those on the other side.

The Idea of Ancestral Reincarnation

Africans believe in reincarnation, but the African idea is not based on a written text; it is based on the belief that humans beings live in a cycle, that things go around and come around. African reincarnation is based on the religion of ancient Egypt, where the priests said that we shall come back millions and millions of times.

Two points should be made clear about reincarnation. The first is that this belief in reincarnation is

firmly held in most of Africa. The second one is that the African idea of reincarnation differs from the Asian idea. Throughout Africa, people believe that humans who die return to the Earth in different human forms, but not, as is found in India, as animals. There is no idea of suffering in the African construction. In Asia, one has the notion of rounds of existences and cycles of rebirth from which men might escape by Nirvana. This idea is not found in Africa. Similarly, the idea of reward or punishment by rebirth into a higher or lower state, as one finds in Asia, is missing in Africa. There is no thought that the present world is an illusion and is full of suffering in the African context. Africans think of world-affirming, not world-renouncing, activities.

Finally, one reason for which people appeal to ancestors is that souls are reborn in children, and the souls who are reborn may be grandparents returned. There is a saying that the ancestors do not create the child; the child has been here from long ago. This means that it behooves the living to pay close attention to those who have become ancestors because they are not dead, but living. As they live, the ancestral name is renewed in the family. There is revitalization of people, and believers can expect their descendants to carry out the same rituals of memory for them.

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See also Reincarnation

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ANCESTORS AND HARMONIOUS LIFE

The ancestors are at the center of African religion because they are at the core of all harmony or

disharmony in society. No specific African cultural community exists apart from the dynamics provided by the ancestral realm. In fact, the causes of all good deeds, fertility as reflected in the abundance of harvest or the productivity of women, and joy of family are the result of the ancestors. One could also say that all misfortunes, misdeeds, famines, and difficulties of living are caused by the ancestors in African religion. Nothing in society is immune from the influence of ancestors. The ancestors are responsible for beneficence and afflictions. However, harmonious living in society can be achieved only by following the ritual paths of the elders.

Malevolent actions are attributed to unhappy ancestors and those spirits that might assist the ancestors such as local or nature spirits. Affliction and chaos can be traced to the lack of ritual and sacrifice. Thus, it is necessary to have diviners who can identify the cause of disasters and afflictions to restore balance and harmony.

Communication With Ancestors

All healers and diviners, whether they are called *babalawos* or *ngangas*, are able to detect occult forces at work in the community. They might be able to tell a person what spirit or ancestor is responsible for a certain disease. To resolve this issue, it is necessary for propitiation in the form of rules, behaviors, and sacrifices to be followed. If an ancestor is responsible for creating disharmony in society, then the resolution has to be seeking the reason for conflict within the line of descent. This means that the members of the society who participate in propitiatory exercises are appealing to the ancestors to have mercy on the society.

In the typical African society, hierarchy is by age. Of course, the ancestors are older than the living, and among the living, the elders are the highest in terms of authority. Thus, the ancestors as participants in the society are eager to see the prosperity and sustainability of the community. They will be called on by the living, appealed to in the case of crises, and evoked when children are born. Their function, it seems, is to hold the society together.

Actually, the visible and invisible worlds are intertwined in an intimate interplay of the living and the ancestors. This is a richly textured

phenomenon in which heaven and Earth, various levels of humans, spirits that are terrestrial and celestial, and ancestors all dwell in a powerful drama of maintaining the moral order, keeping harmony in place. Because this order works to the benefit of everyone, it behooves the living to do everything in their might to maintain this order. One thing they cannot do is offend or displease the ancestors in any way. Therefore, one lives with a constant understanding of the balance that is necessary to keep harmony.

Once a person ends terrestrial existence, the departed becomes a member of the mediators in the invisible world. But the departed are never far away from their old communities. In fact, they take the harmony of their old communities quite seriously and, as privileged personalities, are consulted on a regular basis.

Thus, dependence on the ancestors is the key to appreciating African religion. The preponderant nature of the ancestral world is such that the ancestors are everywhere and are entitled to superior powers giving them authority to keep the living community harmonious. In reality, this conception of the ancestors depends on the understanding of death as the end of the biological world, but the entrance into the afterlife, where the spiritual world is filled with energies that affect the living world.

Ideas About Time and Immortality

Furthermore, there is a belief in immortality; it is a belief that supports the idea that divinity is worthy of being respected and worshipped. When one appreciates the nature of time as an active present, then one can see how the ancestors are constant even in their immortality.

Every community is a present community; it does not live in the past, although the past is heavily subscribed to in a historical sense. Thus, time is different in the African communal sense than time in the Western sense. Consequently, sacrifice, redemption, and the world to come are lived in the present. There can be no resurrection either because everything is present, including the activities of the ancestors.

Now the elders remain alive in the community as guides. Although they are physically absent, they are spiritually active and always

present. What does a guide do? He is responsible for the well-being of the community. As such, the ancestor oversees the harmony of the society, guarantees fertility, serves as protector of the children, and establishes good health for his descendants.

There are six general prerogatives of the ancestors:

1. Control of the society's filiations
2. Control of the metaphysical and social order
3. Protection of agricultural rites and keeping the land fertile
4. Sustaining of unity and harmony
5. Reinforcement of group cohesion
6. Maintenance of harmony between the living and dead

The ceremonies and rituals that are made to the ancestors reinforce the bonds between the ancestors and the living, thus ensuring harmony in the community. Neglecting the rituals is tantamount to asking for ill fortune and even death. Everything is linked in the community, and the living members of the community are responsible for the journey of the ancestors into the next world. Ancestors and other divinities are the recipients and beneficiaries of the rituals made by the living. They need these forces as they negotiate their way through the universe. Thus, the generating balance and the extraordinary attention paid to the community is one of symbiosis. If the community really wants the intervention of the ancestors, then the community must show its support and appreciation for the ancestors by performing the ritual duties.

When one speaks of the harmonious community in the African sense, one is speaking of the interrelationship between the living and the dead, the balance between heaven and Earth, male and female, good and evil, and the visible and the invisible. To hold this phenomenal situation in cohesion takes the rituals and ceremonies of the living and the interventions of the ancestors. In the end, harmony is achieved.

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See also Ancestors; Personhood

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ANIMAL IMAGES

All animals are sacred in African religious traditions. They play vital roles in the creation of the heavens, Earth, and people. They bring messages of life, death, social order, customs, and practices. Some are regarded as deities, whereas others represent deities. On a practical level, animals provide food for humans and are a source of social wealth and standing. Through totems, they also distinguish relations among members of a particular community. For this reason, the images of animals, whether it be in stories or on textiles, houses, temples, shrines, pots, containers, drums, and sculptures, impart a sense of the sacred to the everyday and ritual life of Africans. This entry examines the background of African attitudes about animals and then looks at some specific beliefs and practices.

Origins

Many African stories hold that long ago people and animals could communicate and that individuals in some cultures were able to become one with specific animals. Over time, this ability was lost to most people except for select specialists such as hunters, healers, shaman, priests, or priestesses. Although communication was no longer possible, reverence remained.

Animals, because of their complex human-like activities, were early teachers of humans, in the sense that humans learned from watching animal behavior. By observing their behavior, Africans were able to discover in-depth information about themselves and their world. These animals then became symbols, and their images were used to convey important information. People of the Nile Valley have a deity of language and writing called Djehuty who is represented as a baboon. Baboons

have a language consisting of clicking sounds. Perhaps these early inhabitants made the association of language with baboons based on this observation.

Another early example of the use of animal images is among the San of South Africa. A painting of a dying eland, with zigzag lines emanating from it, depicts the potency of eland, which the San believe to be a source of their shamanistic power. Another image shows the emptying of an eland's bowels, perhaps a crucial indicator that it is the energy release at the point of death, not just death itself that releases this power. The images are painted with a mixture containing the blood of an eland. Other images depict a combination of an eland and human, or a bird or lion and a human. These therianthropes appeared in rock shelters scattered throughout southern Africa and often overlapped, making it difficult to distinguish scenes. These "theaters" were vital to the life of the San people because they were the places at which the shaman could gather and communicate information obtained from their experiences with and as animals in the spiritual world.

Some Examples

Ancient Kemetan culture makes extensive use of both animal images and related therianthropes. The written language, Mdw Nṯr, contains dozens of images of animals and birds that act as letters in their writing system. Sometimes they are read phonetically, sometimes they are read ideographically. Egyptian deities appear as both animal images and therianthropes. The sun deity, or neter, Ra is shown as a falcon or wings, just as the neter Horus. The falcon is a bird of strength and aggressiveness that soars high, like the sun and with the sun. The falcon would also be drawn with kings to reinforce their god-like powers and attributes. The neter Hathor is a cow or, in earlier times, a hippopotamus or water cow, both ancient maternal symbols of strength. Sobek is imaged as a crocodile.

The crocodile represents the monster that symbolically devours the day: darkness or night. The depiction of a crocodile with a falcon head shows that it is Heru, or the sun, that is being devoured or doing battle with the forces of darkness. The Khepera, the ever-becoming neter, image is the dung

beetle. The dung beetle buries its eggs in cow dung. After the annual flood of the Nile, the eggs hatch, starting a new cycle of life. Out of the less than ideal settings of dung and a flood, life is still ever-coming. Sometimes the use of animal images is more abstract, as in the case of the *netjer*, one of whose symbols is a feather. The feather represents the lightness of heart felt when practicing *Maat*. The complete bird is an image of justice among the Xhosa, where it identifies a murderer in a common tale.

No animal is left out of consideration for a sacred duty; in addition to the beetle, lizards, chameleons, spiders, snakes, and foxes occupy prominent positions in religious traditions. It was often the lizard or chameleon who carried the message of death into the world. Spiders are held to be wise, and one of the titles of god among the Akan and Ashanti is the Great Spider, the Wise One. Snakes are thought to be immortal in many societies or represent the departed or living dead. For that reason, specific types of snakes in the physical world are not harmed. If they appear in dreams, they are bearing a message from the ancestors and, if drawn, are shown consuming their tails to symbolize eternity.

With animals given such prominence in spiritual and sacred matters, they become archetypes and their imagery permeates entire cultures. Among the Dogon, the pale fox, *Ogo*, rebels against his creator, attempts to steal seeds of creation, and, in doing so, introduces disharmony into the universe. The resulting symbolism of the fox in Dogon culture is diverse, abstract, and highly sophisticated. The fox is rendered by a simplistic outline drawing of his body and is found on totemic sanctuaries and caves throughout Dogon country. However, symbolic paraphernalia of the fox can be encountered in children's games, baskets, drums, and divination tables.

Another area of where animal images are found is that of the totem. When a family or clan has a special and specific relationship with a particular animal, it is expressed in the form of an animal totem. Common applications of totems include a prohibition from eating or hunting the animal. The use of its image on the garments of ritual clothing, walking sticks, pots, and statues in shrines is an expression of totems.

One last area of the use of animal images is in dance. It is understood that all dance forms

started as a sacred rituals. The movements in the dances were often pantomimes of activities of animals such as birds and fish. While the dancer is experiencing the movements internally, it is an abstracted image of the animal to those watching the dance.

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See also Totem

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ANIMALS

Africans rely heavily on the use of symbols to communicate ideals and universal understanding of our connection to all living kingdoms. Africans believe that all life is one and a manifestation of the One Creator. Ancient Egyptians (*Kemetians*) stressed the divine in animal manifestations. Animals were featured in variation, such as the animal-headed human, the human-headed animal, as well as the combination of multiple animals in one form. Africans also believe that because the Creator positioned humans at the center of the universe, animals are designated as servants of human beings and, as such, are to be used by them as they deem fit. The African relationship with animals clearly demonstrates the African profound understanding of and connection to the natural world. This entry looks at animals in African ritual and mythology; it also explores the use of totems and the meaning of specific animal symbols in ancient Africa.

Ritual and Sacrifice

Animals played a role in daily living, economics, and a multitude of other ways in African life. Within this hierarchy of life and balance of order, animals were created with purpose, by God, and

as needed by humans. Animals are used for fundamental survival, as well as for spiritual and religious purposes. Animals are used in stock-keeping rituals where people basically slaughter animals for food. There are rituals associated with this process because they usually bless the animal to remove any ill intentions and promote clean consumption.

Animals are also used in many regions of Africa for cultural purposes. For instance, animal skins are used to wrap corpses while hides and tusk are used to make musical instruments. Additionally, animal's blood is used as food without the need to kill it. For instance, in Uganda, Sudan, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Namibia, rituals accompany the preservation of the animal and the people because the animals are allowed to live.

It is a widely held belief that the killing of an animal may spare individual as well as collective lives. In that context, animals are thus slaughtered in an effort to safeguard the community. It is also a consistent understanding that the life of the animal is passed onto the people to which they are closely connected, to strengthen and protect them. In this respect, both wild and domesticated animals are sacrificed. The most typical of domesticated animals used in this process are sheep, goat, cattle, dogs, and fowl. Wild animals are used in rain-making ceremonies, as well as to chase away epidemics and public danger and to purify the environment.

Animals are also used in traditional medicine and ritual ceremonies as homage to God and as a way of soliciting his or her help while connecting to the realm of spirits. Animal's blood is used in libations or as an offering to the ancestors, as well as to fortify the soil and make it more fertile. For medicine men, the reliance on animals is critical to the prevention and treatment of disease.

Myths and Totems

In conjunction with breeding, domestication, hunting, and labor, animals are symbolized in myths that have shaped African people's reality and further defined their relationship with the universe. In many African cultures, animals are particularly featured in cosmogony myths because they exemplify the ability to convey sacred power and messages. In myths, animals are also known

as totems and play a key role in identity construction of individuals, clans, and ethnic groups. With the origins of humankind in Africa, this same mode of expression is attested in many other cultures, as revealed in daily communication, such as with oral and literary traditions.

Their connection to the natural world motivated the ancient Africans to identify themselves with animal totems that best fit or embodied the power or ability of that particular animal. The ancient Africans paid their respect to and held animals in high regard because they believed that specific animals possessed certain characteristics or features of the gods who revered them. It was one of the ways that the divine could manifest itself for human perception and understanding.

The animals chosen as totems reflected the Africans' understanding of themselves and their connection to nature. Africans also regarded animals as an archetype or aspect of an incarnate god. The animals were not god, but a representation or aspect of it and similarly associated with the Ba (spirit/soul) on Earth. Their high esteem for animals went so far as to be associated with divinity. Gods and human beings in the future life had the ability to shape-shift or transform into any animal or other life form (for that matter) whenever they desired. It is this intimate respect that led them to mummify and treat the body of the deceased animal like that of a human body for the same purpose of afterlife and immortality. This philosophy is directly tied to their understanding of god and the mobility of the soul after death.

Specific Symbols

Among the many animals respected by ancient Africans, of particular significance was the scarab or dung beetle because it represented, in allegorical terms, the soul's journey. The scarab is symbolic because of its connection to the human kingdom. For instance, it is born in water, also known to the ancient Africans as the universal life force and substance of Earthly life. It is also a symbol of purification or cleansing and balance. The scarab's process of procreation is also of interest because it is orientated by light and follows the movement of the sun. It fundamentally

represents the importance of the soul moving toward the light—that is, moving toward higher consciousness or awareness.

Finally, the scarab always creates a ball of dung in a perfect sphere, much like our own planet and other celestial bodies, and buries it in the Earth for 28 days, the exact cycle of the moon and female menstrual cycle. The scarab beetle reminds women and men to adhere to the natural laws of nature as it works diligently at maintaining order. The scarab was associated with the solar god of resurrection Khepri, who was also connected to new life and creation, Amen.

Another animal worthy of note is the dog or jackal as represented by Anubis, whose ears are erect and open. This is linked with the jackal's clairaudient ability to hear beyond the capabilities of the human ear. Next is the serpent or uraeus, usually depicted on the front of the king's crown symbolizing upright readiness and an enlightened soul. The cobra is also associated with the fertility goddess, Renent, depicted nursing children and protecting the pharaoh.

Ancient Africans also connected closely to birds such as the stork, which symbolized the Ba or Soul as well as the falcon or hawk. Because of the protective powers it possessed, it was linked with royalty and seen as the guardian of the ruler and furthermore associated with the Solar God, Horus. Similarly, the ibis or akhu bird was considered an aspect of the soul as was represented by Tehuti, the god of knowledge. As in the case of Tehuti, more than one animal is often connected to one deity, and the same can be said of Amun and his personification as the ram and goose. The ostrich is yet another bird that was associated with Maat, the personification of order, justice, and balance. Another animal of equal importance is the cat as personified by Bast, also connected to the sun god, Ra.

Furthermore, the lion is one of the most well-known examples as depicted on the head of the sphinx. The lion personifies the rising and setting sun, guardian of the horizon. Lions are also linked to solar deities and many pharaohs, as well as Sekhmet, who possessed the head of a lioness. The lion of Judah is also a prime example because it symbolizes rulership and ferocity.

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See also Bats

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ANIMATISM

Animatism, not to be confused with animism, is the belief in a supernatural power that animates all living things in an impersonal sense. It is therefore not individualized or specialized in terms of a particular object, such as one finds in animism, but is a rather more generalized belief in an invisible, powerfully impersonal energy that is everywhere. Of course, it is possible that some individuals might tap into this power and consequently be able to manipulate it better than others.

In some African societies, as among the Asante of Ghana, it is thought that the king carries with him the ability to change the nature of society by how he handles his office. In fact, if he endangers the order of the universe by violating certain taboos that threaten to destabilize the community by misappropriating or misusing the unseen power of the Earth, he might risk losing his office.

Thus, the belief in supernatural energy that is not a part of a supernatural being is the essence of animatism. Derived from the same Latin root as animism, the term *animatism* was meant to differentiate the individual spirit in animate and inanimate objects from the more generalized belief in the active spirit of the universe. One cannot grant any ethical or moral quality to this active spirit because it is neither good nor evil, neither right nor wrong, but everywhere present and therefore inherently dangerous if it is violated. Some have described it by the electricity metaphor; it is everywhere and it can bring harm, but it is not moral or immoral; it is amoral.

Although one may find animatism and animism in the same culture, they must be distinguished as concepts. Animism may be said to have personality

and animatism is impersonal; whereas animism shows us individuals with special spiritual characteristics or traits, animatism simply exists as a force in the universe in a generalized sense. Of course, it should also be clear to the reader that Africans have rarely characterized their societies in this way. Both concepts, derived from European anthropology, have been applied to African societies as a way to explain a complex phenomenon to Western readers.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Animism

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ANIMISM

The word *animism* comes from the Latin term *anima*, which means *breath*. The term *animism* was first used in reference to African cultures by the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Tylor defined the term as a general belief in spiritual beings. After Tylor, other anthropologists used the term to refer to African religion, usually contending that all African religions have as a minimum the idea of material and immaterial things having breath or a soul. This minimum constituted for these authors the idea of a religion that was one of the oldest forms of belief on the Earth. Some even tried to date its origin to prehistoric times on the African continent.

The idea that a soul existed in every object, animate or inanimate, appeared to represent the *sine qua non* of religion. A particular soul, in this construction, would exist or did exist as a part of an immaterial soul and was therefore universal and eternal.

Most believers in the animism idea share the notion that all religions, African, Western, or Eastern, have some form of this belief in the spirit, soul, or breath force existing in all things. This belief is referred to as animatism. Because humans seem to have this belief transversally, it means that the idea of shadows, spirits, souls, or breath is responsible for the general perception in religion that humans are activated by this life force. Some people have conceived this force as a vapor or shadow that can move from one body to another, passing between humans or between humans and plants or animals. Indeed, it is also possible for inanimate objects to have this vapor.

According to the animist theories, humans came to this belief in shadows, souls, and spirits to explain the experiences of sleep, dreams, and even death. How does one distinguish between a person who is sleep and one who is awake? Furthermore, what is the meaning of a person being alive and one who is not alive? It is at this juncture that the minds of humans, according to the theories of animism, created the idea of spirit forces. The fact that these ideas appeared quite prominently in the experiences of Africans caused the earliest authors, following Tylor, to concede that Africans had indeed formulated the first responses to the problem of different states of consciousness. This concession by Tylor meant that the so-called primitive religion was the fundamental reason for the concept of soul, spirit, shadow, vapor, and breath of life in other religions.

Animism would be criticized by British anthropologist Robert Marett, who believed that it was not possible for Africans to have conceived of this notion of breath, soul, and spirit, as promoted by Tylor. In Marett's judgment, "primitive" people did not have the capacity to recognize the idea of animism within animate and inanimate objects. If Africans came to this position, in the argument of Marett, it was simply an "emotional" response to the environment and not a rational one. Of course, it could be debated how early Africans came to believe in the spirit or soul as existing in objects, but one thing is certain, they believed it. This is a historically accurate fact.

Indeed, one finds that it remains current in the context of African religion. Among the Akan of Ghana, when one wants to create a drum, the people responsible for making the drum accompany the hunters to the forest, and when they discover a tree that is suitable for the drum, they offer libations and prayers to the spirit of the tree. This is representative of the belief that trees, stones, and plants have spirits of their own that must be appeased and appealed to when one wants to make use of them. Some trees, mountains, or rocks might be thought to possess spirits that must be feared; others possess spirits that can be given reverence because of their beauty, historical significance, or utility.

Animism as a function of African religion has impacted the world to the degree that, throughout the world, there are people who believe in the convergence of the spiritual and material worlds; they believe that nothing separates the sacred and the secular or the animate and inanimate because they all possess the spirit or breath.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Animatism

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ANKH

The *ankh* is a pervasive symbol in ancient Egypt. The meaning of the ankh conveys the idea of life or the force that generates living. It has been found on all types of materials, including leather, stone, copper, and wood, although it is most often used on gold. The ankh appears in all eras of ancient Egyptian life and is one of the oldest symbols. However, the exact origin of the symbol is not known. Kemetologists and Egyptologists have

searched many documents seeking to discover the first instance of the ankh. This has proven to be a difficult task because of the provenance of the symbol as well as its antiquity.

The form of the ankh is an oval supported by a "T." Thus, its shape has given rise to many theories about its original meaning. The three most prominent ideas are that the symbol represents the coming together of the male and female genitalia, a type of sandal worn by ancient Egyptians, and the Knot of Isis, which appeared on many fabrics in ancient Egypt. No one knows for certain whether any of these explanations is true because there are no records of the Egyptians giving advice about the origin of the symbol. Much like the *djed*, the symbol for stability, or the *was*, the symbol for power, the ankh reflects a concern with the practical life of the people.

As a symbol of life, the ankh was also used to represent regeneration or be used as an amulet to protect one against misfortune or as a talisman to bring good fortune. There was an intense interest on the part of the ancient Egyptians to ensure that their fortune was good, particularly as it related to the life after death. The concentration on prolonging life by ensuring that death would have no control over the body meant that they looked for every advantage to secure a firm position on eternal life. The ankh was used in greetings, salutations, and leave-taking. When the Egyptian wrote a letter or a treatise, one of the most appropriate endings was to wish for the recipient all life, or eternal life, *ankh neheh*.

There is some thought by Kemetologists that the House of Life, a compound of buildings used for the temple library, the archives of spiritual chants, and other information available to priests, was dominated by images of the ankh. In fact, this symbol is sometimes shown as a scepter that was held in the right hand of deities, who could apply it to the nostrils of the dead to resurrect them. To speak of a House of Life was to discuss the appropriate ways of maintaining the society against all forms of anarchy, chaos, and death.

The best philosophers, priests, and councilors went to the House of Life to investigate all issues that related to living forever. So obsessed was the society with life that the wisest among the



An ankh, an ancient Egyptian symbol of life, in Abydos in Egypt.

Source: iStockphoto.

Egyptians were employed in the process of searching out the keys to life. Thus, the ankh represented the most profound turn of the Egyptian mind toward eternity. Everlasting life was first conceived by the Egyptians. One can also see many examples of the ankh being held by the

loop as if it were a key, giving the impression that many Egyptians believed that the ankh held the key to immortality. It could conquer death and bring about resurrection because, in its essence, it was a power over death that had been granted by God.

Ankhs that were made out of faience, wax, metal, and gems were popular during the 18th and 19th dynasties as jeweled objects of power. Per-aa (pharaoh) Tutankhamen had a mirror shaped as an ankh. His name meant “The living Image of Amen.” Thus, Tutankhamen carried the great name of Amen alongside the symbol of life. When Howard Carter opened the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings, he discovered many objects that had the ankh symbol on them. It appeared to be everywhere in the tomb.

But Tutankhamen was not the only king whose tomb was full of ankhs. Ramses, Tuthmoses, Senursert, and other per-aas had reigns that included the presence of many ankhs on jewelry and other personal objects. Other kings also used the ankh as a symbol of life generating power. Senursert is seen in a famous pose holding two ankhs to his chest. This is an example of the use of the ankh for protection, security, and life. One could avoid chaos and death by the use of the ankh.

Few symbols have ever been as widespread as the ankh. The ancient Egyptians seemed to have created the symbol of the ankh on every occasion that was fraught with decision making. Much like the Yoruba orisha Eshu, the deity of the crossroads, the ankh in ancient Egypt, although not a representative of a deity, is a powerful object for social and political transformation. People believed that the ankh situated over the *neb* could render them protected from all problems. In fact, the symbols suggested that they would have all life. Death would be unable to conquer them because they would go into death with the symbol of immortality. The ankh retained its influence among the Egyptian people long after the end of the dynastic period.

Even when Christianity became the religion of Egypt, the people were still using the symbol of the ankh. For a while the ankh and the cross were used simultaneously until the Christians soon replaced the ankh with the cross. Thus, the venerable African ankh moved into popular culture and has remained one of the most recognizable human symbols.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ka; Nkwa; Soul

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ANUBIS

Anubis is the Greek translation for the Kemetic/Egyptian *Anpu*. He is the Jackal-headed Kemetic god of the dead. Although fearsome in appearance, Anubis is recognized as being a caring and nurturing god. He holds power over the spirits of the dead on their journeys after death. He is the personification of the Summer Solstice because he is associated with opening the way to the afterworld. Anubis was integral in the conveyance of the dead seeking entrance into the Afterlife.

There is a quality of creation to his activities. He is credited with creating the process of embalming and mummification, and in *Kemet/Egypt*, he held domain over the cemeteries and protected them against Earthly perils. Anubis was instrumental in the judgment of the Dead and their fate. Satisfactory completion of the judgment trials of *Maat* permitted the Dead to enter into the Hall of *Ausar/Osiris* for an eternal joyous afterlife. However, should the Dead fail judgment, they were ushered into *Amenti* to be ravaged by *Ammut*. Anubis is an ancient Kemetic God of noble lineage; his origins are traced to the first family of Gods. His mother *Nebt-het/Nephtys* is twin sister to *Auset/Isis*. Some say that his sect of worship was older than and rivaled that of Ausar. This entry looks at his functions, characteristics, and lineage.

The God's Role

Anubis holds dominion over the embalming aspects of mummification and holds sovereignty over decay caused by time and the resistance to decay. He appears numerous times in the Kemetic *Book of the Coming Forth/Going by Day* or the



Egyptian statue, Anubis. Anubis was the guardian of the dead, who greeted the souls in the Underworld and protected them on their journey. Ancient art photographed in Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Source: Hans Laubel/iStockphoto.

Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, as well as in funeral text and tomb and coffin texts. Anubis was the original god of the dead before Ausar's reign. During the reign of Ausar, he serves as an aid and a helper. The scope and importance of his influence is evidenced by his role in the resurrection of Ausar. It was Anubis who judged Ausar's worthiness at death. He is depicted in some texts professing to be the protector of Ausar. Anubis used his influence against time and decay when wrapping Ausar's body in his characteristic linens, which were made by Auset and her twin sister, Nebt-het. In this way, Ausar's body would never decay.

As aid to Ausar in the underworld, Anubis is often depicted in funerary text assisting with the balancing of the heart of the dead against the feather of Maat. He presides over the questioning of the dead in the affirmations of Maat by a tribunal of 42 Gods in the Hall of Maati or the Hall of Double Truths. Anubis balances the *Tongue of Great Balance*, depicted as a scale, and received the heart of the Dead. He relays the worthiness of the Dead to Ausar, receives and presents the symbols of the dead's worthiness, and acts as an intermediary between the Dead and the gods. However, he also protects, prepares, and cares for the Dead on their journey in the afterlife. Anubis is instrumental in the preparation of the body of the dead and preparing the dead for the trial of Maat.

During the embalming process, priests of Anubis completing the funeral rites would wear a Jackal headpiece. In this way, they would become the embodiment of Anubis as he was invoked and his protection sought. The worship of Anubis can be traced back thousands of years; it was long lasting and was introduced to both Greece and Rome from Africa. In Greece, the Kemetic name Anpu was changed to Anubis. Later his name was modified as it was combined with the Greek God *Hermes*. The center of Anubis' sect of worship was in Abydos. When Ausar unseated Anubis as god of the Dead and the afterlife, Abydos became the seat of Ausar's sect of worship.

Characteristics

Anubis is depicted with the head of a Jackal and the body of a man. He is shown on ancient papyrus in coffin and tomb texts with a dark blue or black Jackal's head and brown limbs. However, when Anubis is depicted in gold, he has golden limbs and an onyx Jackal's head adorned with gold. Anubis is rarely depicted as solely human, but can be found in full Jackal form more often. Later in his worship, he was associated with the Dog deity; this can be attributed to confusion between the Jackal and Dog by foreigners and in foreign lands.

In various times and places, Anubis was known by the names *Anpu*, *Imeut*, *Am Ut*, *Khent Sehet*, *Tep-Tu-f*, *Yinepu*, *Khenty Amentiu*, and *Sekhem Em Pet*. He is also called the Lord of the *Necropolis*, Lord of Passage, Guardian of the Veil, and Opener of Ways. Anubis has been combined with several other gods over time for various reasons. The combination of Anubis and Horas can be found. The Greek association of Anubis with Hermes resulted in *Hermanubis/Heru-em-Anpu*. Although Anubis is often mistaken for *Ap-uat*, they are distinct deities. Leading to this confusion could be the fact that both Anubis and *Ap-uat* have been depicted as Jackals.

Anubis has several patronages where his protection and guidance is invoked. Besides the patron of embalming and mummification, he is also the patron of orphans, the lost, the wandering, and victory over enemies for Pharaohs.

Lineage

Anubis's mother is *Nephtys* or *Nebt-het*, the Kemetic goddess associated with the portion of the sky or heavens where certain gods dwell. Like her brother Ausar and sister Auset, she began life as a human in a royal house of a Pharaoh. *Nebt-het* is mostly linked with death, but also life and resurrection. The twin sister of Auset, she is credited with helping *Auset* gather the missing pieces of Ausar. *Nebt-het* is the daughter of *Seb* and *Nut* and sibling to Ausar, Auset, and Set. In some instances, where *Nebt-het* and Set are a formal couple, it was thought that Set might murder Anubis because the latter was *Nebt-het*'s illegitimate son fathered by Ausar. In such instances, Auset is credited with raising Anubis as her own son, with influence from Ausar.

As one of the oldest Kemetic gods, Anubis has a long history of worship across varied geographical areas—Greece, Rome, and Italy—and several Gods have been credited with fathering him. Generally, his paternity has been attributed to *Set*, *Ra*, or *Ansar*. *Set/Sutekh/Setesh/Seth*, the Kemetic God often associated with foreigners and foreign lands, is credited with Auset's murder. Set is sibling to *Nebt-het*, Ausar, and *Auset*. Associated with love, war, and kingship, he is often referred to as the God of Chaos and Storms. *Ra/Re* is the oldest and the first of the Kemetic Gods, called the Sun God; he is credited with taking his barge across the sky every day to pilot the Sun.

Ausar/Osiris was the first pharaoh and the son of Seb and Nut. He was sibling to Ausar, *Nebt-het*, and Set. Ausar was murdered by *Set* and resurrected by Auset with the help of *Nebt-het* and Anubis. He then supplanted Anubis as God of the afterlife and underworld.

Anubis has a daughter, *Kabechet/Kebehut*. She is considered the Goddess of purification and assists her father in overseeing the embalming process. *Kabechet* is credited with providing water to wash the entrails of the dead during mummification by Anubis. She is also said to give drinking water to the dead awaiting judgment. *Kabechet* appears several times in passages from the Kemetic *Book of the Coming Forth/Going by Day*.

Nashay M. Pendleton

See also Anukis; Apep

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ANUKIS

In ancient Nubia, the name Anuket, in Greek Anukis, stood for the patron deity of the Nile River. This deity is normally depicted as a beautiful woman wearing a crown of reeds and ostrich feathers in the company of a gazelle.

Like many of the deities who found their way into the Egyptian pantheon from the South, the goddess Anuket was conceived of as a Nubian deity who was adopted by the Egyptians as one of the most important of the deities associated with the Nile River. For many ancient Egyptians, the Nile River seemed to originate at the sixth cataract (inaccurately called the first cataract) because of the vast cauldron of water that swirled around the huge stones in the river. There was a magnificent drop in the river as it made its way downstream from Upper Egypt, and the water appeared to boil in rushing waves and speedy rapids that churned out of the complex of rocks. Other ancient Egyptians knew that the river came from much farther south and that the name of the deity most responsible for it had to be Nubian.

Thus, Anuket took the form of being one of the triad of deities at the great temple of Elephantine. Alongside Khnum, or Khenemu, and Sati, Anuket oversaw the fertility of the lands next to the Nile. Indeed, Anuket was worshipped as the great nourisher of the farms and fields because of the annual inundation of the Nile that deposited the heavy layer of black silt from Upper Egypt and Nubia on the land. The meaning of Anuket is “embrace,” and in many instances one can see that the idea of silt being deposited on the banks of the river was like an embrace of a much-admired friend and benefactor. The people worshipped Anuket as the great giver of the fertile soil because in her natural form as the inundation she surrounded the river and the source of the people’s nourishment.

The main temple of Anuket was in Sahal in Nubia, although she had been worshipped for thousands of years throughout lower Nubia. The temple at Elephantine was important as the most significant temple for Anuket in ancient Egypt. Yet one does read that at the temple of Philae dedicated to Auset (Isis) Anuket was associated with Nebhet and Neith. This is to be understood in the sense that, depending on the nome or region, the people were able to substitute the names of the gods for each other. Thus, it was not uncommon to find that Khnum was seen as a form of Ausar and Sati and Anuket related to Auset and Nebhet.

Clearly, Anuket and Auset may be conflated as when Anuket wears the disk and horned head-dress associated with Auset and is called in the temple texts “the lady of heaven, mistress of all the gods, giver of life and power, and granter of all health and joy of the heart.” Thus, this Nubian goddess is the great cosmic embracer of all lands and people affected by the inundation. She represents the comforting waters of the Nile as a mother’s arms are the comforters of a child.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Apis; Hapi

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APEP

Apep was the god of dissolution, destruction, and nonbeing. Nothing could escape the attention of Apep when he wanted to advance an adversary position. Indeed, in ancient Egypt, Apep was the main adversary to Ra, seeking to destroy Ra, to bring him into nonbeing, and to create havoc in the society. He swallowed his enemies and caused them complete nonexistence; because no one wanted to be nonexistent, Apep was especially feared. The ancient Egyptians believed that Apep was without natural characteristics; indeed, he was outside of the natural world and therefore could not be looked on like the deities or humans. As a being who needed nothing from the natural world, neither sustenance nor companionship, Apep was totally devoid of any respect for humans.

Apep was depicted as a huge snake that existed at the beginning of time in the primieval chaos prior to creation, and he was thought to be impervious to all assaults, attacks, and attempts to defeat him because he was pure evil whose life was that of a malevolent force for all eternity. Often referred to in the tomb texts as an evil lizard, an enemy to the world, and serpent responsible for rebirth, Apep was also called “he who spits” and was connected to the saliva of the goddess Neith.

There is no evidence of Apep prior to the Middle Kingdom; when he is written about, it is as if he existed before the beginning. This situation has caused some scholars to suggest that the interpretations of Apep are based on the chaotic times just after the Pyramid Age. The mythology that speaks about him comes from the funerary texts that speak of the attacks on the great barque of Ra as the sun god made his nightly voyage through the underworld. But each morning as the solar barque was entering into daylight, Apep would attack it again with a terrifying roar that was intended to frighten Ra as it echoed through the darkness. Hindering the barque, keeping it from reaching its destination, was the aim of this malevolent force.

The serpent’s coils were really sandbanks in the river or stones or stumps of trees used to prevent the solar barque from having clear sailing. The activities of Apep were so mischievous that he was

sometimes equated with Seth, the god of chaos. But the character of Apep, unlike that of Seth, was always consistently that of threats and malevolence. Seth could at times show mercy and be beneficent and protective. Actually, he was enlisted by Ra in a battle against Apep, so Seth seemed to have had some redeeming values, whereas Apep did not. Seth was able in fighting against Apep to resist his deadly stare and keep him at bay with his special spear.

Apep sought to undermine the nature of the universe, to disrupt human society, and to dissolve all relationships between the deities and humans. If Apep could, he would cancel the plan of order, harmony, and balance on the Earth. There was nothing to his work but chaos. He had to be fought; there was no other way to remain free and in peace. Thus, it is written in the Book of Gates that Auset with Neith and Serket and a few other deities managed to capture the monster and have the sons of Heru restrain him. Although it was thought that each night Apep was revived to fight once more, the society had to hold chaos at bay.

Apep was said, in one text, to have eaten Ra and later disgorged him as a metaphor of renewal. In the funerary texts, Apep is usually shown with tightly compressed coils to show how large he really was when he uncoiled himself. It is said that the first part of his body was made of flint. In the text, Apep is shown with 12 heads of victims he has swallowed. When Ra has passed by the serpent, the victims are destined to return to the body of Apep until freedom is secured.

There were no cult priests for Apep. There were no temples built in his honor, but he was often on the minds of celebrants for other deities, and sometimes the people would make wax models of Apep and then burn them with fire. Some rituals involved drawing a picture of a monster, putting it in a box, and after spitting on it four times, burning the box. There could be no priests or priestesses used in the ritual to Apep.

Even the Dead had to be protected from Apep. There is a reference to 77 papyri rolls being used to affect a ritual that would allow the people to cut Apep into many pieces. The people protected themselves from this lurking monster by remembering the sacred ceremonies and rituals that protected them.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Waset

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APIS

In Ancient Egypt, the Apis bull was the calf of a cow that was never able to have another calf. It was a calf with distinctive features that made it remarkable and unique. For example, the apis bull was black with a white diamond on its forehead, an image of an eagle on its back, two white hairs on its tail, and a scarab beetle mark under its tongue. Such a bull had to be special in the eyes of the ancient Egyptians. They thought that a flash of lightning had to strike the cow in such a way that the cow conceived a calf with the distinctive marks. This was enough for them to see this calf as a mark of something uniquely sacred. It had been sent from heaven by the deity to interact on Earth with humans.

Nothing persuaded the Egyptians that this was a coincidence; everything suggested to them that this was a divine plan, and they articulated the nature of the bull as a part of their theology. Like the Mnevis and the Buchis bulls, the Apis bull was an Earthly appearance of god. Throughout Kemet's history, there had been animals that had interceded between humans and the deities; there had even been animal representations in stone, wood, and metal of deities, but this was different. Here in the living flesh was an animal that was the incarnate of a god, living and acting like a bull among humans, but being himself divine. This idea would not be seen again until it was seen in human form with Jesus, who was considered flesh that became god. This entry looks at the origins of Apis worship, the major festival,



Bronze statuette group of the king before the Apis bull. From Egypt. Late Period, after 600 BC. The Apis bull was sacred to the god Ptah of Memphis. Only one Apis bull existed at a time, unlike other sacred animals.

Source: British Museum/Art Resource.

and the priestly process of finding new bulls to take the place of Apis.

Origin of the Idea

The Apis bull concept may have originated in Nubia. We know that it was worshipped in the Nile Valley long before it became associated with a particular deity. However, in Egypt, the Apis bull was Ausar on the Earth in full manifestation. Ausar was worshipped as the god of the Dead and resurrection at the end of the Old Kingdom. By then, Apis had been worshipped in Nubia and Egypt since at least the first dynasty. Some authors think that the Apis bull might be predynastic, a position that seems quite probable given the data regarding its presence at the first dynasty. Later, as Mnevis was Ra-Atum, so Buchis was Ra, and Apis the resurrected Ausar. These three bulls selected for their special markings and physical characteristics were gods on the Earth.

When the Apis died, he was mourned, ritualized, mummified, and buried with the same pomp and pageantry that one associated with the death and burial of a per-aa. Plutarch claims that the Apis bull was worshipped because the people believed him to be Ausar. This black bull, the mighty bull, the Great Black One, was Apis-Ausar, the soul of Ausar. Sacrifices to the Apis bull had to be made with oxen that were of uniform brown or white color; they could have no blemish on their hides. The Great Black One had to have clean, unblemished animals for the sacrifice to be acceptable.

The ancient Egyptians kept the Apis bull in Mennefer, the capital city and chief religious center in the north of the country. In this city, Per-aa Psammaticus built a grand court with columns of 12 cubits in height in which the bull was kept prior to being paraded in public for the people to see and behold the living Ausar. Psammaticus also built two stables that were connected to the court of the Apis bull. These two stables for the animal

or animals had a vestibule where the people could come to see the Apis and the mother of the Apis.

The Great Festival to the Black One

The ancient Egyptians believed that it was necessary to honor the Apis bull outdoors to establish a connection between the people and the real living Ausar. During this great festival, which lasted for 7 days, multitudes of believers would come from far distant towns and villages to get a glimpse of the Apis bull.

Masses of people would gather in Mennefer from every possible place to honor the Apis, to see the Apis with their own eyes, and to be healed if possible by just touching those who had seen the bull. Those who were sick, infirmed, or otherwise afflicted with psychological or physical problems would congregate in the city for the 7-day festival. Priests and priestesses in multicolored clothes made of animal skins and linens would lead the sacred Apis bull in a solemn procession through the streets of Mennefer so that the people could see with their own eyes the god in the flesh. Parents would put their children forward, often lifting them high so they could see over the crowds, in the hope that their children would smell the bull. It was thought that if a child smelled the bull, that child would have the power of predicting the future. Such a gift would serve the child and his family well, thus the intense desire to see and smell the Apis bull.

The priests who kept the court and temple of the Apis bull also ran the oracle of Apis. Those people who wanted to consult the living image of Ausar could, with the proper permission, be allowed to ask the Apis bull for his opinion. If the bull were consulted, food would be offered to him, and if the food was accepted, then the omen was good; but if the bull rejected the food, then the omen was bad.

A New Apis

Because bulls did not live forever, the priests who attended the Apis had to be ready to search for another bull with the proper signs once the Apis died. Some have argued that the priests usually killed by drowning the Apis once it reached 25 years of age. A major funeral was held for the

bull. It was then mummified, and the sarcophagus was taken by sledge through the town with the priests dressed in leopard skins wailing and sobbing to their god.

When the new bull was discovered, it was taken to the City of the Nile and kept for 40 days, during which time priestesses were the only ones who could go near the bull. When the time was completed, the bull was transported to Mennefer on a boat with a golden cabin made especially for the Apis. When the new Apis appeared, the people greeted it with as much joy as they had shown sorrow for the loss of the last Apis bull. All is restored and the Great Black One lives forever as Ausar lives forever.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Animals

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APULEIUS

In the second century of the Christian Era, Lucius Apuleius wrote an account of the religion of Isis that readers have loved. Apuleius was knowledgeable of the ancient customs of Egypt and Greece and gave his attention to trying to recast the information from past thinkers. He is known for his interest in Platonic philosophy, magical formulas, and historical mysteries. In fact, he was charged with casting magical spells on his wife and defended himself in a work called *Apologia*. However, for African scholars and those interested in African religion, he is most famous for his book called *Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass*.

During the Roman Empire, the African deity Auset, called Isis by the Greeks, became one of the most celebrated of all goddesses. She was worshipped, exalted, and praised in every part of the Roman world. Originating in Upper Egypt,

this black goddess became the face of woman throughout the lands where Rome ruled. In effect, Africa had seduced the Roman Empire with the worship of Auset.

Apuleius was fascinated by her beauty, power, and strength. Thus, in response to his interest in African and Eastern religions, he wrote *Metamorphoses*, which contains so many seeds of mythological and romance tales of the Europeans that one could almost claim that the source, for example, of Cinderella, is the Cupid and Psyche encounter in *Metamorphoses*. Yet it is in the concentration of the religion of Auset that Apuleius makes his most important contribution.

In the book, the Egyptian deity appears to Apuleius, claiming to be all goddesses. Her representation to him is that she is the name of the goddesses of the world. No goddess exists without being Auset. She is the Queen of the Sky, and she is the Queen of Queens, the Lady of all Ladies, the one and all of all goddesses. He writes that when he ended a prayer and told Auset what he needed, he was exhausted and fell asleep. Soon, however, there came to him the venerable face of the goddess herself, coming out of the sea and standing before him in full form. He tried to describe what he was seeing. It was impossible to make a complete description because his eloquence was inadequate. Nevertheless, she was a powerful figure with an abundance of hair, probably a huge Afro style as one sees in the wig room of the Cairo Museum, and many garlands of flowers stuck into her hair.

Apuleius describes Auset as having a disk in the shape of a small mirror on her head, and in one hand she held the light of the moon and serpents and, in the other, blades of corn. Her silk robe shimmered with many colors. He is struck by the complexity of this image of Auset because she bears with her flowers and fruits, a timbrel of brass, and a cup of gold. Furthermore, her mouth held the serpent Aspis, and her sweet feet were covered with shoes laced with palms.

Then, according to Apuleius, the goddess Auset spoke words to the effect that she had come to him because of his weeping and prayers. She also told him that she was called by many names, but that she was the natural mother of all things, mistress of all elements, governor of all progeny, chief of all divine things, principal of gods, and light of

all goddesses. Establishing further her authority to speak and to rule, Auset told him that she controlled the planets in the air, winds of the sea, and the silences of hell. He wrote in *Metamorphoses* that the deity told him that her divinity was adored in all the world in various manners and different custom and by many people.

In fact, the Phrygians called her Pssinuntica, the mother of the gods; the Athenians called her Cecropian Artemis; the Cyprians called her Paphian Aphrodite; the Candians called her Dictyanna; the Sicilians called her Stygian Proserpine; and the Eleusians called her Mother of the Corn. But that was not all of the names by which she was called. She said that some called her Juno, others Bellona of the Battles, and still others Hecate. However, the Ethiopians and the Egyptians called her Auset.

Clearly, Apuleius is attesting to the strength, pervasiveness, and legitimacy of Queen Auset, the head of one of the most heavily propagated religions of the Roman Empire. His book, *Metamorphoses*, remains one of the best accounts of how this African deity was seen outside of Africa.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Auset

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ASAMANDO

According to Akan cosmology, the Asamando is the ancestral world or the land of the spirits. Whereas the Akan conceive of the entire universe as essentially spiritual, the Asamando is regarded as the specific site where the spirits of ancestors dwell permanently. Revealed religions such as Christianity regard the heavens or the sky as the location of God and the hosts of angels, whereas for the Akan, the Asamando lies beneath the Earth. This belief in such an “underworld” sheds light on many Akan ritual practices, including dancing and pouring of libation, as the Earth reflects their connection to the spiritual realm.

For the Akan, *owuo* (physical death) does not mark the end of life. It represents the transition from Earthly life to spiritual life, a transition that each individual must make to reach the Asamando and join the community of ancestors or Nsamanfo. Attaining ancestorhood is one of the primary purposes and goals of life. Thus, important to an understanding of the Asamando are the Akan conceptualizations of humanity, life, and death.

The Akan believe that each individual consists of certain material and spiritual elements. The *honam* (body) and *mogya* (blood; connection to matrilineage) represent the material or physical components, whereas the *kra* (life force/soul), *honhom* (breath of Divine Life), and *sunsum* (spirit; connection to patrilineage) represent the spiritual or nonphysical components. Nyame (Creator) bestows these material and spiritual elements on people at conception and birth; however, when they “die,” the *honam* and *mogya* join *Asase Yaa* (Mother Earth) while the *kra*, *honhom*, and *sunsum* return to Nyame. Although the Akan believe that the universe and all things, animate and inanimate within it, are endowed with varying degrees of *sunsum*, on an individual basis, the *sunsum* is the basis of one’s character and personality and originates from the father. Upon *owuo*, it is the *sunsum* that transitions to the Asamando and awaits nomination to the status of Nsamanfo.

Because the Akan calendar operates on a 40- to 42-day cycle, the Akan believe that it takes at least one cycle before the *sunsum* finally departs from the world of the living and transitions to the Asamando. *Ayie* (Akan funeral rites) are taken quite seriously as

it becomes the responsibility of the deceased’s family members to perform proper and timely customary rites as to ensure that the *sunsum* can properly transition to the Asamando; otherwise it can transform into an unsettled and malevolent spirit and may come back to harm the family.

Once the *sunsum* has made its transition, depending on the degree to which the individual lived a righteous life, his or her *sunsum* may be sent back to the Earthly realm to fulfill his or her *nkrabea* (destiny) via the *honam* of a newborn. In this way, the conceptualization of the Asamando has further implications for the Akan life cycle, in that as the elder members of society seek entrance *into* the Asamando, its newest members arrive *from* the Asamando.

The Asamando is of particular importance to the Akan cosmology because it provides the foundation for the collective conscience or ideas of morality. People attempt to live righteously so that when their time comes, they will be admitted to the Asamando.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Akan; *Asase Yaa*; Nyame; *Sunsum*

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ASANTE

The Asante are one of about a dozen groups that make up the Akan people located in the modern state of Ghana, West Africa. They are believed to have migrated from the area of the old empire of Ghana after the spread of Islam in the North and parts of West Africa during the 13th century. The Asante settled in the Adanse region probably in the 14th century before spreading out and, in the process, creating more towns during the 15th century. This entry discusses their history and religious beliefs.

Historical Background

The Asante Nation was composed of several clans ruled by individual kings. There were many petty wars between the various states, which weakened the Asante Nation. As a result, the neighboring Denkyira Nation conquered the Asante and forced them to pay tribute to her until 1701. The Denkyira controlled vast amounts of gold mines. This helped establish the nation's power.

Under the leadership of the *Asantehene* (king of the Asante) Nana Osei Tutu, several Asante clans were consolidated through conquest, and the Asante Nation eventually defeated its Denkyira overlords. The Asante nation was on its way to becoming a powerful force in the region. It was now in control of what would soon be called by the British, the "Gold Coast." Through diplomacy and conquest, the Asante defeated other kingdoms, further expanding the Asante Empire.

Osei Tutu's celebrated priest, Anokye, created the Golden Stool, which was believed to possess the spirit of the nation. The Golden Stool became the symbol of Asante national unity and remains so to this day. Kumasi became the center of the Asante Nation. Nana Opoku Ware succeeded Osei Tutu in 1719. Opoku Ware reigned for 30 years and was responsible for expanding Asante boundaries even farther.

The Asante nation was so powerful that, during the early part of the 19th century, European powers that occupied forts along the coast paid rent to the Asante king. European visitors were immensely impressed with the Asante Nation's size, wealth, and the complexity of its government and social systems. After developing an economic and military alliance with the British, the Asante came into conflict with these "friends" in 1806 for the first time. The Asante and the British would engage in several wars that became known as the 100-Year War.

On January 17, 1895, under the leadership of Nana Prempeh I, the Asante prepared to submit to British rule. To the surprise of the *Asantehene*, he, the *Asantehema* (queen mother), several members of the royal family, and several chiefs were arrested and sent into exile. Adding to this insult, in 1900, the British governor demanded to occupy the Golden Stool, the soul of the Asante nation. Already shamed by allowing their king to be

arrested, the Asante were strengthened by this arrogant and disrespectful demand.

Nana Yaa Asantewa, who was a queen mother, assumed the leadership of the Asante because no male chief was willing to do so. Nana Yaa Asantewa led the Asante army in what became known as the Yaa Asantewa War. The British governor, his soldiers, and their families were held up in the fort at Kumase until their escape in June of that year. After 3 months of fighting, British reinforcements arrived and subdued Nana Yaa Asantewa and her army. In March 1901, Nana Yaa Asantewa and 15 others were sent into exile and joined Nana Prempeh at the Seychelles Island. Thirty-one others were imprisoned in Elmina Castle. The British officially annexed the Asante Nation in 1902.

Nana Prempeh returned from exile in 1924 as a private citizen, but was nonetheless received by the Asante as their king. In 1935, the British government restored the Asante confederacy. This confederacy would remain strong and agitated for self-rule.

Religious Beliefs

For the Asante, like all Akan peoples (or all African peoples for that matter), religion is at the center of their existence. The Asante involve religion in all aspects of life. Religion is deeply embedded in Akan culture because there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Life is a profoundly religious experience and phenomenon. Religion, in the Akan context, is also characterized as being communal and not individual.

Well before the arrival of Europeans and their Christian religion, the Akan developed a belief in a supreme, omnipresent being. The Asante believe in a single God that created everything in the universe, including the lesser deities. They call the supreme god "Nyame." The creator is referred to by using many titles: the Great One, the Great Spirit, the Great Ancestor, Omnipotent, Infinite, and so on. The spiritual presence of Nyame is in all things. As such, the Asante venerate the spiritual presence in rivers, trees, rocks, and so on. However, they do not worship those objects, but only the spiritual entities that use those objects as their abode.

The Asante-Akan, like most Africans, do not believe in proselytizing. A child, when placed on his or her back, discovers Nyame's existence, they believe. They will see the sky, which is the Creator's abode. Nyame resides far away, outside of the reach of humans. The Akan also believe that goodness is the chief characteristic of the All Powerful One. It is believed that Nyame did not create evil, but rather deities and human beings. Nyame's creations created evil.

Africans believe that the soul is an immaterial part of their existence. The soul survives death. It is the soul that must account to Nyame in the afterlife. The soul is the Creator's spark of life. Therefore, there is a divine essence in all human beings.

It is no exaggeration to state that religion is present in all things. Religion dictates the value that the Akan people place on the collective over the individual. It further informs the Akan of their morals and values as they relate to human interaction with each other as well as the universe. Even aesthetics, the Asante perception of beauty, rests on the Asante's religious beliefs. Kinship ties and marriage are predicated on the religious values of the Akan as well.

The role of ancestors is also prominently featured in Akan religion. Ancestors are profoundly important for the Asante. They represent the link between human beings and the spiritual world. In fact, their ancestors reside in the spiritual world. Ancestors are honored and revered, but not worshipped, although they are believed to possess spiritual power and to be interested in the welfare of their descendants. They are ever present and willing to assist in human society.

Adisa A. Alkebulan

See also Nyame

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ASANTEHENE

The Asantehene is the paramount king of the Asante people of Ghana. In previous eras, the Asantehene had far more power than he holds today. Now the kingship referred to as the King of Asante is more symbolic and ceremonial than in the past, when the Asantehene held the power of life or death in his hands. This entry describes the leader's significance, the Golden Stool that he is charged with protecting, and the mode of selection.

The Supreme Ruler

Opemsuo Osei Tutu I was the first king to be crowned as the supreme ruler, the king of kings of all Asante. There were regional and town kings before Osei Tutu I, but no one exercised all authority over the whole of Asante until the enstoolment of Osei Tutu I in 1701. Since that time, 16 paramount kings of Asante have ruled the nation. In 1999, Osei Tutu II became the Asantehene.

The Asante people are a nation of the Akan linguistic group, and this group is divided into clans. There are eight clans among the Akan, and all groups of the Akan possess the same clans, which are Oyoko, Aduana, Ekuona, Bretuo, Asene, Agona, Asona, and Asakyiri. Each clan is said to have descended from one of the original ancestresses of the Akan people. There are several groups of Akan—the Baule, Fante, Akyem, Adanse, and Denkyira—and these groups are viewed as separate from each other, but they all have the same structure of an Amanhene, that is, king of the nation. For example, there is an Okyenhene for the Akyem and an Adansehene for the Adanse. However, no kingship has been established with as much pomp, pageantry, and wealth as that of the Asantehene.

The Asantehene is the leader of the nation in the spiritual response to the Sika 'dwa and the master of all religious and cultural celebrations and practices. Among the Asante, there is the belief that the Asantehene is the direct descendent of Osei Tutu I, and therefore he has the responsibility to maintain the nation by evoking and reaffirming its beliefs in the ideals that preserve national life.



King Otumfuo Opoku Ware II arrives at his Silver Jubilee celebration in a sumptuous palanquin surrounded by twirling umbrellas and with his retinue of 150 Asante kings and bearers (August 1995). Carried before him are the swords of state, whose handles are covered with gold leaf. Beside the palanquin march important clan leaders. Immensely powerful in their own right, they guide and protect their monarch when he appears before his Asante nation.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher.

It should be clear that, even during the height of the power of the Asantehene, the king could not serve with absolute power. He had to share legislative and administrative power with the large Asante bureaucracy. Nevertheless, only the Asantehene could pronounce the death sentence. In earlier years, the Asantehene actually went into battle at the head of his soldiers, but during the 19th century, the fighting was handled by the War Ministry.

With the Asantehene, the Asante nation exercised enormous bureaucratic control over its subjects. Obirempons, the supreme judges, alongside other administrators served to mediate the power of the Asantehene. Although they

were “big” people, no one was bigger than the Asantehene. The Asantehene was also the ruler of the capital city of Kumasi; hence, he was the Kumasehene, king of the most significant city in the Asante nation.

The Golden Stool

The Asante people developed a complex administrative, legal, and symbolic structure to support their civil society. Thus, the Asantehene is sometimes referred to as “He who sits on the Sika’dwa,” meaning the occupier of the Golden Stool. It is never sat on, but the Asantehene is the one who protects it, keeps it secure, and maintains

it. As the object that characterizes the unity and courage of the people, deriving from one of its most legendary meetings of its most important prophet Okomfo Anokye and the first Asantehene, the Golden Stool, which was commanded to come down from the sky by Anokye, is the soul of Asante. Thus, the Asantehene must always pledge allegiance to the Sika 'dwa.

Nothing is more important to the Asante people than the Golden Stool. Consequently, during the national celebration of the Golden Stool, when the people come out to express their solidarity with truth, freedom and vitality of spirit, and fertility of their seeds, human and physical, they proclaim at this great Odwira Festival all that the stool has meant to them. They are led by the Asantehene, who proclaims in these words:

Friday, the Stool of Kings, I sprinkle water
on you, may your power return sharp and
fierce. Grant that when I and another meet
in battle, grant that it may be
as when I met Denkyira; you let me cut off
his head
as when I met Akyem; you let me cut off his
head
as when I met Domma; you let me cut off
his head
as when I met Tekyiman; you let me cut off
his head
as when I met Gyaman; you let me cut off
his head.
As the edges of the year have met, I pray for
life.
May the nation prosper. May women bear
children.
May the hunters kill meat for food.
We who dig for gold, let us get gold to dig,
and grant
that I get some for the upkeep of my
kingship.

Selection Process

When a new king is required, the Asantehemaa or Queen Mother chooses the person for the role, and he is then selected by the council of elders and, with their permission, becomes the Asantehene. In the

meantime, between the death of the king and the appointment of the king, the Mamponghehene, the king of Mampong, the second most important ruler of the nation, serves as the regent Asantehene.

The Asante people take the leadership seriously and therefore have several forbidden activities for the Asantehene. No one can be king who is impotent, infertile, a gambler, deaf, a criminal, or leprous. The idea is that the king reflects the best ideals of the people's vitality, beauty, and power.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Alafin of Oyo

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ASASE YAA

Preceded only by Nyame (Creator) in power and importance, Asase Yaa (also referred to as Aberewa [old woman] and Mother Earth) is the second Great Spirit revered within Akan cosmology. The Akan regard the earth as a female spirit because of her fertility and power to bring forth life and further personalize her as a mother because human beings depend on her for their continual nurturance and sustenance. She is of paramount importance to the Akan because it is through Asase Yaa, by way of libation and dance, that they gain access to and maintain familial connections with the ancestors.

Named according to the Akan tradition of "day-naming," she is most often referred to as Asase (Earth) Yaa (female born on Thursday) because most Akan believe that Nyame created Earth on a Thursday. However, among the Fante, who believe that Nyame created Earth on a Friday, she is known as Asase Efuwa (female born on Friday). Traditionally, among those who call her Asase Yaa, Thursday is considered a day of rest, on which there is no tilling of the land, no burying of the dead, and all acts that may

desecrate the Earth are avoided. Those who call her Asase Efu observe this sacred day Friday. Generally, on any given day, one will not manipulate or agitate the land in any way without her prior permission, gained exclusively through the pouring of libation, because serious consequences are believed to befall those who violate protocol.

Asase Yaa is called in libations (the ceremonial pouring of liquid), immediately after Nyame, and it is with her name that the first offering is made to the ancestors. Thus, because libation is the vehicle through which the Akan initiate all rituals, traditional ceremonies, and political proceedings, Asase Yaa is essentially as prevalent in the spiritual culture of the Akan as is Nyame.

Reverence for her is further manifest in a multitude of Akan rituals. During an infant's outdoor-ing (naming) ceremony, once the complete name is given, the child is placed on a mat to symbolize thanksgiving to Asase Yaa for sustaining its life and to the ancestors for their eternal protection and guidance. During ayie (funeral rites), libation is poured specifically to Asase Yaa not only to ask her permission for digging the grave, but also to ask her to accept and protect the body of the person to be buried. Asase Yaa is also known as the upholder of truth, and, as such, in everyday situations, those suspected to be less than truthful are challenged to touch the tip of their tongue to the Earth as evidence of their honesty.

There are no shrines dedicated to Asase Yaa nor are their priests to serve her because she is not an abosom (deity) whom people may consult through divination. The Akan believe that everyone has the ability to show her reverence, whether through libation or simply keeping the Earth clean, and that her abundance is accessible to us all.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Abosom; Akan; Nyame

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ASHE

In the sacred creation narratives of the Yoruba nation, in the spiritual tradition of Ifa, Ashe (Axe, Ase) refers to the heavenly and godly force, also called Olodumare, used to bring about the universe. In renderings of traditional Yoruba cosmology, the first spiritual power that existed was the energy of Ashe. Ashe, using thought, determined to take material form, thus becoming the Creator, Olodumare. As God, Ashe then exists at the center of all that is and all that will be in the world. Olodumare thus willed itself into being from its own divine essence (the self-existent being). Olodumare uses its Ashe, which lies at the core of its being, to create all things. Olodumare infused this original force into the whole of creation, including its own manifestation of equal male and female source energy (Olodumare, male; Olorun, female).

Varying interpretations of the concept confirm that Ashe is a primary example of an organizing force that accounts for the origins and nature of humans and the universe. Ashe is believed to embody "divine power, authority, order, vital force." Ashe has been defined as a combination of "grace and power." Ashe is "God itself. Everything that is shared in that divine essence and is, as a result, sacred." Ashe is a fluid concept, in that it bridges the space between the seen and unseen worlds. It exists in all things, yet it can be an active or passive force. Ashe is always present and cannot be destroyed. It is understood that a priest or priestess could summon the presence of the orisha to increase his or her Ashe. The concept is also related to the idea of "soul" in the acquisition of the dynamic uses of power involving the material world. In this African spiritual category, Ashe exercises control over objects. One sees it as the indwelling vital energy.

The Yoruba concept of Ashe spread outside of the African continent through the enslavement of African people during the 18th and 19th centuries. European colonial restrictions on African culture and religion were unable to suppress the migration of intellectual and spiritual ideas. Ashe may have been the most important phenomenon to survive the Middle Passage. Within the legacy of the transplantation of African culture in the

Americas and around the world, Yoruba religion continues to thrive and develop through the forms of Santeria, Vodun, and Condomble.

In the global expressions of contemporary Yoruba religion, Ashe continues to be an important concept of ritual expression, sacred empowerment, and critical analysis. Because of the nature of the concept of Ashe, connections to the quantum field theory of physics where Ashe is a form of charged energy that seeks wholeness with the Supreme Being, Olodumare are often made. Ashe then is not only a universal source of energy, which commands and orders the world, but can also be used as a form of utterance (as in the sense of Nommo), which praises and confirms spiritual authority.

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See also Ankh; Nkwa

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ATEN

In ancient Egypt during the Middle Kingdom, the word *Aten*, also spelled Aton, was originally used to describe the orb or radiant disk of the sun. By the mid-New Kingdom times, a solar god named Aten was well known and established among the other Egyptian deities, although it was not until the 18th dynasty of Egypt that the worship of the Aten emerged. During the reign of King Amenhotep III, the worship of the Aten was

encouraged. Throughout the history of ancient Egypt, from c. 1550 BC, when the Egyptians finally drove out the Hyksos from their land, the god Amon-Ra had been given credit for this victory and was elevated to the status of chief of all Egyptians' traditional gods and from whom the early Pharaohs claimed descent.

This status was held by Amon-Ra until the ascendancy of Amenhotep III's son, Amenhotep IV (1352–1336 BC), to the Egyptian throne. During the fifth year of his reign, Amenhotep IV changed his name from Amenhotep, which meant "Amon is satisfied," to Akhenaten, which meant "Glory of the Aten." At this same time, the minor god Aten was elevated to the rank of the state god of Egypt, replacing Amon-Ra.

Instituting the worship of the Aten was the apex of religious reformation ushered in by King Akhenaten. Although Egyptians had always worshipped a chief god, they had also worshipped numerous other gods and goddesses. Akhenaten imposed the worship of the Aten on Egyptian subjects as the sole god to be worshipped. He enforced a new form of strict monotheism, which denied any rivals to the god Aten. Not only did Akhenaten forbid the worship of the former state god Amon-Ra, he closed the temples dedicated to Amon-Ra, persecuted and dispossessed the priesthood of Amon-Ra, and removed all inscriptions of other gods from public temples, monuments, and other building structures. Akhenaten proclaimed himself the priest of Aten and the god's only son. He also had new open-roofed temples built to reflect the essence of the Aten's radiance and power.

The Egyptian gods were traditionally represented by an animal head atop a human body. Usually, the animal chosen to represent a god reflected the character of the god. The earliest representation of the god Aten was in the form of a falcon-headed figure wearing the disk of the sun on its head. As part of Akhenaten's religious reform, the Aten was no longer portrayed as half animal and half human, but as a solar orb, a sun globe with long rays, each ray depicted as long stick-like arms ending in tiny human hands. The hands were sometimes shown holding the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for life, the "ankh," which was a cross shaped like a T with a loop at the top, or the hands were shown open, extending his power and grace to the royal family and to all humanity.

The Aten sometimes wore, even as the sun globe, the royal uaeus, which was the sacred asp that was worn on the headdress of divinities and royal personages of ancient Egypt. This was the only manner in which the Aten was allowed to be depicted during the reign of Akhenaten. Because the Aten represented the sun shining at its brightest, no idols were fashioned in the image of the Aten. Akhenaten declared that the Aten's form could not be captured because he was the essence of the sun's creative power and, therefore, his form could not be imagined.

Akhenaten also built a new capital city, named Akhetaton, which means "Horizon of Aten," for the worship of the god Aten. The former capital city, Waset, had been the residence of the previous god, Amon-Ra. The King did not want to initiate the worship of Aten in a city where other gods had been worshipped; therefore, he moved his capital to a location midway between the cities of Waset and Memphis, where Aten could be worshipped on virgin soil. Today this capital city is known as Tell el-Amarna. The term *Amarna* is used to describe Akhenaten's extreme ideas in religion and art.

The worship of the Aten was carried out in the city of Akhetaten, where the Pharaoh had two temples built in honor of the god. Aten was worshipped as the creative energy of all life. Worship consisted of offerings of cakes, fruits, flowers, and the reciting of hymns in honor of the Aten. However, respect for Akhenaten's god seemed to have been only among the ruling elite. There is no archeological evidence that the ordinary Egyptian personally worshipped the Aten. The ordinary Egyptian populace often had little to do with the religious customs of Egypt except on religious high days and holidays, when the statue of the gods would be carried in procession outside of the temple walls. They were only affected by the closing of the temples and the termination of the priesthood of Amon-Ra. Artifacts were found even in the capital city of Akhetaten, which revealed that people still worshipped the older traditional gods of Egypt.

The most important document discovered that provides some detailed insights into this new religion is the "Hymn to the Aten," which was said to have been written by Pharaoh Akhenaten. This hymn is among the most famous writings of ancient Egypt. It resembles earlier hymns to the

sun god and is similar in its imagery to Psalm 104 in the Bible. The hymn extols the Aten as the one and only true god, and it also confirms the idea of the Aten as a universal god of all peoples, not just of the Egyptians.

King Akhenaten's break with the traditional customs of Egypt did not become permanent. The worship of the Aten as the chief god in Egypt lasted only as long as King Akhenaten was alive. Although Akhenaten devoted his life and his reign to the worship of the Aten, after his death, the new religion was rejected, the old gods reestablished, and the city of Akhetaten was abandoned. Akhenaten's concept of solar worship did not survive, but the influence on art and thinking of this period of Egypt's history continues to this day to fascinate historians.

When a new King took the throne of Egypt, the Aten's status of state god came to an end, the capital city was moved back to Waset, and sacrifices were once again made to the god Amon-Ra.

Brenda J. Washington

See also Amen

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ATUM

Atum was one of the earliest names for the divine in its capacity as creator-god in ancient Egypt. Equally important, the conceptualization of Atum represents the earliest example of humans developing an ontology or metaphysical philosophy to explain the nature of being and existence. The earliest reference

to Atum in ancient Egyptian literature is in the Pyramid Texts and is dated to circa 2350 BC. An analysis of the Pyramid Texts demonstrates that the deity Atum served at least three primary functions in ancient Egyptian religious and philosophical thought: the progenitor of the Heliopolitan cosmogony, the author of divine kingship, and, as already indicated, the primary ontological category by which all matter, phenomena, and life materialized from a nonexistent primordial state.

The word *Atum* has been variously translated by Egyptologists as “The All,” “The Complete One,” and the “Undifferentiated One.” The word is also a variation of the Egyptian verb *tm*, meaning “to not be,” communicating the ideas of preexistence and precreation. According to ancient Egyptian cosmogonical narratives, Atum emerges from the primieval waters of Nun to inaugurate the initial creative act of creation. Hence, Atum was often aligned with the Egyptian concept of *sp tpy*, meaning the “First Time,” the infinitesimal moment at which uncreated infinity becomes an ever-evolving existence of countless beings and life forms.

Atum was also central to one of the premier philosophical traditions in ancient Egypt, the Heliopolitan cosmology, based in the city of *Iunu* and called the city of the sun by the ancient Greeks because of its principal dedication to the deity Ra. Ra was frequently characterized as the active mode of creative energy, whereas Atum was described as its inert aspect, therefore rendering the early name of Atum-Ra as indicated in the Pyramid Texts.

The Heliopolitan cosmological school was centered on nine cosmic deities, including Atum who was their “father” and originator. The nine “gods,” often called the *Ennead* in ancient Greek and the *Psedjet* in ancient Egyptian, represented the totality of the plurality of all life. The Pyramid Texts refer to Atum as the creator of four pairs of dyadically gendered male and female gods functioning as complementary opposites: Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Ausar and Auset, and Neb-Het and Set. Together these deities formed the basic divine community of ancient Egyptian cosmology.

Atum as a supreme divinity of creation was also the authorizer of kingship. In ancient Egyptian political philosophy, the office of kingship functioned as a position emanating from the power of divine mandate. All kings were viewed

as the offspring of the gods. In particular, kings were presented as the actual sons of the primary creator-gods such as Ra, Amen, and, of course, Atum. The Pyramid Texts reiterates this theme when it says, “O Atum, raise this King up to you, enclose him within your embrace, for he is your son of your body forever.” By the New Kingdom period of ancient Egyptian history, Atum’s role as authorizer of kingship was eclipsed by Amen and Ra, yet the god always remained a primary deity for how ancient Egyptians explained their primordial beginnings.

Salim Faraji

See also Ennead; Ogdoad

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AUSAR

Ausar (Asar, Wasiri, Osiris) is an ancient Kemetic deity whose center of worship and study was Abydos, a town in the eighth *nome* of Egypt. Ausar became the central deity in all mortuary rituals. Ausar is ruler of the underworld (Dwt, Duat) and is the personification of the resurrection principle. He is also associated with agricultural renewal.

In addition, Ausar is one of the main figures in the creation myth, which includes Auset, Heru, Set, and Nebhet. The story contained in this myth (commonly called the Ausarian Drama) is the basis for many rituals and festivals and is alluded

to several times in the *Prt em Hrw (Book of the Coming Forth by Day)*. Ausar became a central figure in priestly life, and his shrine is located in one of the oldest predynastic cities in Ta-Merri, often referred to as Anu, Abju, or Abydos.

Origins

Many have speculated as to the origins of Ausar. The most prominent explanation is that he was imported from Waset (Thebes) and brought into Anu. Ausar is not attested to by name until the 50th dynastic period in the Pyramid Texts. The probable antiquity of many of the Pyramid Texts makes it plausible that he was recognized at an earlier period, perhaps under the name Khenti Amentiu (Lord of Amenta or Lord of the Perfect Black; Amen—the Hidden One—blackness).

A central element of the later Ausarian myth, the pairing of Heru and Set, is attested from the middle of the 1st dynasty, predating the first attestations of Ausar by six centuries or more. Abbe Emile Amelineau, a French Egyptologist, discovered a series of tombs in present-day Om El Gaab (Anu), in which the Tomb of Ausar was found. This makes probable the notion that Ausar may have been a real-life personage who was later deified by the people of Kemet.

Over the centuries, the temple of Ausar was successively rebuilt or enlarged by Pepi I, Ahmose I, Thutmose III, Ramses III, and Ahmose II. Statuettes of Ausar have been found as far away as in the Shaba region of the Republic of the Congo in Central Africa.

Worship

Among the centers of worship for Ausar were the temples at Abju, 8th Nome, Upper Egypt; Saqqara, 1st Nome, Lower Egypt; Hut-Heryib/Athribis, 1st Nome, Lower Egypt; Djedu, 9th Nome, Lower Egypt; Taposiris Magna, west of Alexandria, Lower Egypt; Djan'net Tanis, 19th Nome, Lower Egypt; Bigeh, 1st Nome, Upper Egypt; Waset, 4th Nome, Upper Egypt; and at Karnak there were five chapels built for Ausar.

The earliest depictions of Ausar are of his head and torso on a block during the 5th dynasty of King Isesi. Ausar's name is written in Mdw Nṯr (hieroglyphics) on the block, and above it the

symbol of an eye (Iri), which means “to do” or “to make,” and of a throne (As). Ausar is often depicted in human form, usually in a black or green color. When he is depicted in the black color, it is a representation of the people of Kemet, as well as the richness of the Earth. Often he is depicted green as a symbol of the resurrection principle in agriculture. At times he is in Wi (mummy) form with his arms protruding out holding the signs of kingship: staff and flail. The Atef crown (White) of Upper Kemet is also associated with Ausar.

The Djed or Tet symbol is used in association with Ausar. Djed is usually to mean “stability” or “steadfastness.” The Djed pillar is the earliest known symbol associated with Ausar and may actually be predynastic. In the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, often called the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, it is said that the Djed pillar is the vertebrae of Ausar. Some believe that the pillar is actually a pole in which grain was tied. It is often seen used in decorative friezes, together with the Ankh and Was sceptre hieroglyphs, but just as frequently with the “Tyet” knot, symbol of Auset. This may be the reason that Ausar is often spelled Wasiri because his early depictions included the Was sceptre.

Ausar was also associated with the Sahu or Sah (Orion) star system of the southern sky. Sahu is a constellation in the equatorial zone, visible to the naked eye thanks to its brilliant stars, which form a quadrilateral enclosing a shape like a “T.”

Myth

According to Kemetic mythology, Ausar was murdered by his brother, Set, and then brought back to life by the love of his sister and wife, Auset. The love of Auset is symbolic of regeneration and the promise of eternal life. The cycle of destruction, death, and rebirth was repeated each year in the annual flood of the Nile, the river that provided the essential ingredients needed to sustain life, giving birth to one of the first civilizations. Ausar and Auset had a son named Heru. Together they represent a holy family: god, goddess, and divine child. In the New Kingdom, the main temples throughout Ta-Merri venerated a holy family modeled on the Ausar, Auset, and Heru triad.

Plutarch describes Ausar as a human king who taught the craft of husbandry, established a code of laws, and bade men to honor the ancestors. During initiations, initiates would take on the name of Ausar in addition to their own name (i.e., Ausar Ani) as a way to associate themselves with the dead king. Mystery plays were used to honor Ausar among the masses, although special rituals were reserved for the priests in the temples.

Ceremonies and Festivals

Recognition of Ausar was constant, and it represented the way the Kemetic people responded to the presence of the divine among them. Ausar was written into the fabric of the society because of the holy days reserved for him in the culture. Among the celebrations were the following:

- 1st Epagomenal Day—Birthday of Ausar
- 25th Thuti—Ausarian Mysteries
- 13th Paopi—Day of Satisfying the Hearts of the Ennead
- 16th Paopi—Feast of Ausar
- 19th Paopi—Ceremony of Raising the Djed Pillar
- 30th Paopi—Kemet in festival for Ra, Ausar, and Heru
- 12th Hethara—Ausar goes forth to Abju
- 11th Koiak—Feast of Wasir in Abju
- 12th Koiak—Day of Transformation into the Bennu Bird
- 13th Koiak—Day of Going Forth of Het-Hert and the Ennead
- 14th Koiak—Coming forth of the Bennu transformed
- 12th Koiak—Raising the Djed Pillar
- 30th Koiak—The Ennead feast in the House of Ra, Heru, and Wasir
- 18th Tybi—Going forth of the Netjeru of Abju
- 17th Mechir—Day of keeping the things of Ausar in the hands of Anpu
- 6th Pamenot—Festival of Jubilation for Ausar in Per-Ausar
- 28th Pamenot—Feast of Ausar in Abju

30th Pamenot—Feast of Ausar in Per-Ausar; The Doorways of the Horizon are opened

30th Parmutit—Offerings to Ra, Wasir, Heru, Ptah, Sokar, and Atum

18th Payni—Wasir Goes Forth from His Mountain

These festive occasions were repeated enough that they became the norm for the society, and people believed that Ausar was essential to the happiness of the country.

Asar Sa Ra Imhotep

See also Auset

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AUSET

Auset is the venerated ancient Kemetic daughter of Geb (god of earth) and Nut (god of the heavens). In addition, she is the mother of Heru and husband of Ausar. Kemetians represented her in the form of a throne, which represents the seat and transmission of power for the per-aa (pharaoh). In the Theology of On (Heliopolis), she is part of the Pesedjet, the collective company or “family” of nine gods in the On cosmogony, which included Ra, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Ausar, Her-wer, Set, and Nebt-het.

Auset represented the female productive forces in nature. Kemetians recognized her as a moon goddess and a mystic goddess of the supernatural associated with the *tyet*, a symbol of magic in Kemet. In addition, Kemetians saw her as a healer and protector of marriage and the symbolic mother and protector of the per-aa. She also protected the deceased, providing them with nourishment for their journey in the Tuat. Likewise, she was the guardian of the Canopic jars, particularly the jar known as Imsety, which contained the liver of the deceased.



Seated on a throne, Isis suckles the infant Horus. 18th dynasty c. 1400–1379 BC.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.



Egyptian cat goddess Bastet. Bastet was the goddess of fire, cats, the home, and pregnant women. She was the personification of the soul of Auset.

Source: iStockphoto.

Some early legends portrayed Auset as the wife of Ra, but later represented her as the devoted wife and

partner of Auset, whom she helped to govern Kemet. After Set, her brother, murdered her husband out of jealousy, she set out in a relentless search to recover Auset's body, which had been cut up and scattered by Set. Finding all the parts of Auset except his phallus, she helped him redeem himself as the resurrected king of the Tuat and magically bore him a child. She hid, raised, and protected the child, who would eventually avenge his father by waging war on his uncle Set and defeating him with the aid of his mother.

Kemetians depicted Auset on coffins and tomb walls along with her sister with wings outstretched symbolizing a protective embrace; likewise, they showed her in a winged form with her protective arms around Auset. Sometimes they depicted her as a mother nursing her child Heru or both harkening to her legendary role as protector and redeemer. Kemetians transferred this protective image into the new kingdom when Kemetians portrayed her as protector of the per-aa (pharaoh). Finally, Africans represented her as a kite hovering above Auset creating a breeze of air for Auset to breathe.

Auset's epithets reveal the Kemetians, reverence for her even more: "one who gives birth to the heaven and earth," "one who seeks justice for the poor and vulnerable," "one who seeks shelter for the weak," "queen of heaven," "mother of the Gods," "one who is all," "The brilliant one in the sky," "the great lady of magic," "Mistress of the House of Life," "One who knows how to make right use of the heart," "Light giver of Heaven," "Lady of the Words of power," and "Moon shining Over the Sea."

In early Kemet legends, Africans portrayed Auset as a clever and guile trickster as she sets out to learn the hidden name of Ra. Feeling worthy of some Ra power, which could be acquired through knowledge of his name, she tricked Ra into revealing his hidden name, which grants her a portion of his power. Furthermore, legend has it that he gave her permission to pass that knowledge on to her son, giving him status and power no other could rival. Henceforth, Kemetians called her "the mistress of the gods who knows Ra by his own name." In another story, she tricks Set into incriminating himself before a court of law.

Kemetians mention Auset as early as the pyramid text. Over time, Kemetians assimilated her

with several other similar goddesses. For instance, in the early period, her attributes were combined with het-heru, which explains why her totem is often a cow or why she is displayed with cow horns on her head with a sun disk between them. In summary, Auset was a devoted wife, a magician, a protectress, and the ultimate mother. During the Theban era, Kemetians valued her so much that they assimilated her attributes with Mut. Later, the Romans assimilated her symbolic attributes into the Judeo-Christian mother figure of Mary. Moreover, in that sense, her legend still lives on in the African Christian tradition.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Ausar

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AX

The Ax has great religious significance in the Shango aspect of Ifa religion. It symbolizes the thunderbolts that Shango hurls to Earth to strike down wrongdoers. In statues and illustrations, it is often seen on Shango's head and is equated with his power, caprice, and the creative experience of human sexuality. The ax represents a warning against the arrogant use of military power to political leadership and represents a symbol of swift and balanced justice. As a double-edged emblem, it symbolizes Shango's constant preparedness for adversaries and is often carried on top of the dance staffs called the *Oshe Shango* during celebrations and rituals.

The *Oshe Shango* depicts a female devotee kneeling in respect to Shango. The balancing of a double ax refers to an act in Shango initiation ceremonies, where the initiate balances a vessel of fire on top of his or her head to demonstrate Shango

calmness in the face of danger. Its shape also symbolizes the stone axes kept in Shango shrines.

Early axes were made in Neolithic times. These ancient fabricated objects are believed to be meteorites that have fallen to Earth. Africans have found them lying around on the ground in fields and picked them up to be placed in covered vessels on the altars of Shango shrines. Africans believed that these stones contain the power of Shango's fire and that they fell to Earth during lightning strikes. The image of Shango's double-headed ax has been particularly attractive to a number of African American artists, such as David Driscoll, Paul Keene, and Jeff Donaldson as a symbol of resistance and liberation.

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See also Ifa; Shango

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AZAKA, THE LOA

Loas are a part of the Vodun pantheon; they are spirits that are part of one's metaphysical consciousness and come into play whenever called on from the realm in which they exist. In other words, one has to be conscious believers (Voduists) of their (Loas) spiritual existence to be in contact with their energy. Once their energy is manifested, Loas come into existence as supernatural beings or spirits that can enter the human body. Azaka, Azake, Mazaka, Papa Zaka, Mede, Kouzin, or Couzen came into existence after the Haitian Revolution when enslaved Africans were allowed to own land.

The origin of Azaka's name is thought to be pre-Columbian, from the indigenous Taino Indian language stemming from *zada*, meaning corn, or *maza*, meaning maize. Azaka is mainly depicted as male, although some scholars say that this Loa is also female. Similarly, Azaka is said to only exist in a "good" form. However, it has also been exposed as having a "fiery" (Azaka La Flambo) side. Mainly, Loas functions in whatever gender or form in which humans place them. Loas are neither positive nor negative. However, they have been used by human beings for good deeds, such as renewing balance and harmony in one's life, or for bad deeds, such as hurting someone who is unprotected. Azaka remains a steady representation in Vodun religion as the spiritual connection between humanity and land, hence the titles of "Patron Loa of Farmers" and "Minister of Agriculture."

As the patron Loa of farmers, workers, and laborers, Azaka functions as a reminder of a shared inheritance—of peasant ancestry, family ties, and a profound relationship with the Earth. Azaka, spirit of the land, nurtures the seeds and tills the Earth. It is from Azaka, the Loa, that one can learn about the abundance of steady labor and its possible fecundity. Azaka is humble in its knowledge of Earthly possibilities and is therefore always depicted as shy, yet representative as strongly symbolic of the human spiritual and physical roots.

Loas may show their character by possessing, riding, or mounting people who may call on them. While being mounted by a Loa, one may find oneself capable of participating in acts and speaking in tones that are unusual for them in a spiritless state. Hence, if one is ridden by Azaka La Flambo, one may find oneself experiencing an insatiable hunger for sex and food. Azaka La Flambo works with the fire of creative imagination by smoking a pipe from which figures appear within the puffs of smoke. Azaka La Flambo handles what the Earth gives (i.e., lava) and uses that to take from the infinite darkness, the metaphysical and the unseen, to create images and sounds that tell of the human experience via myths and stories.

No matter the creative outcome of Azaka, whether called on as female or male, good or fiery, Azaka Mede, the deity of agriculture, will answer when provided with specifics exclusive to its character. When one is calling on Azaka, one will wear blue (denim suit or dress) and red (neck-erchief) and a straw hat; a sack (makout), machete,

or sickle; provide foods such as corn of various varieties and forms, cassava bread, sugar cane, rice and beans, tobacco, herbs, cereal, and rum; draw a *veve'* (symbolic drawing) during a ceremony; as well as make ritual statements on an altar with an image representative of Azaka, such as the Catholic image of St. Isadore. When Azaka arrives, one develops a long appetite for food and begins to walk with a limp, representative of carrying a large workload. One also begins to mimic movements reflective of hoeing and digging. It is said that the Loa Azaka requires all of this (colors, symbols, offerings, and image) to help those who call on it to comprehend the honest, sincere reality of working hard to earn a fruitful harvest in their life.

The quality of working hard to produce a fruitful harvest is what gives Azaka, the Loa, the title of Minister (Mede) of Agriculture, focusing on the significance of its role in the Vodun community, particularly in Haiti. Neither Azaka nor the practice of Vodun is exclusive to the Haitian community because Vodun includes elements from other African people such as Kongo, Mandingo, Ibo, Yoruba, and Mondong, along with aspects of the religion of the Arawaks, Freemasonry and Catholicism. Also known as Kouzen Zaka, Azaka is identified as the cousin or brother of the common person. Further, Loa is referred to as *fle'Vodou* (flower and quintessence of Vodou) and *lewa* (the king).

Fle' Vodou and *Lewa*, Azaka, the Loa, and the entire Vodun religion were suppressed temporarily by people attempting to oppress practitioners in parts of Africa, Brazil, and the Americas (North, South, and Central). Vodun was suspect and vilified by Europeans who made every attempt to eliminate its existence and practice. Vodouists were skinned alive, hung, flogged, and imprisoned and had their instruments of practice (drums, flags, clothes, *assons*—calabash covered with special beads with a bell tied to it) destroyed. Hence, the association with Saints of the Catholic religion as Vodouists maintained their practice under their guise. Azaka is identified with Saint Isador of the Catholic religion because this is the patron saint of farmers; he wears blue pants and a cape with a sack slung over one shoulder as he kneels in prayer and an angel behind him plows the land with a pair of white oxen. Azaka, the Loa, is celebrated and affiliated with Labor Day in Haiti (May 1).

See also Vodou in Haiti

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AZANDE

The Azande are a people who live in southwestern Sudan, immediately north of the Congo and east of the Central African Republic. The Azande traditions are ancient; they see themselves as having originated in several clans that stretch back into history. Like many African people, they have a history of migration and, within the past 200 years, a history of fighting for their independence from outside, mainly European legal and social, encroachments.

Despite these intrusions, the religious principles that constitute their Azande heritage have remained relatively intact. Although Europeans instituted customs and traditions from Europe into the social life of the people during the colonial period, there remains among the Azande a strong commitment to their belief in the traditional conception of one creator deity who brought the universe into being.

The Azande believe that Mbori, the almighty God, is responsible for the creation of the world, but they do not have shrines, temples, rituals, or ceremonies to worship Mbori. In many ways, the religion of the Azande reflects the African understanding of the separation of the creator from the ordinary lives of the people. Thus, the people may turn to Mbori for consultation, but this is rare because the people are more likely to turn to oracles as daily necessities. This is more in keeping with the ancient traditions of Africa as seen in the Nile Valley

during the reign of the pharaohs or as seen in other African traditions.

The principal oracles are identified as having a direct relationship to the ancestors of the Azande. Furthermore, the ability to do harm to other people is considered something that is inherited by a small group of people who are therefore able to measure out the kind of discipline necessary to maintain societal harmony. At the base of all misfortune, however small, in someone's life is a disorder in the human universe. Someone is responsible. Nothing occurs as misfortune without the intervention of humans. People who die are usually the victims of murder, in the sense that someone caused their deaths.

Those priests or priestesses who are able to discern the nature of order, harmony, and balance in the society are usually responsible for carrying out punishment on those who would disrupt the social order. Out of fear, many people refuse to engage in negative behaviors. One of the greatest cultural characters among the Azande is the character of Ture, who maintains the middle ground between order and chaos, as in many African traditions, and applies the conventional wisdom to various activities, actions, and social situations. Some authors have referred to Ture as trickster figure, similar to Ananse among the Akan, but this is to minimize the psychological and social effect of a character who is not about tricking anyone, but rather about enforcing through instruction the value of the middle ground between chaos and order.

The process of marriage among Azande gives a woman the option to reject the marriage if she finds it unsuitable. After the marriage ceremony, the husband always remains indebted to the wife's family. It is impossible to be truly divorced from the family of the woman inasmuch as the woman is considered a valuable part of her family's wealth.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Family Rites; Rituals

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B

BA

Ba, as an aspect of the soul, was represented by a human-headed bird in ancient Kemet. The Ba speaks to the oneness and harmony with nature that is such a central theme in African cosmology. In the ancient Kemetic science of the soul, the Ba is the aspect of a person that represents the “soul of breath” dwelling within each human being. The Ba is often depicted as a bearded man, with the head of a hawk representing its simultaneous physical and spiritual/transcendental nature. It is this element of a person’s being that represents the “world soul” that permeates the universe, existing within humankind and in the essence of all things.

The Ba is the corporeal element of the soul that represents the interconnected nature of all creations. The concept of the Ba speaks to each person’s innate power because the Ba is representative of a person’s connection with the creator (Ptah). Naturally endowed with the creator’s essence, the Ba allows the person to experience all other elements of the universe because they are all composed of a common creative substance.

The Ba can be literally translated as “to come alive” or “spiritual manifestation.” The Ba is essentially a person’s “breath of life,” an invisible source of energy. As the breath of life, the Ba is a person’s *vital force*, the activating life force of their being. A person’s Ka, united with their Ba, forms the nonphysical qualities of a person,

their unique character/personality, and moral conscience. The Ba is capable of changing its form at will; in fact, the body of the Ba is represented by the body of a hawk to symbolize the Ba’s mobility or ability to move between Earth and the heavens, the visible and invisible, and its ability to transmigrate between the realms of the physical and the spiritual.

Although the Ba is a person’s Earthly vital force, at the time of death, the Ba is believed to leave the body through the discharges of the flesh and return to the spirit world to meet Atum while the body remains behind. The Ba is believed to return to Earth inhabiting another body (Ka). A person’s Ba is also said to return to visit its family, friends, and its Ka. The Ba is responsible for protecting the body of the deceased. It is also the Ba that supplies the Ka with air and food when the body is in its tomb. In fact, many Kemetic tombs were built with narrow passages that were designed to allow the Ba to leave the deceased person’s physical body and the tomb. The Ba is believed to be transmitted from the ancestors to their descendents.

The Ba is a principle element of the soul that the people of ancient Kemet believed to be indestructible, eternal, and omnipresent. It is that element of being that always remains divine and immortal. It is often depicted leaving or returning to its body, hovering over the body, and carrying in its claws a *shen ring*, which represents eternity. It was also believed that God exists on Earth in the form of the Ba. Instances in which a divine aspect of God is manifested in any natural phenomena can be

viewed as the presence of Ba. For example, the Sun was believed to be the Ba of Re while Apis the bull was believed to be the Ba of Ausar (Osiris).

Serie McDougal III

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BABALAWO

A Babalawo is a priest of Ifa, also referred to as Orunmila, who is probably the most popular deity of the Yoruba pantheon and certainly one to whom great attention is paid by all. Indeed, Ifa is the deity of divination, a most important and favored epistemological mode in Africa in general. African people turn to divination on a daily basis and, therefore, to Ifa in Yorubaland for guidance and advice on all kinds of issues, trivial or critical. It takes, however, a person specially and carefully trained to decipher Ifa's messages to the humans, and this is precisely the function fulfilled by a Babalawo.

Those called into Ifa's priesthood must undergo a long and expensive initiation process, which may last anywhere between 3 and 15 years. During that time, the initiate must acquire an extensive body of sacred and secret knowledge and memorize no less than 4,096 couplets associated with Ifa. When the initiate has shown readiness, she or he must then prepare for two important rituals: a ceremony of purification by water, and a final testing by fire, known as *Pinodu*. The latter demands that extremely hot oil be poured on the initiate's hands and rubbed on his or her body without leaving any sign of burns. It is at this point that the initiate is declared to be finally ready to undertake their most noble function—that is, to provide assistance and protection to others in their community.

Traditionally, there have been three levels of initiation into Ifa: the *olori* level, where a person may worship Ifa, but not divine with it; the *orisa*

level, where a Babalawo may worship and divine with Ifa; and, finally, the *Amon ti a te ni Ifa*, the highest level, where a Babalawo may not only worship and divine with Ifa, but also may partake in the eating of food offered to *Igba Odu*—that is, the sacred calabash of *Odu*. Such a level is achieved by Chief Babalawos only.

Babalawos who have undergone proper training and whose initiation has successfully ended must remove every hair from their body as well as shave their head. They are also expected to wear white and light blue clothing. Babalawos are highly respected because they are believed to have privileged access to the wisdom of the Ancestors and the gods and to be able, therefore, to share it with the rest of the living for their benefit.

To fulfill their obligations, that is, divining to answer the questions of their fellow men and women, and possibly alleviate their anxiety, Babalawos typically use a divination board, known as *opon Ifa*, whitened with “divination powder,” *iyerosun*. The divination board is usually round, but may also be rectangular. It may be decorated or not. In addition to the divination board, the Babalawo uses 16 palm nuts, *ikin*. The Babalawo would most often hold all the palm nuts in his left hand and then attempt to grab as many as possible with his right hand with one grasp. He would repeat this “exercise” eight times. From this, and depending on the number of nuts left in his left hand each time, the Babalawo would draw signs on the divination board and a pattern, or more precisely an *odu*, would emerge.

It is then incumbent on the Babalawo to interpret Ifa's answer, the *Odu*, correctly for his or her client. The *Odu*, however, is always a parable; because the Babalawo is not supposed to know the specific situation that brought one in for consultation in the first place, it is ultimately the client's role to apply Ifa's answer, the parable, to his or her specific situation.

Another method of divination also commonly practiced involves the use of a divining chain, whether made of metal or string, and to which four half-nuts have been attached on each half of the chain. The diviner throws the chain away from him or her and then reads the answer based on the way each nut fell. Finally, a divination session is not complete until the Babalawo has also informed his or her client of Ifa's recommendations



Santeria “babalawo” (high priest) Victor Omolofaoro Betancourt poses in front of his outdoor altar on January 19, 2002, at his home in Havana, Cuba.

Source: Getty Images.

or demands—that is, of what type of ritual (if any) is necessary to open the path and ensure success. The ritual often involves a sacrifice or offering of some sort to Ifa or some other deity.

Needless to say, given the importance attached to divination throughout Africa, Babalawos have their equivalent in many other parts of Africa. In Igboland, for example, it is the *Mboni* who fulfills the same important function, whereas in Fonland, it is the *Bokonon*. Furthermore, some scholars have derived the word *ifa* from *nefer* and have suggested that the origin of the worship of Ifa must be properly located in Kemet. In the African Diaspora, the term *Babalawo* is loosely used and refers to any priest of a Yoruba deity, not just Ifa.

Ama Mazama

See also Divination Systems; Fa; Ifa; Ikin; Initiation; Priests

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BAGA

The Baga-speaking people live in Guinea. They include the Baga, Landuma, and Nalu. As people of the southern swampy lands of the low coast, between the sea and Conakry, the Baga are an

important agricultural people. They are rice growers who have occupied the coastal area for many centuries. In fact, the low coast, named for the fact that one cannot tell from the air where the water ends and the land begins, is a region of palm groves, salt ponds, and rice fields.

Although the Baga culture has been in flux for many years because of the inroads being made on their land by Fula and Susu cultures, as well as by Christian and Moslem missionaries, there are still elders who retain an attachment to the rich culture of the people. In the 21st century, the rapidity with which the young Baga have given up their language to speak Susu, to convert to Islam and Christianity, and to turn their backs on their own customs means that there will soon be a majority of Baga who do not know *Simo*, a secret society written about more than 100 years ago.

The *Simo* was a society that came alive during the ancient rice harvests. The Baga people keep shrines of their ancestors and carve *elek* symbols to protect the family and represent the lineage. When people gathered to thresh the grain, it was a religious occasion when masked initiates would dance the ancestral dances around the *elek*, the head of a bird with a long beak or a horned animal, to celebrate the ancestors in the presence of the family relic.

The largest and most well-known mask of the Baga people is called the *Nimba*, goddess of fertility. The great tragedy of this culture is that this mask, the largest in the African world, has few adherents in Guinea. Almost all the sculptures have disappeared from the villages, taken by missionaries, broken by votarists of new religions, or simply abandoned by the descendants. Because the Baga no longer celebrate the rituals of their ancestors, some of which have been taken up in the Americas, the authentic *Nimbas* are difficult to find.

These magnificent sculptures are made of one solid piece of wood. The face is carved quite narrow with a hooked nose and a thin, almost nonexistent chin. The huge head is held by a proportional sized neck that is then joined to two enormous breasts with a hole, for eye holes, in the center. When the dancer wears this mask as a head piece, he is able to see through the hole in the breast. Raffia covers the sides of the mask concealing the identity of the dancer who wears it. This is important because the person who wears

the mask is not the spirit of the mask; the mask has its own spirit, and the wearer of the mask is merely a conveyer for the spirit of the mask.

To know the mask wearer in his ordinary state is to know something about the human person, but it confuses the religious situation. Hence, the African tradition of concealing the identity of the wearer is to provide the viewer with the opportunity to suspend the ordinary sense and experience the spiritual sense of the mask spirit. One does not need to know the carrier of the mask; this is not the most important element in the religious sense.

A second mask is the huge *bansonyi* used during male initiations. This mask is made with a painted pole, decorated with colors, and culminating into a triangular human face, with a calico flag. Most of these poles and the artwork on them reach to nearly 20 feet tall. Because the *Nimba* mask is large in bulk, the *bansonyi* is tall and colorful. The dance of this mask is ritualized by the dancing of two people, each with a pole mask, to represent the necessity of a husband and wife to champion their half of the village. Each one represents half. The women and the men are represented. It is a form of teaching gender complementarity.

There is a profound philosophical idea in the gender positions of the Baga. They respect both genders and believe that a community is without direction if one part of the community is unrepresented. Africans have practiced these types of ritual dances for thousands of years, and the Baga are some of the most storied people in West Africa. Even among the Baga, however, one sees the invasion of Western or Islamic cultural forms to the degree that neither the *Nimba* nor the *Bansonyi* are regularly practiced because of the cultural inroads into their religion and culture.

Among the Baga people, the kinship lineage is important because it dictates the religious life of the people. For example, the creator-god is Kanu, but the most significant deity for the male lineage is Somtup, the founder and spirit of the male initiation society. His wife is a-Bol, who governs the female initiation society and who is the most important deity for the female lineage of the ethnic group. Thus, each sex has its own allegiance to a deity for that particular sex.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ka; Nkwa

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BAGANDA

The Baganda people are an important ethnic group in the country of Uganda. The country takes its name from the people. The people are concentrated on the northwestern shores of Lake Nyanza (also called Ukerewe, Victoria). This lake is the source of the longest branch of the Nile River. From here, the Nile flowed down toward the Mediterranean Sea. The Baganda's ancient kingdom was called Buganda and was bounded on the north by Bunyoro and on the east by the Nile River. With more than 3 million people, the Baganda are the most populous group in Uganda. Of all the former kingdoms that comprise Uganda, the Baganda were the largest and comprised slightly more than a fourth of Uganda's land mass.

The Baganda possess a powerful culture that is based around the kingship. The king is called the Kabaka, and when the earlier governments of Uganda wanted to express their complete control over the country, they had destroyed the Baganda and other kingdoms. Nevertheless, the people maintained their calm and, because of the strength of their culture, it was easily resurrected when the political climate changed.

In addition to the centrality of the kabaka, the people take great pride in their verbally rich culture. They use many folktales and proverbs to teach their children moral behavior and ritual correctness. The children are taught to express themselves through word games such as *ludikya*, which is often called "talking backward." For example, a child may say *omuzima* (spirit) and then say *amzi-umo* as a way of talking backward. There are many variations of these word games. At home the children observe the adults at play with riddles and learn by studying their elders. They refer to the collective riddling game as *okukokkya*.

According to the traditions of the Baganda, Kintu, the first Kabaka, is said to have married Nambi. But it was said that Nambi had to return

to heaven, where her father, Gulu, objected to her marriage because Kintu did not know how to farm. He only knew how to get food from animals. Kintu was tested by the relatives of the girl to see whether he could identify his own cow in the midst of a herd. Hundreds of cows looked like his, but nevertheless he befriended a bee who told him that when he landed on the horns of a cow that would be his cow. By virtue of his help from the bee, Kintu was able to find his cow and was given the girl. The father was stunned by the wisdom of the young man. He said to the young man, "Please take my daughter and go before Walume (death) show up and want to travel with you."

They took cows, sheep, birds, goats, and a plantain tree. However, Nambi wanted to go back and retrieve some grain that she had forgotten. Her husband protested, but off she went. Unfortunately for her, death was waiting for her, and she ran fast but death ran faster. She could not get away. After living on the Earth for many years in peace, death, that is, Walume, started to bring sickness and illness to the people he met.

Most Baganda practiced an indigenous religion until the assertive positioning of Islam and Christianity in the 20th century caused the people to abandon *balubaale*. They worshipped gods who represented various physical properties and mental attitudes. Temples were often identified with fertility, warfare, water, or health. Even as Islam and Christianity were growing, the people still believed in the spirits of the ancestors. They visited the temples to learn of impending dangers and how to avoid them. Because the *muzimu* are the most important spirits as ancestors, the people they are able to protect and shelter are always those who express faith in them.

The rites of passage of the Muganda are a four-step process:

1. Omwana (child)
2. Omuvubuka (youth)
3. Omusajja (adult)
4. Omuzima (spirit)

Finally, the person becomes a candidate for reincarnation. Everything in life prepares the person to become a part of the unbroken line between the living ones and the eternal living ones. Among the

Baganda, it is important to go through all the phases where one learns manners (mpisa), how to greet visitors properly, and how to sit and stand correctly in order to engage in the necessary preparations for afterlife. All relationships are valued, and the idea of being sociable is the key component to a good community.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Rites of Passage

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BAKONGO

More than 10 million people comprise the Bakongo ethnic group that lives along the coastal regions of the Congo, Peoples Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola. They migrated to this region in the 13th century from the northeast, which would place their point of origin in the eastern Peoples Democratic Republic of Congo or the heart of Africa. The Bakongo enjoyed a highly developed kingdom and were one of the earliest groups to make contact with the Portuguese in the 15th century. Not long after, Catholicism and disgraceful Portuguese trade practices were introduced, which caused division among the Bakongo people, prompting King Affonso to write the King of Portugal proposing a resolution of the situation. This would signal the beginning of a long, tragic, and complex relationship among the Bakongo, Portuguese, and Catholicism that sent many Bakongo into the European Slave Trade in enslaved Africans, set up the Congo for colonial rule, and influenced the contemporary political activity of the region. Although Catholicism was introduced to the Bakongo relatively early compared with other parts of Africa and today retains

a strong Catholic presence, indigenous religious and cultural practices thrive and have been identified in Haitian and New Orleans Vodou, Cuban Regla de Palo, Lucumi, and Regla de Ocha, Brazilian Umbanda and Candomble, and African American expressive culture.

Creation and Cosmology

The principle creator of the world is Nzambi Mpungu, the sovereign master. After creating the world and all creatures in it, Nzambi Mpungu withdrew and has little interest in the world and its inhabitants. Although Nzambi Mpungu withdrew, he still causes the rain to fall and seeds to grow into food to sustain people. Nzambi Mpungu is also responsible for their health and the birth of children. Nzambi Mpungu is strong, rich, and good, although also responsible for death. Nzambici is God the essence, the god on Earth, the great princess, the mother of all the animals. Nzambi is the mystery of the Earth. She was sent to the Earth by Nzambi Mpungu, who then marries her, making him the father of all creation. Nzambi gave humanity all laws, ordinances, arts, games, and musical instruments and settled quarrels between animals. She also stole a part of Nzambi Mpungu's fire. Other deities among the Bakongo are Ntangu who is the sun, Ngonde the moon, Nzassi who is thunder, Lusiemo who is lightning, and Chicamassichinuinji who dwells in the sea.

Like many African groups, the Bakongo have numerous accounts of creation and the origins of things. Often in these narratives, the activities of different deities or characters vary from, contradict, or clarify previous information. This is the nature of oral cultures, in which storytelling is fluid and contextual, but also in which knowledge is esoteric. In such cultures, stories mask deeper knowledge that is known only to initiates. What follows is an account of Bakongo cosmology, from an *ngânga*, an initiate into an Africa way of thinking, using concrete and less symbolic or mythological language.

The world was empty of all life in the beginning. A fire force, *kalûnga*, emerged within this empty circle, or *mbûngi*, and heated up its contents, which, when cooled, formed the Earth. The Earth, the starting point of the fire, is now a green

planet because it has gone through four stages. The first is the emergence of the fire, the second is the red stage, where the planet is still burning and has not formed. The next is the grey stage where the planet is cooling, but has not produced life. These planets are naked, dry, and covered with dust. Finally, the green stage is when the planet is fully mature because it breathes and carries life. As part of the universal order, all planets must go through this process.

Another important characteristic of Bakongo cosmology is the sun and its movements. The rising, peaking, setting, and absence of the sun provide the essential pattern for Bakongo religious culture. These “four moments of the sun” equate with the four stages of life: conception, birth, maturity, and death. For the Bakongo, everything transitions through these stages: planets, plants, animals, people, societies, and even ideas. This vital cycle is depicted by a circle with a cross inside. In this cosmogram or *dikenga*, the meeting point of the two lines of the cross is the most powerful point and where the person stands.

Person

The Bakongo person, or *muntu*, is a living-energy being and a physical being. Therefore, the *muntu* is a complex “pattern of patterns” or “principle of principles” in being. Muntu is distinguished in creation because *muntu* have *mwèla-ngindu* or a dual soul-mind. The *mwèla-ngindu* has experiences at each moment of the sun. The first moment is *musoni*, a time of beginnings. It is the time of human conception in the womb. *Kala* is the time of the sun rising and the physical birth of a person. *Tukula* is the period of maturation and the peak of creativity, a time when the person ideally demonstrates mastery of life, whether in familial, social, artistic, or spiritual realms. *Luvemba* time is marked by physical death. A person’s dual soul-mind or *mpève-ngindu* interacts with the local and/or world community after death and continues to have experiences in the *ku mpèmbe* in preparation for a new cycle of creation. For the Bakongo, a person is a *kala-zimi-kala*, a living-dying-living being.

The person standing at the crossroads forms a “V” within the *dikenga*. The V is a sacred image appearing throughout Bakongo weaving and

artistic designs. The three points of the V are also represented in the three firestones, foundation of Bakongo social order, and the three different colored ingredients used in the divinatory calabash and the three divisions of the precolonial Bakongo kingdoms.

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See also Muntu; Nzambi

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BAKOTA

The Bakota are an important ethnic group whose principal location is the northeast of the country of Gabon in Central Africa. They call their language iKota. They are also known as Kota, Kuta, and iKuta. Their neighbors, the Fang, call them Mekora. Because the Bakota are organized along patriarchal lines, they have developed many subgroups based on various patriarchies. Thus, one can find Menzambi, Bougom, Sake, Ikota-la-hua, and Ndambomo people who will say they are also Bakota. In effect, these are subclans with their own particular style and accent of speaking the iKota language.

The meaning of the term *Bakota* is controversial, but it seems likely that the idea of bonding is central to the meaning in the iKota language; this is in line with much of the thinking in African



Reliquary figure. From Bakota, Gabon. In this area of Africa, nearly all groups venerated the relics of ancestors, which they kept in containers with other objects that impart power. The container holding the bones and other magical substances was often surmounted by a carved head or figure (reliquary).

Source: Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

philosophy. When people come together in family, they are bonded in one way or another. It might be consanguine or it might be by experience and political connection. Thus, the Bakota are said to be people who have tied themselves to each other in a deeply spiritual and physical sense. The word *kota* means to “bind.”

Quite clearly, the Bakota are a united and coherent people, but what is the source of this unity? In most cases, the patriarchy rules among the various clans of Bakota, but in some cases, such as the Mahongwe, which literally means “of the father,” it appears that this group has really adopted a matriarchal system of lineage. Therefore, one finds a patriarchy that has to share space with matrilineality among speakers of iKota. The fact that the Mahongwe have adopted a matriarchal system of descent lineage puts them in line with numerous West African and Central African groups.

The Bakota suffered the same fate as other ethnic groups in Africa when European colonization came and divided up members of their families. Indeed, the Bakota are most densely populated in Ogooue-Ivindo province in northeastern Gabon. Their population can also be found in Congo-Brazzaville and among the Batanga group, in neighboring Cameroon. One of the facts of Bakota life is that the people are conscious of their numerous relations outside of Gabon; although there are national boundaries, the communities view themselves as closely connected despite such political borders.

Known for their deeply spiritual beliefs, the Bakota have produced some of the most significant art in Africa. Their conception of ancestral or guardian personalities has evoked some of the more singularly spectacular sculpture of such figures. The work is usually done in copper or brass, but may also be done in wood. These figures are relics of the great ancestors or spirits of some distant force that protected the people during times of trouble.

Among the most popular order of secrets among the Bakota is the Bwete, which is usually composed of men who have shown a special relationship to the society and culture by their ritual and ceremonial purity. Given that the Bakota practice circumcision and widow purification, certain men and women are granted knowledge of these secrets, whereas others are not.

Most authorities on Gabonese society believe that the Kota are quite egalitarian as a community and that openness on all matters of social and political action, as well as work and responsibilities, fall equally on all people and cross all lines of age, occupation, and gender. It is only in the most secret of secrets, such as circumcision and widow purification, that there are special officiates.

The Bakota people value their customs, traditions, and ancient ancestors, and the children are brought up to accept this way of celebrating unity and community. They respect the elders; ritualize all holy days related to birth, puberty, and death; and believe that the highest moral ideal is found in the concept of Ewele—that is, basically character, pride of being.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors

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BALANTA

The Balanta people are found mainly in Guinea Bissau, although they may be found in areas of Senegal as well, particularly in the Casamance. Their heartland is north of the Geba River, an area rich in elephants, beeswax, and coveted hides. The people are intelligent and dedicated agrarians, growing lots of foods, including rice and peanuts. In many ways, their religious ideas and cultural ideas have been impacted by the historical, political, and economic upheavals of the region.

Although the Balanta are found in the coastal regions of West Africa, they are said to have migrated from the East, possibly from the Nile Valley region of East Africa. Their oral narratives

and their commercial history have established them as significant players in the development of the trade along the coast. However, it is at the level of custom, culture, politics, and traditions that they exhibit strong African religious practices. They cultivate yam, paddy rice, and maize. They are known principally as rice producers, although they only started that practice when they moved their villages to the mangroves during the European slave raids of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

The intensive human labor that was required by rice farming also impacted the structure of the community's religion because it required high-density and compact village patterns. The Balanta had to develop the use of the iron tip shovel, *kebinde*, to compete with their neighbors in the practice of agriculture. Although the Balanta are not the most numerous people in Guinea Bissau, they occupy a large geographical area and still produce millet, maize, and peanuts.

The Portuguese created an enormous crisis in the culture of the coastal people as the Muslims had done hundreds of years earlier. The Balanta had worked to maintain customs and traditions based on their ancestral histories; however, nothing could prevent them from being seduced by the unchecked slave raids along the coast. The European slave trade reinforced ethnic distinctions and led to neighbors fighting against neighbors. The Bijagos ethnic group was well known as supporters of the European slave traders. But other groups, such as the Papel and the Manjaco, were dedicated to producing food supplies for the European coastal trading posts. When the slave trade ended, the Balanta, involved tangentially in the trade, sought to continue their traditional customs, but the commercial interests established by the Portuguese produced a desire for many of them to migrate to Europe and Cape Verde as share croppers and to Senegal and Gambia as rubber producers.

Balanta and other groups sought to limit Portugal's control of the coast. However, Portugal gained power over this coastal region through trade and maintained it by fostering interethnic conflicts among neighbors. For example, in 1913, the Portuguese under the leadership of Teixeira Pinto formed an alliance with the Fula army under the leadership of Abdulai Injai to defeat all coastal

groups, including the Balanta. By exploiting the competition among the African groups, the Portuguese were able to gain control of the food and water supplies along the coast and contain the Balanta people. Of course, what they could not contain or restrain were the traditions of the people and the survival of their will to respect their ancestors.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors

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BALENGUE

The Balengue live in Equatorial Guinea bordering Gabon. Their language is Molengue, a language that is similar to many in the so-called Bantu group. However, the Balengue are a small group of people who are also called the Molendji. They are related to many of the other people in the northwestern cluster of Bantu speakers in Gabon. This northwestern cluster is composed of several groups, including the Bubi, Duala, and Kossi; however, the Balengue are a significant group within the area. Moreover, they are also in close proximity to the Fang people, a larger ethnic group that has had an important cultural impact on the Balengue people.

The Balengue, like other Bantu peoples, believe in life after death, and they believe that the dead can and will interact with the living. In this regard, they are not different from many other Africans who accept the idea that ancestors are active in the lives of the living. All Balengue believe that those

who have died can have a significant influence on the way the living carry out their lives. Because the Balengue are a coastal people, much of their religious ideology is related to the sea.

For the Balengue, the dead can help or harm the living based on a person's relationship to the dead and whether the living are respecting or giving honor to the ancestors. As in other African religious experiences, there are spirits that can censure those who do not honor the traditions, customs, and rituals of the society. Those who have knowledge and ability to manipulate the phenomenal world are respected for their closeness to the ancestors and their powerful energies. These are energies to be appreciated for their ability to assist or prevent certain actions. The ancestors also protect their family members and loved ones from those who may mean to do them harm. For the Balengue, as is the case for many African peoples, the living and the Dead have a close relationship, and, thus, the ancestors must be regarded as part of the Balengue society who bring the natural and so-called supernatural worlds together.

The Balengue have long accepted that spiritual and physical realities are often merged and that it is impossible to separate the actual world that can be seen from the world that is unseen. Moreover, there are many representations of the spiritual world manifest in the natural world. Everything that exists represents something that is spiritual. Water, trees, animals, and rocks are manifestations of the divine. It is therefore critical to the Balengue people that the natural environment be honored and respected as the ancestors or other deities would be honored. This is to establish peace and harmony between humans as well as between the seen and the unseen.

Paul H. L. Easterling

See also Ancestors; Ocean

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BALI

The Bali Nyonga, also known as Bali Chamba, are a part of seven ethnic groups that bear the same prefix (*Bali*): Bali Nkontan, Bali Kumbat, and Bali Gwangsun. The Bali Nyonga are relatively newcomers to the grass field of Bamenda. During the early 19th century, the Bali who were a part of the Adamawa people suffered famine and pressure from their neighbors. They were also raided by the Fulani. The Bali moved from Chamba, having escaped from wars, a protracted drought, and other climatic hazards. They were horsemen and therefore mounted their horses and moved out to regions in search of food. As they traveled south, they fought with other ethnic groups, taking prisoners of war along with them. Later, they focused attention on markets in the southern forests, where labor was needed for the new palm-oil industries.

The Bali Chamba moved south, where they encountered contingents of the mighty Tikar, Wute, and Mbum peoples. Around 1835, the Bali Chamba were defeated by an alliance of Bamileke chiefdoms at Bafou-Fondo near Dschang. By 1850, they were in the Menda area (now Bamenda), where they settled and competed with the already established city states of Mankon and Bafut to conquer and acquire smaller villages. After Cameroon's independence, Bali Nyonga became a subdivision in the Mezam Division North West province. This entry discusses their language, culture, and religion.

Language and Culture

Mbakoh is the original language of the Bali people, although Mungaka later became the language of one of the clans. Until the death of King Gawolbe, one of their important leaders, the Bali people were one people living under one monarch, united by one purpose and one culture. Above all, they spoke the original form of Mbakoh, which continues to undergo various linguistic transformations.

Gawolbe's tragic death marked a turning point in the union of the Chamba group as the people split into seven clans: Bali Muti, Bali Nkontan,

Bali Kumbat, Bali Gasu, Bali Gansin, Bali Gham, and Bali Nyonga. The Bali Nyonga is the only group that acquired a totally different language other than Mbakoh. It is not clear why they elected to use mungaka.

It is misleading to refer to the language spoken by the Bali as “Bali” and it can cause confusion among the villages, the people, and their language. This mistake probably stems from the fact that the descriptive name, “Tsu bah’ ni” in Mungaka, which literary means “talk (of the) Bali” or the language of Bali, of the Bali people is used interchangeably. When a speaker asks, “u nin chu chu bah’ ni?” (“Do you speak the Bali language?”), the conveyed meaning is the same if the speaker said, “u’ nin chu mungaka?” However, the first, rather than the latter, question is frequently expressed.

The appellation “Bah’ ni” is the original form of the now anglicized authentic form “Bali,” which dates from the colonial period when the colonizers found it difficult to articulate the sounds in the African names. They were forced to proceed with phonological changes and smoothing. Several complexities must be noted here—the name of the people, Bali Nyonga, Ba’ni, and Banyonga, and the name of the language. Earlier writers indiscriminately used unorthodox names such as Bali and Ba’ni to refer to both people and language.

Religious Practice

Medicine and religion among the Bali people are derived from the same philosophical foundation. Thus, one finds that the priests and priestesses in the society can treat physical and psychological problems. They are able to discern whether a person needs one or the other. This happens because the doctors are skilled in the study of human behavior, physical or psychological. Living in villages with their people, the religious officials are able to determine who is psychologically in need of assistance and who is in need of physical help. They are experts at the use of herbs as well as in the nature of communication.

The doctors perform rituals that are rooted in the people’s traditions, and this activity could include rubbing of special oils to ensure that the disease does not reappear or slaughtering chickens and other animals and pouring the blood

on the patient. All of this is done with the sacred words used to call on the spirits or ancestors who might be responsible for the patient or the particular illness.

Among the Bali people, the *voma* is a male society of secrets. The *voma* is a type of cleansing team that would arrive in a village from the river and enter the town to cleanse it of all evil spirits. It was considered an abomination for a woman to view the *voma* when they paraded through the village, singing and dancing the special dance of the religion of the Bali. One can understand the temptation to view this dramatic performance, but women were warned to stay inside their homes when the *voma* performed. If a woman saw the *voma*, she would have to perform rituals to cleanse herself or she might not be able to bear children or see. The Bali also had other societies such as the house of njong, literally nda-njong, reserved for those who had completed certain rites.

When a young man inherited a throne and became a king, he was given the title “Ba Nkom.” It was the title of a king in a major family. The Ba Nkom had to observe certain spiritual rules—for instance, he could not shake hands. This particular rule was made more explicit when Europeans started visiting the Bali people. When the European would extend his hand, the Ba Nkom would not take it. This would have been a spiritual violation.

The Bali also had rituals that included everyone. For example, the *Lela* was a ritual dance that involved a brilliant array of colors and costumes at the Fon’s (King’s) palace. The *Lela* may be considered the coming together of the ethnic group in a massive ceremony of the prowess of the ancestors, spirits, and deities of the Bali people. As a crowning festival of the religion of the people, the *Lela* created the occasion for unity and reinforced the connectedness of the Bali people.

Emmanuel Kombem Ngwainmbi

See also Kings; Societies of Secrets

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BALUBA

The Baluba are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their number is estimated at around 10 million people. They are widely known for four major achievements: their art, whose numerous objects populate, among others, the Tervuren Museum; their religion; their philosophy; and their political thought, which is manifested in Pax Luba.

Luba philosophy and religious thought played a crucial role in the development of African philosophy and the Negritude Movement in the 20th century. Luba religion was revealed to the outside world by the publication of Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* in 1945. The controversy generated by this book in the international community placed Luba religion and thought at the center of the vast intellectual debate that led to the birth of contemporary African philosophy and African enculturation theology. It should be noted in that regard that *Bantu Philosophy* was the first book published by the nascent *Presence Africaine*. This means that Luba religion and worldview remain deeply intertwined with the development of the Negritude Movement, as well as the Panafrican Movement. This entry describes the history, culture, and religious beliefs and practices of the Baluba, along with the impact of religious beliefs on government.

Historical Background

The Luba empire is one of the most renowned African states, along with the Mali empire, Songhai empire, the kingdom of Asante, Zulu empire, Kongo kingdom, Mongo kingdom, Lunda empire, the kingdom of Buganda, the kingdom of the Mwami of Kivu or Rwanda, or the empire of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Archaeologists have shown that the origins of the Luba state goes back to the 5th century AD and spanned almost 1,500 years.

After flourishing from 500 AD to 1900 AD, it was fragmented by Belgian colonization between 1880 and 1960. However, it survives today in a variety of polities. Today, Lubaland is divided into the kingdoms of Kabongo, Kasong'wa Nyembo, Kinkondja, Kabondo-Dianda, Malemba-Nkulu, and Mwanza, among the most prominent. Although these administrative entities are integrated in the modern Republic, traditional "Chiefs" are recognized by the government. They administer their territories with a standing police force and levy taxes.

The Baluba, 1 of the 200 ethnic groups of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo), are a branch of the Bantu people and thus share a common worldview with many other people from the Equator to South Africa. They live principally in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the Katanga province. But the Luba empire included a large number of people living in various countries, including Zambia and Angola.

The original location of the Baluba is the region between Lualaba (or the Congo River) and Lake Tanganika. This location in the Great Lakes region provided the Baluba with sufficient means of subsistence necessary for the development of a powerful civilization: water, abundant food, fish, and raw material necessary for a technology needed for protection and agriculture. Some scholars think that the Baluba are one of the protobantu groups and that their territory constitutes one of the main centers from which the Bantu spread across Central and Southern Africa.

Language and Culture

It is not surprising that languages such as Shona and Zulu share striking similarities with the Kiluba language, as do the names of people and names of God. Typically, Luba names such as Nkulu and Tambo can be found in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the name of God (Unkulunkulu in Zulu) is well related to the Vidye Mukulu of the Baluba. Leza, another Luba name of God, is found in Resa and Lesa variants among various ethnic groups from the northern Kalahari into Congo and across into Zambia and Tanzania.

The Baluba are patrilinear; however, in most cases, men and women carry the same names, such as Ilunga, Mutombo, Nsengha, Sungu, Seya,

Nkulu, Ngoy, Nday, Mande, Monga, Numbi, Mbuyu, Mbuya, Banza, Banze, Mwenze, Mwanza, Twite, Kabamba, Kabimbi, Kabange, Kabongo, Kabila, Kalala, Kasala, Kalenga, Kalenge, Kasongo, Kayembe, Kayamba, Kazadi, Kyungu, Kyoni, Nkongolo, Mukaya, Mukanya, Mulongo, Mutonkole, Mwamba, Mwila, Mwilambwe, Nshimba, Nshimbi, Nyembo, Mpanda, Mpande, Masengo, Museka, Musenge, or Ngandu. Some of these names can be found in many countries from Uganda to South Africa and from Congo to Zambia and Zimbabwe.

As one of the Protobantu group, the Baluba shared a profound cultural unity with many other people across the continent. Kiluba, the language of the Luba empire, is part of the group of Bantu languages that is dominant in the whole central Africa and extends down to South Africa. The Baluba have a “basic language correspondence” of more than 60% with neighboring peoples. Not only are these languages more or less mutually intelligible, but they are based on similar grammar and produce a unified logic.

Religious Beliefs

The Luba religion shares a common cosmology and basic religious tenets with many other types of African religions. Although the Kiluba language does not have a specific word for *religion*, it has an extensive lexicon that describes the nature of the Supreme Being, the supernatural world, and various religious activities. The Luba belief system includes the belief in the existence of a Universal Creator (Shakapanga), the afterlife, the communion between the living and the Dead, and the observance of ethical conduct (Mwikadilo Muyampe) as a sine qua non condition for being welcomed in the village of the ancestors after death.

Among the most important components of the Luba religion, three important figures, Leza (Supreme God), Mikishi or Bavidye (various Spirits), and Bankambo (ancestors), constitute the supernatural world. In the world of the living, the main figures are Kitobo or Nsengha (priest), the Nganga (healer), and the mfwintshi (the witch, the embodiment of evil and the antithesis of the will of the ancestors).

Religious activities include prayers (kulomba, kutota), praise songs and formulas (kutoba), dances, sacrifices, offerings, libations, and various rituals, including cleansing or purification and rites of passage. Among the Baluba, Disao, the circumcision of men, is mandatory. However, women do not undergo excision.

Besides prayers and invocations, means of communication with the divine include the interpretation of dreams and especially the practice of Lubuko (divination) to consult the will of the ancestors before any important decision or to know the causes of misfortune. To find out the truth about a liar, the Baluba use Mwavi (a poisonous beverage) as a test. The assumption is that it hurts only the guilty.

Besides various shrines, holy places include sacred mountains, lakes, rivers, trees, animals, and snakes (especially Moma, Python). One of the most sacred places of the Luba empire is Lake Boya near Kabongo City.

It should be noted, however, that the core of the Luba religion is the notion of Bumuntu (authentic or genuine personhood) embodied in the concept of *mucima muyampe* (good heart) and Buleme (dignity, self-respect). Bumuntu stands as the goal of human existence and the sine qua non condition for genuine governance and genuine religiosity. Thus, religion played a crucial role in defining the Luba vision of good government and “civilized life.” This notion of nobility of heart is enshrined in the creation myth of the glorious phase of Luba empire when *Buluba* (Lubahood) became a label of quality.

Genesis Stories

For the Baluba, the Buluba refers to a tradition of wisdom transmitted from generation to generation for more than a millennium. Buluba, then, means the core values of Luba civilization, a unified worldview, a common set of religious ideas and ideals defining the essence of ethics, human dignity, good government, and “sage king.” In its origin, Buluba meant that kind of “refined behavior” generated by Luba courts and extended to other kingdoms of the vast empire. It is that distinctive label of quality, that nobility bestowed by personal dignified ethical behavior (Buleme), and

the belonging to a community ruled by the “Bulopwe” that is “civilized government” institutionalized by the ancestors according to the will of the creator and created for the protection and promotion of the Bumuntu (human dignity).

The Luba genesis saga articulated a distinction between two types of Luba emperors whose forms of government were shaped by their own moral character and private behavior: Nkongolo Mwamba, the red king, on the one hand, and Ilunga Mbidi Kiluwe, a prince of legendary black complexion, on the other hand. It is worth noting that the Baluba of Heartland prefer to call themselves “Bana Ba Mbidi,” rather than children of Nkongolo. Mbidi the “civilized prince” is recorded as the founder of “the golden era” of the second Luba empire.

The Luba genesis Saga emphasizes the difference between Nkongolo Mwamba the drunken and cruel despot and Ilunga Mbidi Kiluwe the refined and gentle prince. Nkongolo the red is a man without manners, a man who eats in public, gets drunk, and cannot control himself. In contrast, Mbidi Kiluwe is a man of reservation, obsessed with good manners; he does not eat in public, he controls his language and his behavior, and he keeps a distance from the vices and modus vivendi of ordinary people. In Luba historical memory, Nkongolo Mwamba symbolizes the Kilopwe, the embodiment of tyranny, whereas Mbidi Kiluwe remains the Mulopwe par excellence, the admired caring and compassionate king.

Luba cosmology casts Nkongolo’s evil government in esthetic terms. Nkongolo is said to be the son of a hyena; he was so ugly that no one resembled him before or since. His red skin symbolizes the color of blood, and he is thus said to be “Muntu wa Malwa,” a physical and moral monstrosity who brings suffering and terror into the world—an uncivilized man who lives in an incestuous relation with his own sisters.

Mbidi the black prince will introduce the “civilized” practices of exogamy and “enlightened government” based on moral character, compassion, and justice. He is said to be beautiful, and the people identify with him. Mbidi functions in Luba consciousness as the norm of the legitimate power of good government, Bulopwe, which is antithetical to Bufumu, the brutal and illegitimate power of Nkongolo. Kalala Ilunga, Mbidi’s son, and, after

him, Ngoy’a Sanza are recorded as the paradigmatic sage kings, whereas others are denounced as monstrous tyrants. In the investiture speech, the young emperor had to learn from the noble Twite that “Bulohwe I Bantu” (power is for the people and the *raison d’être* of a king is service to the people).

Leadership

Recorded as the enlightened ruler feared by thieves and troublemakers, Ngoy’a Sanza (1665–1685) is celebrated for his openness to cultural and ethnic diversity and his focus on justice and respect for human rights. His passion for moral ethical standards, justice, and law and order led him to a severe penal code inflicting harsh punishment to criminals. This punishment included the cutting off of a hand to a thief, the upper lip to a liar, an eye or the nose to one guilty of adultery, and an ear to one who does not listen and disobeys constantly.

Although the Luba notion of Bulopwe is rooted in the concept of divine kingship, no one in practice identified the Mulopwe (King) with the Supreme God, Shakapanga. Power was never personal; it was exercised by a body of several people. The Baluba understood that the power of the King should be limited and controlled to guarantee the welfare of the people. Thus, the Luba empire was governed by an oral constitution based on the will of the ancestors (Kishilakya-bankambo). A powerful religious lodge, the Bambudye, acted as an effective check on the behavior of the King and even had the power to execute him in case of excessive abuse of power. It was assumed that the king must obey the mandate of heaven by governing according to the will of the ancestors. These ideals of genuine personhood and good government had their foundation in the spiritual values inculcated by Luba religion.

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Bantu Philosophy; Nganga

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BAMANA

The Bamana people belong to the Mande group and can be found primarily in Mali. However, sizable Bamana communities also exist in neighboring West African countries, in particular, in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. There are about 2 million Bamana, making them one of the largest Mande subgroups, as well as the dominant ethnic group in Mali, where about 80% of the population speak the Bamana language. The Bamana, as they call themselves, are often referred to as *Bambara*, which is likely an inaccurate rendition on the part of the French of *Bamana*. This entry looks at their history and social organization, and then it turns to their religion and ritual.

History and Social Life

The Bamana emerged as a distinct Mande group when the Songhay empire dissolved, after being invaded in 1591 by troops from Morocco. Some of the Mande people then turned inward and created the Bamana empire in the mid-1700s, with Segou and Kaarta as major centers of Bamana power and lasting influence. This explains how the Bamana came into existence as an autonomous group.

However, they do share with their Mande relatives many striking similarities. For instance, the Bamana social structure is patrilocal and patrilineal. The basic social unit is the family, which may include anywhere between 100 and 1,000 individuals. Families are formed on the basis of each one of its members tracing their descent from a common male ancestor. Families (or *gwa*) assume collective ownership of the land and work together to grow millet, rice, sorghum, peanuts, melons, and other crops. It is

not uncommon for them to also raise cattle, goats, fowl, and sheep. Families then form villages, each with a central figure of authority.

One's position in the social hierarchy is predicated on one's position in the initiation groups, which play a major role in Bamana life and society. There are six initiation societies known as *dyow*. The main function of the *dyow* is to teach members of the Bamana society about critical issues, such as the dual (material and spiritual) nature of the world and ethical standards and expectations of the community. Without proper socialization, a person may hinder their own well-being, as well as the welfare of their community. The six societies correspond to different levels of education.

Religious Belief

The Bamana religion is based on the belief in one supreme God, Maa Ngala, "Lord of All," or Masa Demballi, "Uncreated and Infinite Lord." God is responsible for creating the world and all that is in the world. It is both immanent and transcendent. As in other African religious traditions, however, once the initial creative process was over, the Supreme Being elected to reside in the sky and delegated the governance of the world to lesser spiritual entities. It is to those entities, rather than to God, that the Bamana men and women address their requests and make offerings. These include divinities such as Nya, Nyawrole, Jarawera, Ntomo, Nama, and Komo, which act as Maa Ngala's ministers and agents.

In addition to the divinities, ancestors also play a major role as intermediaries between the living and God. Ancestors are buried within the family compound because their involvement in human affairs remains constant. Libations must be poured to them regularly, especially before consulting with or requesting something from them. Upon dying, one is expected to become an ancestor. However, this is largely predicated on the performance of the proper funerary rites on the 1st, 3rd, 7th, and 40th days after death has occurred.

The Bamana believe in the existence of an intangible, yet powerful life force, residing in all that is. It is in every woman, man, child, animal, plant, and so on. It is life, and it is of divine origin. *Nyama*, as the Bamana understand it, is a sacred

force that animates the universe. It is neither good nor bad, but may manifest itself under both aspects depending on the circumstances. Good behavior, in the form of morality, generosity, and compassion, will bring about a positive manifestation of Nyama. In contrast, offenses against morality and the community's traditions are responsible for causing great upheavals. Everything being interconnected, the violation of the social code of conduct will disturb the general equilibrium of the universe.

Different people control or inherit different amounts of Nyama. As one ages, for instance, one's amount of Nyama increases, hence the respect given to older people. Blacksmiths are also believed to inherit large amounts of Nyama from their ancestors. They undergo a long and arduous training to learn how to handle Nyama. The work of the blacksmiths is seen as sacred. The forge is therefore a spiritual sanctuary, with the day starting with meditation and sacrifice. In the forge, the primordial creative act is reenacted by the blacksmith, with the hearth as the female element and the mass of the anvil the male organ.

The fusion of the female and the male is indispensable to the creation of life. In a similar vein, women who are mothers are elevated to the status of semi-gods. It is through the woman's womb, indeed, that God continues its creative work, thus making motherhood sacred. It is in the woman's body that Nyama's power asserts itself, causing life to germinate and thrive.

Ritual Practices

Whereas God is associated with masculinity, the Earth is associated with the feminine. The sky, God, is her husband, fertilizing her when it releases its sacred semen, rain, and also when it allows its light to shine on her. The Earth goddess is known as *Lennaya*. The Earth is particularly revered by those who engage in agriculture. Sacrifices are offered to the Earth spirit to ensure fertile yields on which the survival of the whole community depends. Farmers will ask for permission before sowing and for forgiveness for breaking the ground to plant seeds. The women will have the responsibility of placing the seed in the Earth itself, as an analogy between the Earth's and their own creative power.

In as deeply religious an environment as the Bamana, life is quite naturally highly ritualized. As another example of this, before cutting a tree down, one must ask for permission from the spirit that lives in the tree. Also, prior to starting to eat while in the forest, one must throw a few bits of food to the four cardinal points in acknowledgment of the environment as the place that gives food, thanks to God's work. Rituals, indeed, conform to the religious and natural order of things, thus reinforcing it. As human beings engage in rituals, they become participants in the cosmic drama called life.

The Bamana are reputed for their beautiful pottery, sculptures, *bokolanfini* cloth, and iron figures. Bamana masking traditions are also extensive and impressive. An object of particular fascination is the intricately carved headdress representing *Chi-wara*, a mythical and spiritual being who taught the Bamana the art of farming. The headdress amalgamates the horns of a big antelope, the body of an armadillo (a ground pig), and the scaly skin of a pangolin, all animals involved in digging the Earth. *Chi-wara* masquerades are often organized at the beginning of a new planting season to ensure a good harvest.

Ama Mazama

See also Ancestors; Fertility; Fire; Harvest; Rain; Rituals; Sacrifice

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BAMILEKE

The Bamileke people are located in the western province of Cameroon. They share a boundary with Anglophone Cameroon. Mount Bamboutous, a well-known demarcation of the Bamileke in Cameroon and abroad, extends to the Southwest up to the Nkam region. The High Lands of Dschang–Bana–Bangante, a relatively cold area for this part of Africa, divide the land from the North to the East.

The word *Bamileke* is a colonial corruption of the name of the Dschang people, who consider themselves Baliku—that is, the people of the hole in the Earth. Thus, the name Bamileke is not an original term and carries a meaning never intended by its people, although it has been embedded in the culture. The word simply attempts to provide a description of the location of the Bamileke people.

The Bamileke are found everywhere in the country given their large population in Cameroon. They live in small groups surrounded by farms. In overpopulated areas, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find unused land. The women are solely responsible for all farm work, whereas the men are breeders of small livestock; they are also merchants and craftsmen. In addition, the Bamileke have made good use of land between Nkongsamba and Douala toward the Bassa land in the Mbang and equally toward Banen of Ndikinimeki. They are owners of an important percentage of businesses in Douala.

Many secret societies are in operation among the 8 million Bamileke spread across more than 94 kingdoms. Given that they had a set of common customs, the people have built a common cultural identity and cohesiveness across the country. They hold closed “family” meetings and discuss and make decisions on family matters without involving external entities. Decisions usually address issues such as financial growth, reasons for a death in the family, and adherence to the process of becoming a successor. This custom, also widely known as *fumlah*, is seen as the nexus of Bamileke culture and religion; it is also widely believed and feared as a religion, in which a person, usually a man, donates to a close friend or family member evil spirits in the form of human beings in exchange for financial prosperity.

Like their neighbors, the Bamoun (Banoun), Kom, and Babanki, the Bamileke believe that human death is not a normal occurrence, but an act shrouded in mystery and mysticism. No matter what his or her age, when a person dies, his or her relatives must consult a doctor or find the reason for the death. Each person in the family is forced to come forward and swear before a totem that he or she has no hand in the death. If there is a murderer among them, he or she is instantly “trapped” by the totem. During the burial ceremony, the family member must undergo a ceremony involving pouring libations into the ground, and all material gathered from the spot is seen as the skull of the deceased.

Masquerades possessed with ancestral spirits and magical statues are common artifacts used within the kingdoms. These artifacts, including skulls of deceased ancestors and musical equipment—xylophones, drums, and flutes—are kept in a secret place in the home of the eldest living male in each lineage. During the celebration of death of personalities, like King Njoya’s mother (1913), elephant masks were worn to demonstrate their importance.

Women are expected to bear children. Irrespective of her marital status, if a woman does not have children, the Bamileke believe she has been bewitched. Consequently, the doctors are consulted, and remedies are provided that reverse the situation.

The Bamileke believe in the existence of the supreme god, Si, but Si is remote, and therefore the ancestor spirits as imbued in masquerades and statues are more common throughout the kingdoms. When an elder is obliged to relocate to inherit another compound and property, the previous home is first purified by a healer with divine powers, and a dwelling is built to house the ancestral skulls in the new location because the spirits have nowhere to reside, and leaving them with no home may cause irreparable trouble for the family.

Emmanuel Kombem Ngwainmbi

See also Ancestors; Children

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BAMUN

The Bamun are an important people from Cameroon. They have a rich religious and ceremonial history that reaches to the migration of King Nsara and his followers who entered the present-day Cameroon. The name *Bamun* literally refers to the area where the people finally settled, a valley that was called “mun,” “noun,” or “nun.”

Geographically, the Bamun kingdom is located near the lands of the Tikar, an artistically and culturally significant people. Both the Bamun and the Tikar are known as great artists creating enormous sculptures of bronze and beads. In many ways, the flow of the culture between the Tikar and the Bamun is one that has enriched both groups. The Bamun essentially adopted many words from the Tikar language. They also adopted words from other people, including the Bafanji, Bamali, and Bambalang. One can deduce that part of their moral mindset is influenced by the sociolinguistic and cultural climates in which they lived.

The Bamun have a rich cultural heritage; however, in contemporary times, the people have become mostly Islamic and Christian. Living in the area of volcanic mountains, the Bamun were known for festive occasions representing their experiences. For example, the people dressed in traditional colors and fabrics and paid homage to the history of the ethnic group at the palace of their kings. This practice, which can be traced to the 14th century, demonstrates a continuum of the monarchial reign and sovereignty. Thus, this tradition shows the high moral and ethical standards with which the Bamun upheld their values.

Before the Bamun adopted Islam during the time of the grandfather of the Sultan Ibrahim Mombo Njoya, they maintained a strong African tradition based on their ancestral heritage and customs. The seventh king of Bamun who became in fact the first king in the line of the Njoya royalty (the first king, Chare, 1394–1418), El Hadj Seydou Njimoluh Njoya accepted Islam, an alien religion, partly because he had many wives, but allowed his people the right to practice Christianity. Other Bamun still practiced the Bamun ancient religion. The Bamun king is considered among the most powerful traditional rulers in Africa, yet the

king allowed the people to continue the practice of the ancestral religion. The Bamun King Njoya presided over rituals in his palace that were based on local customs as a way of expressing continuum of the dynasty. The highly publicized *nguon* ceremony, one of the most elaborate in Africa, celebrates the 600 years of the dynasty.

Even today, the king, called *sultan* in the Islamic tradition, resides in the palace in the traditional town of Foumban. In the palace of the king are found the relics of the past kings and the history of the customs and traditions of the ancient Bamun. Kinship remains essential to the Bamun way of thinking about ancestors and life.

Emmanuel Kombem Ngwainmbi

See also Kings

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BANTU PHILOSOPHY

Bantu philosophy refers to the philosophy, religious worldview, and ethical principles of the Bantu people articulated by the first generation of African intellectuals and founders of contemporary African philosophy and theology. Originally it referred to research done on traditional culture between 1950 and 1990 in Central Africa, and more specifically in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda by philosophers and theologians such as Mulago Gwa Cikara Musharamina, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti, Mutuza Kabe, and Alexis Kagame.

This research was part of the process of decolonization of knowledge that began with the collapse of European colonial empires in the wake of the

first and second world wars. This research intended to rediscover the ancestral philosophical worldview and spiritual values that had been denigrated and distorted by the colonial education. This goal was accomplished by analyzing African proverbs; the structure of Bantu languages, songs, art, and music; and various customs and social institutions. In so doing, “Bantu Philosophy” scholars defined the criteria needed for a philosophy or theology to be “African.” These criteria involved the use of African languages and an African worldview. This method of philosophizing and theologizing was inaugurated in 1910 by Stephane Kaoze, the first Congolese to gain a substantial training in modern philosophy. In his work titled “La Psychologie des Bantu” (“Bantu Psychology”), Kaoze articulated what he regarded as the Bantu way of thinking about knowledge, moral values, God, life, and afterlife. Working in the context of Christian evangelization, Kaoze called for the replacement of colonial Christianity with an “African Christianity.” For such an Africanization of Christianity to occur, he maintained that the gospel should be preached in foreign languages and with foreign method, and that it should address the real issues of African lives, including colonial oppression. He inaugurated the basic method of African theology, which consists of the following elements:

- the establishment of the elements of a traditional African philosophy and a philosophical anthropology to be used as foundation for a theological discourse;
- the use of traditional religion and wisdom (proverbs, myths of creation, traditional vision of God, traditional ethic, and oral literature) as the foundation for theology;
- the use of African languages;
- unveiling the “cultural unity” of African cultures through comparative studies that grasp the common features of African worldviews, ethical principles, and spiritual values and use them to articulate an African theology; and
- the defense and promotion of human rights as a fundamental task of African theology.

However, it is the book published in 1945 by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels that popularized the notion of Bantu philosophy in Africa and in the West.

Published in 1945 (first in Lubumbashi, Congo), this small book written by a Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels generated a long controversy that played an important role in the development of contemporary African philosophy and Inculturation theology. *Bantu Philosophy* is a small book divided into seven chapters: “In Search of a Bantu Philosophy” (chapter I), “Bantu Ontology” (chapter II), “Bantu Wisdom” (chapter III), “Bantu Psychology” (or “The Theory of ‘Muntu,’” chapter IV), “Bantu Ethics” (chapter V), “Restoration of Life” (Chapter VI), and “Bantu Philosophy and Our Mission to Civilize” (chapter VII). The merit of the book resides not in its content, which is quite poor, but rather in its challenge and revolutionary outlook clearly stated in the seventh chapter:

The discovery of Bantu philosophy is a disturbing event for all those who are concerned with African education. We have had the idea that we stood before them like adults before the newly-born. In our mission to educate and to civilize, we believed that we started with a “tabula rasa,” though we also believed that we had to clear the ground of some worthless notions, to lay foundations in a bare soil. We were quite sure that we should give short shrift to stupid customs, vain beliefs, as being quite ridiculous and devoid of all sound sense. We thought that we had children, “great children,” to educate; and that seemed easy enough. Then all at once we discovered that we were concerned with a sample of humanity, adult, aware of its own brand of wisdom and moulded by its own philosophy of life. That is why we feel the soil slipping under our feet, that we are losing track of things and why we are asking ourselves “what to do now to lead our coloured people?” (p. 73)

Like many European missionaries, Tempels embarked for the Congo imbued with Levy-Bruhl’s myths about the primitive mind. However, after years of work among the Baluba, Tempels realized the mistakes of the Western idea of Africa. Having carefully studied the Kiluba language and discovered the wisdom of Luba proverbs and worldview, Tempels underwent a deep conversion that led him to acknowledge

African moral values and the value of the Luba conception of God. In a time when the notion of primitive people was taken for granted, Tempels shocked the European world by choosing as the title for his discovery of Luba worldview “Bantu philosophy,” rather than “primitive philosophy” or “religious thought,” as Marcel Griaule did with the philosophy of the Dogon. He demystified the colonial invention of a savage Africa by demonstrating the existence of a coherent Bantu ontology, a sound system of belief in the Supreme Being, and a coherent ethical system that guides African existential trajectory. Well before the proclamation of the United Nations’ Charter of Human Rights, Tempels argued that the Bantu have a clear vision of human dignity and the rights of the individual. He even speculated on the relationship between Pharaonic Egypt and Bantu philosophy. This was radically antithetical to the prevailing Hegelian Paradigm, Social Darwinism, and Levy-Bruhlian theories of primitivism. Although Tempels still remained captive of the colonial worldview and the belief in the superiority of Christianity, his mea culpa opened the door to a radical demystification of colonial scholarship. This is why the fathers of the Negritude Movement, such as Leopold Sedar Senghor and Alioune Diop, and the nascent publishing house “Presence Africaine” embraced Tempels and promoted the book in French and English translations.

Bantu Philosophy is therefore not simply a book or the philosophy of the Bantu people, but also a way of thinking that honors African humanity by acknowledging “African rationality” and a meaningful African presence in world religions and in the global community of philosophers.

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Cosmology; Ontology

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BANYANKORE

Banyankore is a word spoken in the Bantu family of languages and corresponds to “the people of Nkore,” comprising the *Bahima* (singular *Muhima*) and the *Bairu* (singular *Mwiru*), two relatively autonomous peoples cohabiting Nkore near the end of the 15th century. Runyankore, a form of Bantu, is the traditional language of both Bahima and the Bairu. When the British arrived at the turn of the 20th century, Nkore was one of four kingdoms in East-Central Africa located among the high plateaus and fertile plains that make up the southwest region of present-day Uganda. Upon incorporation into the Ugandan Protectorate in 1901, Nkore became known as the province of Ankole.

Distinct and markedly different ways of life characterized Bahima and Bairu economic, political, and social structures. The Bahima were pastoralists whose primary means of subsistence centered on cattle herding. Meat and dairy products such as butter and milk formed the basis of the Bahima diet. Gifting cattle served as a means of obtaining patronage from local authorities and the principal dowry exchanged during weddings. Military regimen and warfare, especially against encroaching cattle thieves, was a regular aspect of Bahiman life. The political structure revealed a centralized government administered through a monarchical system of leadership. Control of the government rested with the *Mugabe*, or king, who was chosen from among a Bahima clan called the Bahinda. An *Enganzi*, or court favorite, served as personal counsel to the Mugabe.

In contrast to this seminomadic existence, Bairu life was sedentary and largely communal or clan-based in nature. The cultivation of vegetables was the primary means of subsistence and formed the greater part of the Bairu diet. An artisan class existed and produced pottery for Bahima cattle herders and weaponry for Bahima warriors. Although intermarriage between the two groups was exceptional, some Bairu did become local authorities within the Bahima political framework through marriage to Bahima women.

Cultural life in Nkore revolved around the *Bagyendanwa*, or royal drums. The Banyankore connected the Bagyendanwa to the historical

founding of the kingdom of Nkore. The drums were the fundamental part of the regalia that served to legitimize the Bahinda clan as the royal bloodline of Nkore's monarchy. The Banyankore revered the Bagyendanwa as a symbol of authority and national unification. No monarch could rule without possession of the drums, which were male and female. Similarly, the Banyankore believed that the national sovereignty of Nkore rested with the Bagyendanwa and therefore hid the drums during times of war. As a means of ancestral veneration and reflexive memory, the Banyankore offered supplication and gave charity in the customs of fellowship and good will that the drums represented.

Although traditional scholarship holds that the Banyankore worshipped the drums, the Banyankore did not believe that the drums possessed a spirit, and this interpretation is inconsistent with African religious practice (see e.g., the function of the Golden Stool in the Asante kingdom).

Malachi D. Crawford

See also Bantu Philosophy; Drum, The; Kings

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BANYARWANDA

Banyarwanda (singular *Munyarwanda*) is a word originating in the Bantu family of languages meaning “the people of Rwanda” and consisting of three caste groups: the Batutsi, cattle herders; the Bahutu, agricultural cultivators; and the Batwa, hunters and pottery-makers. From the 15th century until its colonization by Germany in the final years of the

20th century, Rwanda was a kingdom located in East Africa, to the south of Uganda, and bordered by Lake Tanganyika, Lake Victoria, and Lake Kivu.

The Banyarwanda perceive *Imana* as the Supreme God that created the universe and everything within it. *Imana* is essentially good and the life-giving force that sustains all existence. The material world that humans experience is one of three planes of reality. Another world called *ijuru* exists above the sky, while a third reality exists beneath the ground. Both of these two anterior realms are similar in appearance to the material realities of human existence and are not conceptually comparable to notions of heaven and hell. Banyarwanda believe that, after traversing the sky in the daytime, the sun is cut into pieces by a man who throws its bone back across the heavens where it is reborn the next day.

Because *Imana* does not intercede into the daily affairs of mankind, for many Banyarwanda, the most direct means of connecting with the spiritual realm is through invoking the sacred power of lesser gods, ancestors, diviners, or sorcerers. One such lesser god is *Ryangombe*, the personal servant and expression of *Imana*. Banyarwanda believe that *Ryangombe* has the power to influence human affairs and that human will enters the world through him. *Ryangombe* works through the power of his spoken word and often acts on behalf of the weak and vulnerable of society, sometimes as a challenge to established authority. Banyarwanda appeal to *Ryangombe* for good fortune. *Nyabingi*, meaning abundant, rich, or one that provides, is a female demigod with sacred power that equals *Ryangombe*'s in strength.

Knowledge of the meaning and uses of sacred power in society is imperative to understanding Banyarwandan cosmology. Authority was dependent on one's command of sacred power in Banyarwandan society—a king could not rule without it. In part, a king's ability to maintain powerful practitioners of sacred power at his court or in his service was an indirect reflection on his own sacred power.

Human beings, both living and dead, have significant powers within this sacred order. For example, although *Imana* determines the nature of one's life, ancestors influence its purpose. To forget one's ancestry is to forget one's purpose and can cause great harm. So, although a *Munyarwanda* will

make an offering to an ancestor with the foreknowledge that the physical acceptance of the offering is impossible, it is the fact of remembrance and the act of giving that aide in the remittance of trouble. Diviners—those Banyarwandans who can commune with the spiritual realm—are sought out to examine the source of a personal problem. Conversely, sorcerers are thought to be criminals who practice a learned form of sacred power that can harm others. Being suspected or accused of sorcery is a serious matter, while being convicted of sorcery is punishable by death.

Malachi D. Crawford

See also God

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BARIBA

The Bariba, also called the *Baatonu*, *Baatombu*, *Baruba*, *Bargu*, *Burgu*, *Berba*, *Barba*, *Bogung*, *Bargawa*, or *Barganchi*, are the *Baatonum*-speaking ethnic group of the northern part of Benin Republic in the Borgou-Alibori province. They actually call themselves *Baatonu* (singular) and *Baatombu* (plural).

Originally, the Bariba migrated from northern Nigeria to establish in Benin. However, a few of them, about 60,000, are still found in that country today, which represents one tenth of their population in Benin Republic. The Bariba are the largest ethnic group in northern Benin and the fourth largest group in the country, following the Fon, the Adja, and the Yoruba, thus representing 10% of the population of Benin Republic. They are predominantly herders (who raise poultry and livestock), farmers (who grow corn, sorghum, cassava, yam, beans, peanuts, rice, and cotton), and brave professional hunters.

Many Bariba are known to be superb clothweavers as well. The latter, especially Bariba women, create excellent designs of woven cloths patterned in beautiful colors worn as traditional attire. The most notable festive event among the Bariba is the annual celebration in honor of the ancestors, called the *Gaani*, which is observed throughout major Bariba cities, namely, Kandi, Kouande, Nikki, Parakou, and Pehunco, the largest city, home to more than 200,000 Bariba out of 365,000 inhabitants.

The Bariba society is strictly hierarchical and caste-like. There are groupings as varied as the ruling *Wasangari* nobles and warriors, the commoners *Baatombu*, the enslaved people of varying origins, the *Dendi* merchants, and the *Fulbe* herders. The Bariba still have kings and chiefs in various regions, such as the *Banga* (Ruler) in Kouande, the *Saka* (Ruler) in Kandi, and the *Sarkin Nikki* (Ruler) in Nikki.

Religion is one of the most significant aspects of the Bariba communities and a strong determinant of their Cosmology. Many Bariba, like most ethnic groups in northern Benin Republic today, are proselytized Muslims. The *Dendi* traders, who were preaching throughout the north of the country, introduced them to Islam. Otherwise, the original religion of the Bariba is the African Traditional Religion or the Popular Traditional African Religion Everywhere (PTARE), as the leading Afrocentrist, Molefi K. Asante, termed it. Despite Islam's stronghold in the northern Benin Republic, the majority of the ruling upper class Bariba communities continue, against all odds, to practice their indigenous religion, PTARE.

In the Bariba Cosmology, *GuSunon* (*Gu* = rain, *Sunon* = Ruler), hence Ruler of Heaven and Earth, is the Supreme God. The Bariba never call on Him directly and invoke *GuSunon* through the instrumentality of several deities known as *Bunu*. The *Goribu* (i.e., the dead in general) and the *Sikadobu* (or the family divine ancestors) are venerated as well. There are several worship places, which are by a tree, in a river, or in a farm. Each sacred temple is overseen by a traditional priest, who presides over various sacrifices, the *Gnakuru* to the gods, and performs benediction or *Domaru* on various occasions—in times of calamity, disease, famine, drought, during the enthronement of a dignitary, and during festive celebrations. Various meanings are attached to the places of worship. They are either linked to an event of primal significance

pertaining to the history of the village or to heroic deeds of a family, to a legend, or to a person possessed by one of the *Bunu* or deities. For example, *Bion Kuru*, *Kiriku*, *Seema*, or *Kaau bii* fall into a trance during traditional dances, such as the *Bukakaaru*, the calabash/gourd dance.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Ancestors; Priests

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BAROTSE

The name *Barotse* refers to an extensive group of people who occupy the Western part of Zambia, portions of Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. They also may be called Barotsi, Barutse, Bulози, Marotse, Rotse, Rozi, and Lozi. The original name of the Barotse was Aluyi. For purposes of this entry, the name *Barotse* will refer to all of the people mentioned.

Barotse history is complex. The Barotse people are organized with a paramount king and many subkings. Indeed, it has been said that it is a nation of royals because of the proliferation of kingships. Arriving in their present area around the 16th century under the leadership of Mboo Mwanasilandu, the Barotse established their capital at Lealui. In the vicinity of the capital, the Mashona people, the majority in Zimbabwe, often traded with the Barotse, creating a common trade language that was understood by both groups. However, it was not the Mashona who were to have the greatest impact on the complexity of Barotse history, but another ethnic group from the south, the Makololo.

In the early 19th century, a powerful conquering monarch of the Basotho people, Sebitoane, led his Makalolo armies from what is now South Africa north through the territories of the Tswana and Shona people leaving devastation in his wake. Passing through the Kalahari Desert, they encountered the Barotse people on the flat flood plains of the Zambezi and subdued them. The armies of Imasiku, the paramount king of Aluyi, were

conquered in 1838. The Makololo called the Aluyi, whom they had met and defeated by a new name, Barotse, meaning “people of the plains.” In the following years, the Barotse became subject people, rising only as high as they were permitted by the Makololo elite. After 40 years of subservience to the Makololo, the Barotse revolted and eliminated most of the Basotho-Makololo royalty and oligarchy, reestablishing their own kingship lineage.

With the destruction of Sebitoane’s dynasty in 1864, the Barotse had declared their national independence and selected Sipopa as their king. They were soon, however, to be subjected to British colonialism. Nevertheless, the people retained their cultural practices and heritage based on their long history. The king and the *mokwai*, who is usually the eldest sister of the king, rule with the authority and prerogatives of the ancestors. They are considered equal, the male and the female ruler, and each is required to obtain the assent of the other before a national edict or law is passed.

The Barotse believe that the Supreme Deity is a solar deity in the sense that the sun embodies the power of a force that energizes the universe. There are no shrines built to this deity, but there are many ceremonies and rituals intended to appease ancestral and other spirits. All evil is associated with some spirit. According to the beliefs of the Barotse, the ancestral spirits must be consulted and celebrated on a regular basis as a way of maintaining harmony and peace in the society.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; God; Kings

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BASSA

Within the context of African religion, the term *Bassa* has strong geopolitical and historical connotations. In historico-geographic terms, the

Bassa people have Kemetic origins, having migrated from Egypt following the collapse of the Adbassa Empire in the 6th century to Bassa-ri, Land of the Bassa, which include portions of modern-day Senegal, Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo, and Cameroon. Oral historical accounts indicate that the term *Bassa* seems to relate to the combination of the words *Baah*, meaning “father,” and *sooh*, meaning “stone.” Thus, one could derive the name Father Stone from Bassa. Indeed, an important king was given that name in Bassa history. Supposedly European merchants, attempting to negotiate relations with their African counterparts in the 15th century, struggled to pronounce *Baah Sooh Nyombe*, meaning “Father Stone’s people.”

The people are known as Gboboh, Adbassa, or Bambog-Mbog, an initiate of their patriarch and elder, *Mbog*, offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to metaphysical forces for protection and blessings—rights of appropriation, in ethnological terms, consistently had political influence in all of their settlements.

The Bassa people live in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Cameroon. They are found in the central region of the Grand Bassa in Liberia, Rivercess, and Montserrado counties, and in Cameroon they are found in the Littoral, Central, and South provinces. Some Bassa are found in Togo and are called Basari; in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they are called the Bassa Mpoku. Culturally, the Bassa people are classified under Niger-Congo. Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benu-Congo, Bantoid, Southern Northwest, and Basaa include such dialects as Basa, Bisaa, Mbele, Mee, Tupen, Bikyek, Mbene, Bicek, Mvele, Bakem, Ndokama, Basso, Ndogbele, Bibeng, Bon, Log, Mpo, Mbang, Myamtam, Diboum, and Ndokpenda. This entry looks at their language and religious beliefs.

Language

The ability of the Bassa language to communicate different meanings in one word presents the Bassa not only as wordsmiths, but it speaks to their intellectual ingenuity and ability to influence opinion. Proverbs, a typical mode of expression among the elderly, are aimed at soliciting important information. They provide primary and deeper meanings that must match the context in which they are

used. Proverbs are mostly used in formal settings and during solemn discourse such as family meetings, court proceedings presided by the village chief, meetings of the council of elders, or during discussions on how to lead a morally upright life.

Bassa proverbs usually point to difficult and complex problems whose solutions require pragmatic reasoning, hence to understand them careful discernment of the terms in their totality is expected. For example, “The elders can always find the crab’s heart” suggests that elderly people are smart and brilliant enough because of experience to locate the most difficult of objects; therefore, they can locate any problem and solve it. Due to their longevity, experiences full of patience, careful scrutiny, and repertoire of knowledge, the elderly person can find the crab’s heart.

On the psycholinguistic and semantic levels, Bassa constructs the brand of a powerful language with apt imagery and multivariate meanings. The Bassa of Cameroon address themselves within the same context of a plurilinguistic community with supernatural potential. They are *Bon ba Ngoock* (“Children of the Rock”) and *Bon ba Mbog Liaa* (“Children of the Tradition of the Rock”). They are associated with *Hilolombi*, The Supreme Being, the Most High. *Hilolombi* comprises three roots: the normative article *hi*, complementing *iloo* (to surpass), and the adjective *nlombi* (ancient) when combined means “The-Greatest, Eldest” or “The-Greatest-Because-The-Eldest.” Given that *Hilolombi*, the Supreme Being, is neither male nor female, but a divine authority with grandeur, one capable of mercy provides the basis for mitigating male and female principles in the Bass-ri.

Religion and Moral and Ethical Behavior

The current moral and ethical foundation of the Bassa is contained in a compendium of ancient and modern sociolinguistic and ancient values, where traditional and Judeo-Christian principles often clash or blend, with decisions made and opinions formed in consultation with the oracles, the Holy Bible, or other supernatural entities. Traditional customs are deeply connected to the spirit world where humans are transformations of the supernatural.

The deceased are not dead; they have moved to another realm and can be reached by libation performed by the living. They are helpful to the

living in decision making and judgments about the future. Therefore, the way to maintain stability and harmony in society is to remember to ritualize the deceased ancestors, who can help bring about healing, solutions to problems, and order.

Besides *Mbog* Panther-men, and law makers, there are *Mbombog* and its confraternities, *Um*-the Watersnake-men and judges; *Nge*-Leopard-men and executors; *Njek*- specialized in the implementation of immanent justice; *Ngambi*-revealer of secret truths, present and future; *Koo*-Snail-women; *Ngam*-Spider-men and soothsayers, among other spiritual forces that mitigate ethical comportment.

The Bible translated into Bassa was published in 1922, 1939, and 1969, giving the Bassa almost 9 decades of experience with a new religion. The Christian idea of God as both a revengeful and compassionate or merciful Supreme Being who punishes wrongdoers and rewards the righteous now permeates the psyche of the Bassa, who equally see the Creator, Elder, as something to nurture in every member of that society. By the same token, because the most important personality in the village is the eldest *Mbog*-*Mbog*, the Creator is greatest because He is the eldest. Therefore, it is the greatest mistake to adopt someone else's idea of God. However, the idea of the Christian God and that of *Mbog*-*mbog* coexist in the psyche of the Bassa.

Emmanuel Kombem Ngwainmbi

See also Ancestors; Oracles

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BASUTO

The Basuto people live in southern Africa. They are a nation composed of numerous Sotho-speaking people who were organized into one nation, Lesotho, by the legendary king, Moshoeshoe I. Whereas the Sotho-speaking people existed prior

to the union created by Moshoeshoe I, the specific nation of Lesotho is a direct result of the political activity of the king.

The Basuto live in the high savanna regions of southern Africa. Among the main groups of Basuto are the Northern Sotho, including the Lovedu and the Pedi; the Western Sotho, who are really the Tswana; and the Southern Sotho, the Basuto proper of the nation of Lesotho. Most scholars agree that the language spoken by the Basuto is a Bantu language similar to hundreds of languages in southern and eastern Africa. For example, it is closely related to Nguni, Venda, and Tsonga. The language of Basuto is agglutinative because it uses affixes and derivational and inflexional rules to build words. The name of the language is Sesotho. It is one of the languages from which the artificial language Tsotsitaal is derived in South Africa. It is a unique lexicon and a set of idioms that are used with the grammar of Sesotho or Zulu. During the past 2 decades, it has become the language of the Kwaito music in the townships.

Inasmuch as the European domination of much of the Sotho culture created a serious rupture in the traditional religion of the people at the visible level, the language carries an enormous wealth of information about the way the Basuto see the world. For example, the word *morithi*, which has the meaning of shade or shadow of a human being, has been translated in English as spirit. However, it is to be understood from the Basuto perspective as also conveying the idea of dignity or reputation and expresses the view that one can become *morithi*, one of the ancestors after death.

There is one critical way in which the traditional religion of the Basuto has been corrupted by the Christian interpretations brought into the language. The Basuto word *Modimo* means essentially the Almighty God. One does not have a plural for this word in the Basuto. Yet the Europeans introduced a plural in the form of *medimo*, meaning "gods," a foreign concept in the Sesotho language. When the Sesotho speak of the ancestors, they use the term *badimo*, the ancestors; the word is never used in the singular. One speaks of a person being among the ancestors.

In the 19th century, when the whites began their push into the interior of South Africa, producing a domino effect on various African

nations, Moshoeshoe I opened his kingdom to people who had been displaced by the great chaos of warfare. The king used the strategy of asking Europeans to come live with his people as a way of having access to guns and ammunitions as the whites were pushing into his territory. Nevertheless, the missionaries were not able to prevent the inevitable conflicts between the Afrikaners and the British. The Afrikaners/Boers had started to move into the area around 1831. Moshoeshoe I appealed to the British for aid in fighting the Afrikaners/Boers, but the British did not respond until 1868 when Queen Victoria granted some protection. The Basuto people were placed under a British protectorate and gained their independence in 1966.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; God; Kings

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BATA DRUMS

Bata Drums are a set of three drums that are of Yoruba origin (ethnic group of Nigeria, West Africa). Although these drums originated in Nigeria, they are also found in Cuba due to the forced enslavement and migration of Africans from Old Dahomey to the former Spanish colony of Cuba during the era of African enslavement. The drums are used to play the sacred music of the Yoruba people.

There are two types of Bata drums: the traditional Bata, which are played in Nigeria, West Africa, and those that are played in Cuba by practitioners of the Lucumi and Santeria spiritual systems (Yoruba-based). The Bata drum is a hollowed wooden cylinder (carved wood/glued slats of wood) with two open ends (each of different

diameter) that are covered by specially treated goat or cow skin. The skins of traditional (Nigeria) Bata are attached to the body of the drum by a system of interwoven straps. The skins of the Cuban Bata are attached to the drum's body by a series of metal rings and tension rods.

Both types of Bata are played at both ends as they sit horizontally on the lap of the Bata drummers. The traditional Bata are played with leather straps, whereas the Cuban Bata are played by hand. Both heads of each of the three drums has its own distinct sonar range. While playing these drums, each player produces a distinct rhythm, which, when combined with the other rhythms, produces polyrhythms designated for various Orisa (deities) of the Yoruba/Lucumi/Santeria pantheon. The combined Bata music, songs, and dancing operate in concert to invoke the deities and spiritual possession.

Along with its own distinct range, each Bata has its own character and name. The lead drum, called the *Iya* (EE-Yah), which means mother in Yoruba, is the largest and lowest in range. The middle drum (in range and size) is called the *Itotele* (EE-toh-ta-lay), a Yoruba-derived name that implies completed action. The *Ikonkolo* (EE-Kon-Ko-Lo), the smallest drum and highest in range, derives its name from a combination of the words *Koh* (to sing) and *Lo* (to play a musical instrument). Additionally, the *Iya* is adorned with a string of small bells called the *Chawuoro* or *Chaguoro*, which enhances the sound of the drum, and a resin-like substance called *Ida* (EE-dah), which is placed at the center of the largest head to dampen the sound.

Bata drums require special care, which includes consecration, feeding, and special storage. The drums are consecrated by a *babalawo* (traditional priest) after they are constructed. The feeding of the Bata drums involves sacrifice and ritual, which is conducted by the *Babalawo* before they are played in ceremony. When not being played, the Bata are placed with their smallest heads facing up or hung from the wall and not allowed to touch the ground. Bata drums are also thought to possess magical powers.

Kefentse K. Chike

See also Dance and Song; Drum, The; Santeria

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BATONGA

The Batonga are a southeastern African ethnic group that can be found in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. Their historians say that they originated in a land in northeast Africa and migrated to their present area during a period of political and social unrest. It is also believed that the Batonga are related to the Maravi or the Tumbuka because their languages are similar. However, among the Bantu, it is possible to see similarities in the languages and yet not be able to detect a direct line of descent.

The Tonga or Batonga claim to be a separate ethnic group largely because they share a common language and a common name for their group. Their language is called *chiTonga*, meaning the “language of the Tonga.” The Batonga, for example, do not accept the identification of the Tumbuka or the Maravi. Nevertheless, their identity has been complicated by the fact that they were invaded and conquered, in part, by the mighty Ngoni during their migrations up and down the Rift Valley and into southern Africa. A group of Ngoni reached the area of the Batonga as late as the 19th century and defeated the Batonga in battle, subduing them and integrating them into the Ngoni civil and social systems.

The Ngoni were a patrilineal people, after having adopted the practice hundreds of years before, and they forced the matrilineal Batonga to accept the new pattern of descent. By 1855, most of the villages of the Batonga were matrilineal and had become areas under the domination of the Ngoni army. Incorporated into the Ngoni military units, the Batonga soldiers were forced to perform the most menial of tasks. However, in 1876, the Batonga rose in a violent

revolt against their Ngoni overlords and fought fiercely for independence. They were unsuccessful, and the reaction of the Ngoni was severe. Members of the royal house of the Batonga were killed, the oversight of the Batonga people became more stringent, and the use of the Batonga in military raids was increased, also increasing the possibility that they would become fodder for the armies of opponents.

Remnants of the Batonga who were able to escape the power of the Ngoni built their villages on small islands in the middle of Lake Nyasa or in fortresses alongside the shores of the lake. This gave them military advantage and protection from marauding armies. It is easy to see how the religion of the Batonga was influenced by their lifestyle.

Living in and around Lake Nyasa in Malawi, the Batonga developed a deep regard for water. They became principally fishers, although they ate cassava as one of the mainstays of their diets. Given that the Batonga were infiltrated by Ngoni culture, they adopted many of the customs and styles of the Ngoni. They used *lobola*, a gift of cattle, for marriage payments, and they adopted the Ngoni tradition of the family paying the husband’s family if the wife became ill. There were certain rules to keep males from divorcing wives without public hearing and repudiation, although the wives could dismiss their husbands without any such formality. This may have been one of the holdovers from the time of the woman-centered tradition of the Batonga. If a woman died away from her family, they could demand payment from the husband.

The Batonga people have a distant supreme deity who is quite remote—so remote, in fact, that the people do not call his name because he does not figure in their lives at all. It is only when they are pressed to discuss the nature of creation that the Batonga would reveal the fact that they believe in a supreme deity. Otherwise, the Batonga honor the ancestors whom they have known. They consult diviners, believe in the power of spirit transcendence, and search for answers to ordinary problems from the ancestors. All spirits are respected, consulted, and propitiated as needed by the society.

There is also a belief in reincarnation. The Batonga believe that after death a person could receive another totem—that is, by consulting the

diviners, following certain rituals, and taking special herbs, a person could become any animal or person he or she wished to be after death.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also God; Marriage

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BATS

Bats have been recognized as some of the most mystical creatures and are so often misunderstood. Bats are the only existing flying mammals and, over the course of their long history, have been depicted with much negativity. Commonly, in various media portrayals, they are said to be evil. However, in Africa, bats have their sacred place in the cycle of life. One can say that the mission of the bat cannot be replaced by any other mammal no matter how close the similarities. These social creatures are nocturnal and possess the uncanny ability to move in darkness and rely on sonar in their nose for perfect navigation. They are also clairaudient: They have a keen sense of hearing that also makes them unique.

Bats contribute to life because their consumption of vegetation assists pollination and seed dispersal. In Ghana, the straw-colored fox (a kind of bat), as it is referred to, relies on the Iroko tree, one of Africa's leading agricultural products. This tree is highly valued because of its strength and color.

Most bats are mainly fruitarians, but will eat insects, birds, and even chicken. Their waste product, "guano," is one of their most interesting features because it is used as a fertilizer. The African fruit bats are also considered allies to many who rely on the West African locust tree for sustenance. The locust tree is a survival food and offers a source of calories and nutrients, especially during times of drought or famine. The locust tree is

often used as firewood, shelter for livestock, and shade and protection. A reliable resource, its falling leaves nurture the soil, its bark and twigs help with dental care, and it remains a source of sustenance for bats.

Bats—particularly the mouse-tailed bat, native to Egypt as long as 4,000 years ago—were commonly found hanging out with mummies. During the winter months, bats would hibernate in the pyramids, eating and drinking every day, but moving about less often than usual. Their acclimation to the desert environment complements their ability to live off their own fat deposits when food is scarce. The hammer-headed fruit bat lived in the forest of Gambia, Ethiopia, and Angola near swamps and rivers, feasting on mangrove and palm trees. In Central Africa, the fruit bat, or *epailette* bat, also lives in forests or fields consuming ripened fruit and juices.

Another bat common to Africa is the yellow-winged bat, also considered the "false vampire bat" and one of the best looking of all the species. These creatures are blue-gray or blue-brown with yellow wings and ears. The female bat is the hunter, whereas the father protects and feeds the offspring. Yellow-winged bats mate for life and roost in acacia trees, primarily in the flowers where they attract insects for food. Another interesting feature of the fruit bat is how they hide or nestle themselves within pouches in their shoulders. These pouches have glands that give off a strong odor, which is absorbed and used as a female magnet. This is an instrumental part of their mating process because they are able to fill the air with their scent to attract their female counterpart.

In Africa in earlier times, and later cross-culturally, bats were a powerful symbol, representing the souls of the dead, initiation, rebirth, happiness, and longevity. With respect to nature, bats or totems represent time for transition or transformation and letting go of the obstacles that may hinder growth. They also reflect people's need to come face to face or soul to soul with their true and higher selves. Bats are also symbolic of new truth and imply great strength and stamina to handle ordeals that may beset people as they open to new awareness or consciousness. Bat medicine teaches people to trust their instincts, open themselves to new beginnings, and demonstrate the ability to embrace the promise and power that comes from this awakening.

Bats have also been long associated with lore, mysticism, and religion. In the Ivory Coast, bats were seen as the spirits of the dead; in Madagascar, they were known as the souls of criminals or the buried dead. In the Cameroon, bats were capable of blood sucking the life force of a person while sleeping. Furthermore, consistent with Ibibio tribe, bats were connected to witchcraft. For instance, the Ibibio believe that if a bat came into a home and touched someone, that person was considered bewitched. Bats are also often associated with nighttime or darkness, when most rituals were performed.

The blood, heart, and other parts of bats were often used by African healers for specific purposes. In ritualistic ceremonies, a bat's blood was used for spell work directed toward discord, tension, and havoc; its eye is used against harm and evil and works as protection. Despite their negative reputation, bats have played a vital role in the cycle of life and have made a contribution to African religious ceremonies.

Elizabeth Andrade

See also Animals; Rituals

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BATWA

The Batwa, also known as the Twa (sing.) people, are one of the ethnic groups among the original inhabitants of the equatorial forest of Central Africa. The forest was granted to them by the Creator as part of their right and responsibility to preserve the Great Lakes region. When the Creator had distributed all the land to other groups, he left the high mountains and plains around Lake Kivu in Congo (Kinshasa), Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi for the Batwa people to make their home. Standing at a short stature with red skin and

prominent foreheads, eyes, and teeth, the Batwa were endowed with the safekeeping of the forest, which provided them with nourishments and medicines and a place for sacred grounds. In this regard, the Batwa became the guardians of the forest and its primary benefactors. This made the people unique beings in that they lived in harmony with the forest region that enabled them to become specialists in forest skills, such as hunting and gathering and preparing herbal medicines. Because of this harmonious relationship with their environment, the Batwa lifestyle was rich in song, dance, and musical gatherings, which were influenced by their surroundings. In general, the Batwa utilized an equalized social system based on their understanding of collectivism. That is, they practiced a communal relationship with one another, a relationship that allowed them to rely on each member of the community to contribute to the overall well-being of the group. Their collective work and efforts, as well as their unique relationship with the forest, entitled the Batwa to consider themselves as supreme. As a result of their special sense of self, and in an effort to protect it, they worshipped the spirits in the forest to preserve their special rights. Their responsibility and privilege as guardians of the forest enabled them to have a unique connection to the resources of the lands, and this allowed them to gain specialized knowledge of herbs and other natural products. This knowledge gained is transmitted in oral history through Rutwa, which is the language of the Batwa people's songs and stories. Moreover, the Batwa people have a special relationship to the spirits of the land and to the land itself. Their rituals and ceremonies exhibit the felt necessity for the people to sanctify and legitimize rituals surrounding such events as the installations of the kings and the prosperity and reproduction of their own societies. The Batwa people are acknowledged as the original instructors and leaders of the forest community, and they are therefore enabled to guide and teach others about the spiritual connection between the people and the forest, as their rightful place to protect and preserve, while utilizing the lands for the growth and continuation of the Batwa society.

Marquita Pellerin

See also Medicine; Trees

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BAWON SAMDI

One of the classifications of deities in Haitian Vodou is the *Gede* family, or spirits of the dead. *Bawon Samdi* (also sometimes spelled Baron Samedi) is the father of the hundreds of Gede and Bawon (Bawon La Croix, Bawon Kriminel, Gede Nimbo, Gede Zareyen, Gede Ti Pete, and Gede Ti Pise, to name a few). *Gran Brijit*, Bawon's wife and mother of all the Gede and *Gedelia*, are some of the rare females. The Gede are viewed as *Lwa creole*, who did not originate from Benin, but were instead born on the island.

Bawon is considered to be wise because he holds the knowledge of the dead and the outer world. The first body buried in a cemetery is said to become the manifestation of Bawon, guardian of the cemetery; the first female becomes the manifestation of *Gran Brijit*. When Bawon ventures out of the kingdom of the dead, he must wear dark or colored glasses to protect his eyes from the bright light. However, he frequently takes out the right lens to see in the world of the living while the other lens allows him to keep an eye on the realm of the dead. It is also said that with his right eye he keeps an eye on his food, as Bawon Samdi is notorious for his formidable appetite. He even makes his own liquor: a raw *kleren*, a form of cheap rum, steeped in 21 spices, and so spicy that no other *Lwa* can bear to drink it.

At times Bawon Samdi comes to Earth as a ragtag beggar, but he usually wears formal attire, which includes his top hat, tailcoat, and long black cane, complete with a skull handle. Although his dress attire may indicate otherwise, he is quite a trickster, and he spends much of his time engaging in lewd, licentious behavior as he ridicules those who take themselves too seriously.

Bawon is very much a partier, and no Vodou ceremony ends without one of the Gede, often *Gede Nimbo* (called Papa Gede), arriving to liven things up. Bawon's presence is a constant reminder to those in the land of the living that all must succumb in the end to Bawon, ruler of the afterlife.

Bawon Samdi drinks black coffee or vodka and gin, the strongest of all alcohol, and he often smokes strong cigarettes. His favorite foods are black goats and black roosters. Like his wife, Gran Brijit, Bawon is associated with the colors black, purple, and white, and because they live in cemeteries or hidden locations, their realm is the Earth. Bawon Samdi and Gran Brijit are known to have a somewhat playful rivalry, and they try to avoid each other altogether. If they end up meeting each other, all know to steer clear because their fiery tempers might lead to long, drawn-out brawls. The Gede is its own classification, its own family, to which Bawon Samdi belongs. His symbols are a skeleton, a coffin, a black cross, and farm implements.

Kyrah Malika Daniels

See also Lwa; Vodou in Haiti

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BAYA

The Baya or Gbaya people live principally in the Central African Republic (CAR) of Africa. Situated about 500 miles north of the equator, the CAR is a land-locked nation bordered by Cameroon, Chad, the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of Congo.

Population migration resulting from slave raids in the 18th and 19th centuries brought migrants into the area of the CAR. The CAR has more than 80 ethnic groups, of which the major ethnic groups are the Baya who account for 34% of the population, the Banda who account for 25%, the Sara for 7%, the Nabandi for 11%, the Azande for 10%, and the Mbaka for 5%.

The Baya culture, also known as the Gbaya culture, is a subset of Ubangian culture that makes up about 82% of the regional population, and there are many subgroups within the Baya culture. Although French is the official language of the CAR, Sangho, the language of the Baya, is a common language used for commerce and intertribal communication. Therefore, the role of Baya culture in the life of the CAR cannot be overemphasized.

Like most Bantu peoples living in rural areas, the Baya are mainly farmers whose staple food is cassava, and like most Ubangians, the Baya use a method of farming called swidden or slash and burn. It involves clearing the vegetation of a plot of land, spreading it over the area to be used for planting, and burning it. After about 3 years of use, the plot is abandoned for about 4 years as new plots are cultivated in rotation. The Baya use this method for mostly all of their farming needs. Cooperative labor enables the cultivation of large plots. Manioc, yams, millet, corn, and bananas are the main food crops. In modern times, the Baya attend to crops such as cassava, yams, and corn for their own needs, whereas crops cotton and coffee are grown solely for exporting.

Because of the hot and humid climate, the Baya live in hut-like homes made of dried bricks with thatched roofs that tend to keep the rooms cool during hot days and warm during the cold days of the rainy season.

Before the advent of the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, the Baya had their own indigenous African or Bantu culture of which the religious aspect was based on the belief in the existence of spirits in objects, ancestral spirits, and gods that can be related to and pacified through various sacrifices and rituals. The religious culture of the Baya has been threatened by both Christianity and Islam, but it has been resilient enough to enable some of its aspects to be incorporated into the local practices of both

Christianity and Islam. The population of the entire CAR is supposed to be mostly Christians, accounting for 83% of the population, of which 33% are Roman Catholic and 50% are Protestant; around 12% of the population follows local original indigenous beliefs, and 3% are Muslims. Nevertheless, the ancestral beliefs and practices persist through integration with both Christianity and Islam.

Daniel Tetteh Osabu-Kle

See also Rituals; Sacrifice

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BEADS

Beads are a vital part of material culture throughout Africa and simultaneously serve sacred, secular, social, and aesthetic functions. In West Africa in particular, beads adorn the hair and body in the form of headdresses; earrings; necklaces; arm, wrist, and ankle bracelets; belts; and sashes. Beads also adorn everyday and ceremonial clothing, as well as sculptures, charms, fetishes, and other ritual objects. In the past, beads were used as currency in some areas.

Beads express personal style, but also convey social standing, wealth, age, marital status, cultural, and spiritual affiliation. For example, in Benin, a beaded cuff bracelet with a diamond pattern would identify the wearer as a married woman. A red, pink, dark blue, black, and white beaded fringed belt in South Africa would be worn by a diviner and would convey his status and association with light, energy, knowledge, and purity.

The personal use of beads begins in infancy, where the mother will place a string of beads on the child to thwart evil spirits. One such example is found among the Yoruba, who place wristlets of beads on infants to protect them from the

vengeful spirits of children who died in infancy. Common throughout West Africa is the use of a string of beads around the waist of a child, which is said to promote good health. Among the Bakongo, a similar practice exists using a single bead made from a wooden disk or seed. This bead is tied and hung around the child's neck, waist, or ankle and serves to guide the child's soul so that it reaches old age safely. Sometimes the beads would be fashioned into a net that would be worn like a shirt or the child's head would be adorned with shells that would prevent the Devil from carrying the child away.

Pregnant women in Ghana and among the Mende wear beads to ensure protection of the baby. The use of beads as amulets of protection stems from the perception that objects are infused with a spiritual power or force. Some objects, such as beads, have more power than others. Specific beads, such as the akori bead, were highly valued. This bead was used in rituals, burials, and jewelry. In Ghana, this bead was once equal to gold in value.

Not all beads are used strictly as a form of protection. Among the Yoruba, beads are an important artifact in the relationship between a person and an orisha. When a person receives the *ilekes*, a beaded necklace of specific colors, he or she receives not only the protection of the orisha, but the orisha's spiritual force. Beads were also used to decorate ritual objects such as calabashes that hold ceremonial palm wine in Cameroon. The material from which beads are made varies with the region, but the most popular materials are glass, wood, shells, and seeds. The choice and meaning of colors also vary from culture to culture.

Denise Martin

See also Amulet; Blessing

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BEJA

The Beja are a seminomadic group of peoples united by the common language of TuBedawiye, who live mainly in Southern Sudan. They are composed of the subgroups of Ababda, Bishariyyin, Amar'ar/Atmaan, and Hadendowa. The Beni Amer are at times also described as Beja, but they speak Arabic or Tigre.

They have predominantly African ancestry, unlike the northern Sudanese, who are mainly either of Arab descent or have developed through intermarriage with Arab immigrants. The scholarship on the Beja religion suggests that it is largely Islamic, but an Islam that is often interpreted in relation to pre-Islamic practices and beliefs.

The development of their dominant religious beliefs has been shaped by a number of factors. The first is the emergence of a social and material culture from their life as nomads. The second is the influence of Islam, spread through trade and conquest. The third is the dislocation of their nomadic lives when they were forced to settle in one place because of shifts in their relationship to dominant centers of economic and political power in Sudan.

Within these historical developments, there now coexist a cluster of pre-Islamic and Islamic beliefs and practices. The pre-Islamic beliefs are constituted by both systematic aspects of their social institutions and a structure of informal beliefs and practices.

One aspect of the systematic, formal social institutions is the possible development of a horizontal sacredness, in which the material details of physical and social life take on sacred value. This could be understood to have developed through the experience of constant mobility, which led to the creation of a ritual built around the process of dismantling and moving the tent.

The tent is the central architectural form of many nomadic societies, and ritual forms have developed around it in relation to rites of passage such as marriage. The culture of the tent is not uniform to all Beja groups, however, because the predominant architectural form of the northern Beja is not the tent, but makeshift huts made of wood.

The structured form of pre-Islamic traditions includes the Silif, one of the aspects of which is the managed exploitation of natural resources. This

might have a relationship with the Islamic conception of khalifar, which is understood as human responsibility for stewardship over everything in creation. In a pre-Islamic framework, such a notion of stewardship in relation to animistic conceptions of nature could have been interpreted in terms of a sense of coexistence with other natural forms and the spirits associated with them so as to preserve the sustainability of natural reserves as well as their sacred character where applicable. A central aspect of informal Beja beliefs is the belief in jinns, which are spirits who are believed to dwell in both natural and manmade spaces.

Pre-Islamic beliefs are associated with aspects of Beja identity that are understood as African and different from the Arab associations of Islam. These contrasting identifications are particularly relevant in the struggle of the Beja to preserve their ethnic identity in the face of socioeconomic pressures and to consolidate a distinctive political base in the multiethnic context of the Sudan.

Fiercely independent, the Beja have been considered a proud people in the sense that they resist external influences. They resisted domination by the Egyptian and Ethiopian kings throughout their history. Even today there are many who have resisted service in the Sudanese army. Yet their long history has meant some involvement with outsiders such as Arabs from northern Arabia. This has impacted mainly the religious side of the culture, but the Beja still insist on their own traditions alongside Islam. It is believed by some authorities that the Beni-Amer Beja, whose name and identity were gained from the Jaalyin Muslims of Arabia, have retained more of their customs than other clan groups because they have had the least intermarriage. There is no way to verify this claim; however, it should be noted that the Beni-Amer have been the most resistant to foreign incursions.

Historically the Beja sided with the Mahdi in fighting against the British colonialists. This was one of the few times that a "modern" European army was defeated in Africa. Twice the Mahdi's army with his Hadendowa Beja allies defeated the British in the 19th century. In turn, they were asked to fight with the British against the Italians in World War II. In defending their own territory, they have been active soldiers in keeping outsiders at bay.

The Beja have retained a part of their ancient matrilineal practice, although the culture is now mainly patrilineal, following the Christian and Islamic models. The most important person in the family group is the mother's brother. The Beja prefer to marry first cousins. They also believe that rites of passage around circumcision, engagement, marriage, and death are important.

Oluwatoyin Vincent Adepoju

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BEMBA

The Bemba are a branch of the ancient Luba Empire who acknowledged the authority of the chief, Chitimukulu. They reside in the Northern Province of Zambia and its neighboring countries with a combined population of approximately 1,850,000. The language of the Bemba is *IciBemba*, a part of the Bantu language family.

Bemba religious beliefs and practices espouse a multidimensionality of the cosmos where *Lesá*, God, the Supreme Being, is the genesis and sustenance of all celestial and terrestrial beings. Traditional Bemba proverbs describe beliefs regarding the Supreme Being. For example, God is a divine being with dual aspects as expressed by the phrase, *Mayo na tata*, my mother and my father; and "*Ubwile ubwapika Lesá tabupikululwa*," man cannot comprehend the mysteries of God. He is all

intelligence, all science. Another example is “Lesa shiwatutaula mibanga, God breaks down hard trees like ‘mibanga’ (by lightning). God is all powerful. Who can resist him?” *Kwimba kati kusansha na Lesa* means to seek out a remedy to work with God. God is the author of all plants and their diverse properties. *Lesa Mukulu* is the expression used for the supremacy of God over all divinities or superior beings. *Lesa* is the Great Ancestor, which is the anterior ancestor.

Imipashi (ancestors) are spirits of those who died long ago. They can be public and private (i.e., familial). Public *imipashi* are the spirits of deceased chiefs, and burial places, such as the *Mwalule*, the burial place of great Bemba chiefs, are consecrated to them. Private or familial *imipashi* are the spirits of deceased relatives or the spirit of each deceased individual. Ancestors play an important role for the success of war, hunting, fishing, health, and good harvests.

Bashinganga (diviners) mediate between the spirits of ancestors and the people for the good of the community. The *bashinganga* uses knowledge of plants, incantations, and magic, along with various divining methods. Giving children names at birth, diagnosing the causes of illnesses and death, performing during the ritual hunt, and finding sorcerers and evil spirits are among the functions of the *bashinganga*.

In African religious thought, all beings, both animate and inanimate, are interrelated and interdependent, including God. This interrelatedness and interdependency can be expressed through *umukowa* (totems), a special identification of a clan with an animate or inanimate object. Moreover, unity, kinship, belongingness, and common affinity are achieved through totems. The totem of Bemba clan *umukowa* is the crocodile. In addition to the clan *umukowa* (totem), there are family and individual *umukowa* (totems). Some *umukowa* (totems) include the otter, antelope, fish, lion, leopard, rain, sorghum, millet, and castor oil. Because the Bemba is a matrilineal society, *umukowa* (totems) are passed through the mother’s family.

The east and west, the sun, the Earth, and the rainy seasons are powerful, divine symbols. *Lisa* is the future (the east), whereas the west represents the origin of the Bemba people, the ancestors, and places and traditions left behind. The early morning

sun is the maleness of Lesa, and the sun at noon is linked with the authority of the male chief. The Earth is representative of the womb, where every person returns at the time of death. The three annual seasons represent male and female. The dry season represents the female, whereas the hot season represents the male. The rainy season unites the two seasons and represents perfection and unity. Furthermore, the rainy season represents the union of man and woman, which brings life and continuity to the Bemba. The rainy season also symbolized the divine gift of parenthood.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Fertility; Rain

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BES

Bes is the name of one of the oldest deities in Africa. He is usually represented as a short, stout man with a broad forehead, wide nostrils, large phallus, and an open mouth with a protruding tongue. However, the physical features of Bes were not the most interesting aspects about him. Of course, he was an African figure, perhaps representative of the Twa or Mbuti people, but he was more than that to the ancient Africans in the Nile Valley, who saw him as the great representative of humanity. This entry looks at his history and beliefs about his powers.



*The god Bes, usually shown as a dwarf, a domestic god, protector of women in childbirth, also associated with music and dance.
Location: Temple of Hathor, Dendera, Egypt.*

Source: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

Long History

The god Bes occurred so early in the human imagination that it reaches back to the earliest of human settlements along the Nile. But Bes is not only a name that reaches deep into the past, but it is also one that has a widespread existence in the ancient world. In fact, there are indications that the deity's image was so widespread that it was found from Punt (Somalia) to Mesopotamia (Iraq). Who could contemplate the origins of the human race without thinking of the black-headed one that came from the ancient cradles of human beings? Thus, Bes, many scholars believe, sits at the door of the beginnings of human involvement with carving images that reflected the most intense desires of the human community for communication with the mysterious.

Various representations of Bes reflect the beliefs and attitudes of the artists carving the image at the time. For instance, there are portrayals of Bes with a cape of lion's skin, with a very high-plumed headdress, and with knives and musical instruments. Sometimes he is shown with the SA hieroglyphs, indicating his protective powers. Thus, Bes is a multidimensional god with numerous functions. He could be called on as an energetic defender of the community, as the symbol of majesty, as a hunter or an explorer, or as a musician. These were just some of the activities for the awesome powers of this deity.

The fact that Bes is so ancient is not amazing given the fact that childbirth is at the beginning of the human race and Bes is the deity of the birthing houses, the *mammisi*, throughout ancient Kemet. Mothers went into labor with Bes by their sides; when they gave birth to children, the first deity to bless them was often Bes. One can still see examples of Bes on the walls of temples in the Nile Valley. At the great temple of Kom Ombo, one can see evidence of the presence of Bes as the deity welcoming the newborn child into the world. Of course, the carving of the image of Bes on the walls of the temple simply reflected the consciousness of the people of the day about the importance of this deity.

The totality of the Bes experience in the Nile Valley is enormous. Nothing surpassed the familiarity that the ordinary ancient Egyptians felt for Bes. In that respect, he was the earliest

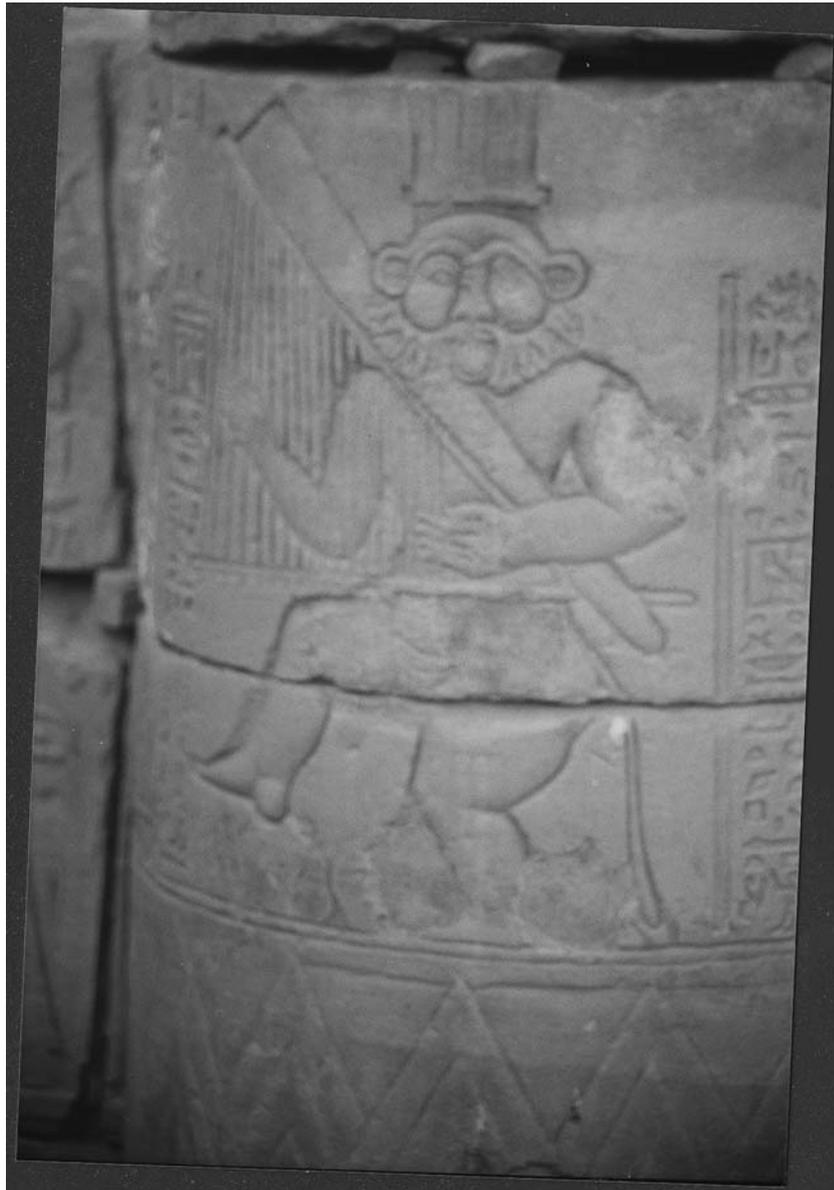
comforter of the sick, the disabled, the perplexed, and the birthing mother. The joy with which the people embraced him furthered his influence as the merryman and the creative force for good and happiness.

According to the ancient texts, the home of Bes was Punt, but this is not certain because the evidence shows that his provenance was far beyond Punt. The fact that the greatest representations of this well-valued deity are found in Egypt suggests that he might have been indigenous to the Nile Valley. It is known that Bes was depicted on statues and in reliefs with increasing frequency as the Egyptians found themselves invaded by others. Could this have been a response to the anxieties and complexities of life that were brought to bear on the people by the foreign invaders? Although this question cannot be fully answered, it is probably that Bes, with his bowed legs and broad ears, adorned in animal skins, was also a patron of war and the protector of hunters, suggesting that he was ready to join with the people in any eventuality.

A God for All Reasons

If the ancient Egyptians could have had an all-around deity, one to be called on at the moment of urgent need, one to be available when others were away performing specific missions, and when one was alone with individual discomfort, then Bes was that deity. So ubiquitous was Bes that, during the Middle Kingdom in the town of Kahun, there were lion figures associated with Bes, and in the New Kingdom there were images of Bes at the Ramesseum. Bes could be called on during the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom to ward off snakes. In fact, there are figures of Bes, as the deity Aha, strangling two snakes with his bare hands.

Therefore, Bes was the deity who comforted women in childbirth and later oversaw women, men, and children as they prepared to confront situations that could bring about their deaths. Probably no other deity with the exception of Tawaret was used on amulets for good fortune as much as Bes. If there were hints of strength, power, vigor, and cleverness in Bes, there were also beneficent qualities of sexuality, love, laughter, and abundance. A deity for all occasions,



This is a photograph of the ancient deity Bes from a column at the Temple of Karnak in Upper Egypt.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

using his considerable power and energy, to span the lifetime of his subjects, Bes remained a popular deity down through the Ptolemaic Era of Egyptian history.

Indeed, during the Ptolemaic reign, images of Bes were painted on the walls of temples, and certain rooms of those temples became the sleeping rooms of pilgrims who sought to have healing dreams to revitalize their sexuality in the presence of painted images of Bes with naked women. Clearly, Bes

accommodated many people and functioned to bring blessings to the Nile Valley for thousands of years.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Children; Fertility; God

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BETE

The Bete people live in the Southwest of the country of Côte d'Ivoire. Their neighbors are the Akan ethnic groups to the east and the Guro people to the north. Although their population is less than 1 million, the Bete have a powerful history of artistic production. Their art is found throughout the world as representatives of the best abstract work from West Africa. They are an agricultural people, growing cocoa and coffee, whose existence is primarily linked to their patrilinear organizational structure. They are not a people with kings, but rather have villages that are termed *headless*, but that are under the authority of the ancestors' power as interpreted by intense spiritual individuals who are the mediators for the ancestors. It is assumed that the people have maintained their art forms, even exploring other artistic concepts, particularly because they are spiritual. Their religion is their adherence to the ancestors. Their art, therefore, represents the deepest philosophical concepts of the people.

Like all African people, the Bete have a close relationship with their ancestors; this allows them to have harmony, balance, and order in their society. Although they are in a region of Africa that has accepted outside religions, the Bete maintain an effective connection to their ancestors, who are responsible for all the activities of the ethnic group. They acknowledge the work of the Almighty Creator, Lago, but they neither pray to Lago nor worship Lago. As in almost all African cultures, the relationship of the human population to the Creator is distant. The work of Lago having been done before the origin of the human race, the people rely on ancestors and other spirits for everyday support. All power to protect, bring happiness, support fertility, and bring harmony among people is directly related to the spirits with special powers and energies, such as those that inhabit trees, rivers, and rocks.

The Bete follow their customs and taboos and make sacrifices of animals to keep order and balance. Every ritual is devoted to protecting the lineage of the ancestors. One of the reasons they have such extensive use of masks is because of the numerous festivals and ceremonies in honor of the ancestors. Among these masks are the gre or nyabwa with the exaggerated, distorted features around the mouth, forehead, and nose of the figure. These are masks that presided when there was conflict in the society. When the people had achieved peace, they were able to retire the masks. All masks are endowed with force, and among the Bete this force is often used by the people to prepare young men for war and to instill terror in the hearts of enemies. No mask exists without a dance.

It is important to note that the Bete have created a significant body of artistic work that elevates the African tradition in the same manner as the classical productions of ancient Egypt and Nubia. Their history of art is filled with numerous examples of works that utilize the principles of creativity, harmony, fantasy, and myth.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; God

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BIRDS

Birds are held in high regard in African religion because of their ability to cross the barriers among humans, spirits, space, and time. As with many African religious systems, this belief is based on observable phenomena. Birds thrive on land, in water, and in the sky. The chicken, or bird, may be the most sacrificed animal in African religious practices. Practically speaking, this is due to chickens being domesticated, abundant, and easy to acquire.

Mythically, chickens are present at creation or accompany the first humans. Among the Yoruba, a five-toed chicken accompanies Obatala from heaven to what will be Earth. Her scratching of the loose earth brought with Obatala creates the Earth. The Mende creator god *Ngewo* gives two chickens as a gift to the first human couple. These stories illustrate how chickens have the ability to mediate between humans and the Divine, hence their frequent use in sacrifice.

The Mende of Sierra Leone endow birds with the gift of prophecy because, from their high vantage points, birds are able to witness events unfolding from a broader view than the ground-bound human. Being able to interpret the language of birds allows the foretelling of future events. This ability is generally held by senior-initiated Mende women. Birds also carry messages from the ancestors. A person traveling and hearing the persistent voice of a single bird could be hearing a message from a spirit being relayed by the bird.

The chicken is also held in high regard. It keeps village time with its morning crows and returns to the coop in the evening. It is ever watchful and squawks at the first stranger. Mende women use the leaves a brooding chicken selects as prenatal medicine. Pregnant women are encouraged to emulate the self-disciplined focus of a brooding chicken and are forbidden to eat its flesh or eggs. The chicken also serves as a distinguisher of truth. To determine whether a dispute has been settled among relations or friends, the estranged person hold grains of rice in hand. If the chicken pecks enthusiastically at the rice, the dispute has been truly resolved. Other examples of birds being used to distinguish truth exist in stories among the Xhosa of South Africa, where a bird identifies a murder, and in ancient Kemet, where a feather is the ultimate judge of an individual's activities during life.

Another common spiritual association with birds is their connection to the human soul. The *ba*-bird in Kemet depicts a bird with a human head. The *ba* is translated in the west as the soul, but it really does not have an English equivalent. It is the psychic force of a person that, when they die, seeks to be united with the *ka*, the life force or sustenance of a person for the body to exist in the afterlife. The image of the *ba*-bird drawn in

funerary scenes hovering above the body or in trees around the tomb shows this journey that must be made every night.

Denise Martin

See also Animals; Ba

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BIRTH

In the vast catalogue of African spiritual and religious concepts, birth is one of the most profound ideas connected to the major epochs in the journey of life, death, and reincarnation. Birth is a sacred mystery to African people, but not entirely unknowable. Birth reflects the activities of God's work. It is generally regarded as an important event in the endless passage taken by human beings, a continuum within the human experience. Birth is a central family episode that is met with a tremendous amount of joy and sense of fulfillment because the expectation of a child is considered the highest gift from God. Thus, birth is also a significantly revered experience for the entire community.

According to John Mbiti, a noted expert on African religion, several key features are associated with the birth of an African child. First, a pregnant woman is expected to engage in specific activities that will keep her and the child safe until it is born. Second, communities often carry out expansive rituals to thank God for the gift of the child to come and to pray for the safety of the mother and child. In addition, some women will wear talismans for the purpose of protection during

pregnancy. It is also a common practice for an African woman to return to her own family until the birth of the child.

Many African societies participate in extended ceremonies and activities to mark the birth of a child. Furthermore, some societies have developed complex rituals regarding the disposition of the placenta because it is the physical manifestation of the sacred link between mother and child. In some African cultures, especially among African Americans, at one time attention was given to the birth membrane covering the amniotic fluid known as a *caul*: When found intact after birth, it was believed to portend special powers. Typically, African ceremonies and rituals are dedicated to praising God and to asking for the continued protection of the newborn and mother.

A wide range of transformation rites are carried out that involve the entire community. These rites include naming the child as an initiation into society/world and the continuation of rituals throughout adult and elder hood (marriage, passage of youth, unity, education, death, etc.). Another important feature in the study of birth in African societies has to do with the transmigration of ancestral souls through children, as reflected in naming practices: In Yoruba, for example, names like Babatunde, “the father comes again,” or Yetunde, “the mother comes again,” are common.

The sacred rituals of indigenous African societies that mark the birth of a human being are derived from the highly reflective beliefs about God, the ancestors, and the whole of creation. In general, African people embrace the ideas surrounding the reentry of the child into the world through the female body. Their cultural history and mythology sustain focus on birth as associated with creation, reincarnation, womanhood, regeneration, and promise. Most significantly, birth is directly connected to common African thinking about the Supreme Being.

There are perhaps thousands of names for God within the African context. Among the Amazulu in Zimbabwe, the god Unkulunkulu exists to organize the lives of humans. In doing so, she or he gave men and women the ability to birth children. Nyame, the God of the Twi nation in West Africa, washes preborn children in a bath of gold and gives the child’s soul its destiny in life. Nyame also administers “the water of life” and infuses her or

his own essence. Therefore, this preparation allows the child to be born into the world. Other gods, such as Ngai of the Masai in Kenya, give each spirit at the time of birth a protector who keeps the person safe throughout their life and who, at the time of their death, takes their soul back to God.

Hundreds of African gods are dedicated to the process of birth. In ancient Egypt (Kmt), Heket served as the goddess of creation and is noted for birthing the gods. Also in ancient Egypt (Kmt), as elsewhere in Africa, birth symbols become dominant features of daily life. For example, the God Khepra (the scarab beetle) symbolizes birth and rebirth largely because its activities appeared to be self-creating, thus signifying eternal life.

Although birth is the theme of many ceremonies, African people have also produced divine statuary, such as the wooden Akuaba/Akuabanini doll, traditionally made by males. Other images herald the birth of a child, such as male/female ancestral figures, mother and child, and the Bambara Chiwara (Mali) symbolizing fertility of land and family. There are also a multitude of images that signify the divinity of women for their childbearing capabilities and phallic symbols marking the primacy of masculine virility.

Other important topics with respect to birth in the African religious context include the order of births, the meaning of multiple births (twins), supernatural births, virgin births, fertility, and hero birth narratives. The history, actuality, mythology, and symbolism of birth provide critical insight into African life, cosmology, spirituality, and philosophy, especially in the discussion of human beings’ relationship to God.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Children; Fertility; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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BLESSING

Blessing refers to the act of calling on the divine to bestow protection, prosperity, health, peace, and, generally speaking, all manners of good fortune as defined by the community. In African religion, blessings are expected from God, the divinities, and the ancestors, the main actors of the benevolent African spiritual world. In as eminently religious a world as the African world, requests for blessing are numerous. Blessings can be personal or communal; they can occur in a formal or informal manner and setting, and they may concern all life matters.

However, African people are most definitely concerned with life and with the process through which life sustains and regenerates itself—that is, fertility. Hence, one finds that fertility occupies a central and frequent place in appeals for blessings. Fertility not only involves human procreation, but also extends to land and animal reproduction and growth. Thus, rain, without which drought, famine, and devastation would prevail, causing much pain to the whole community, is commonly acknowledged as a blessing from God. In times of drought, communities will organize communal rituals in an attempt to secure that they be blessed with rain again. Other societies, such as the Lovedu of South Africa, for instance, hold a Rain Ceremony every year for the express purpose of guaranteeing the continuous and abundant flow of rain in the coming year. Water, in general, is intimately associated with life and fertility in Africa.

In the same vein, children are also very much desired. According to an African proverb, “Children are the reward of life.” The birth of children ensures parents that they will receive proper burial rites and will be effectively remembered, thus allowing them to remain socially alive after they die. The ancestors are the ones who bless the living with children. When a couple experiences difficulty achieving pregnancy, the ancestors are immediately suspected to be responsible for obstructing conception. Thus, rituals whose purpose is to secure ancestral blessing for human (and land as well as animal) fertility abound.

Among the Bemba people of the northeastern part of Zambia, for example, a woman is presented with a miniature clay pot filled with water on the day of her wedding by her paternal aunt as

a blessing. Likewise, among the Guusi people of Kenya, in East Africa, fertility being controlled by patrilineal ancestors, the grandfathers are asked for their blessing to bring an increase in people (and cattle). One may also ask to be blessed with good health, well-being, and a trouble-free life.

There are several manners in which blessings can be bestowed. As an informal act, a blessing may take the form of a prayer, a song, a libation, or the burning of incense, among other possibilities. The Gada people, for instance, believe that the burning of incense will attract blessings to their homes. Burning a white candle in one’s home is also widely associated with a similar effect, in particular in the African religious diaspora. Common also in Africa is the spraying with water of a newborn baby’s body by one of the midwives as a way of welcoming it into the world and blessing it with long life and good health.

As a formal act, a blessing will require some form of ceremonial act officiated by a spiritual leader or elder. In addition to prayers that will be said and libations that will be poured to open the way, sacrifices and offerings will most likely be made so that one can receive the desired blessing. Such ceremonies may center around one person, a group of persons (e.g., as it is the case during initiation ceremonies), or the whole community, as in the case already mentioned of Rain Ceremonies.

People and communities tend to offer what is most valuable to them as tokens of their deep appreciation for the blessings of the spiritual world. Thus, beer among the Lovedu and butter, fat, meat, honey, and honey mead among the Maasai are conceived of as the most powerful agents of blessings, and therefore figure prominently in blessing rituals. Women are sprinkled and smeared with honey, mead, and butter by Maasai elders during rituals to ensure abundant fertility. Likewise, in Vodou in Haiti, divinities (the Lwa) are offered their favorite food to dispose them favorably toward human requests for blessing. Hence, one will offer rum and pork to Papa Ogu, the divinity of war, or champagne and delicate cookies to Ezili Freda, the Lwa of love and fertility, because they are known to be fond of those things.

Ama Mazama

See also Offerings; Rituals; Sacrifices

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BLOOD

Blood is viewed in African cultures as the source of life. In fact, almost every African culture has rituals associated with blood. For example, among the practitioners of some forms of Vodou in Benin, the priests gather their spiritual powers in a practice called lighting the fires, in which they pay homage to Ogun, the god of fire, iron, and war. During the ceremony, a cow is usually sacrificed, and the blood is spilled on the ground. Indeed, the blood of animals has been used to call forth the spirits for thousands of years in African history.

When the participants of the ceremony have danced the sacred dances and the energy of the spirits has filled the people, the blood results have been achieved. The fertilizing of the ground with the blood of special animals (cows, goats, and fowl) is a vital part of many religious rites. This rite enables the priests to call on the Gods to protect against evil forces. There is an ancient symbolic use of blood sacrifices and burnt offerings preserved from the ancestors of modern priestesses and priests.

The magical power of blood is referenced in *The Book of the Dead*, where it is written that "The God Osiris, whose word is truth, says the blood of Isis, the spells of Isis, the magical powers of Isis, shall make this great one strong, and shall be an amulet of protection against all forms of evil."

There has never been a general acceptance of human sacrifice in African religion, although there are some exceptional situations where blood was offered to the deities in a defiled form of African religion, as with the short-lived Dahomey kingdom of the 18th and 19th centuries. In what may be called *rituals of bloodthirst*, some of the kings, betraying the history of their region, adopted brutal measures to control the population during

the worst period of Portuguese kidnappings in Dahomey. However, it is now recognized by scholars that this was an aberration.

Since ancient times, there have been cases where human beings, including servants and wives of a great king, volunteered or were expected to go to death with the king to be with him in the realm of the dead. Ancient Egyptians soon changed this practice to the symbolic use of shawabtis, small figurines that accompanied the dead. The shawabtis were placed in the tomb with the deceased to serve him or her during the sojourn in the underworld.

Africans have also used blood to seal oaths. This has been seen in Yoruba and Akan culture and is generally accepted as widespread in Africa. Among the Akan, a goat may be sacrificed and the blood spilled on the ground during special rites of the Ohum festival or other festivals dedicated to the ancestors.

Female blood has a remarkable potency in the ritual imagination of Africans. For example, among many people, the menstrual blood of a woman is considered sacred and has the power to ward off evil spirits or bring danger to men and many shrines. Of course, because the monthly cycle is natural, it also has the power to bring about embarrassment for women, producing in some a feeling of inferiority. Others see the ability to shed blood as an example of the unique fertility of a woman.

Indeed, there are others who see divinity in the special powers of women. In African religion, each sex can operate as the vessel of the spirits, and there are both priests and priestesses who serve at their shrines or temples. However, the sex of the minister is not an indication of the sex of the divinity. African traditional religion may be considered less sexist in its image of the spiritual world, compared with other world religions.

Despite taboos that might be associated with blood, for the most part, it is a sign of propitiation and ritual cleansing in a society. With blood the society announces its connection to the sacred, to the everlasting, and to the ancestors. Thus, in African traditional religion, blood remains one of the most important elements in the practice.

Kwabena Faheem Ashanti

See also Rituals

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BOATS

The earliest records of boats in Africa come from the civilization of ancient Egypt. Because human origin and human civilization occurred first on the continent of Africa, it seems logical that Africa would be the place where humans first created river crafts. The nature of the Nile River, its absolute essentiality for ancient Egypt, made it the perfect laboratory for Africans to experiment with boat-making.

Boat Craft

So vast was the arena for the use of boats that the Egyptians used boats to carry everything from grain to stone, from lumber to the bark of the gods. Papyrus was used as one of the most common materials for boats around 4000 BC. However, the Egyptians soon turned to cedar wood, often conifers from Lebanon, as the most popular wood for boats, especially the sea-going vessels that carried troops, building equipments, and passengers. The papyrus boats were steered with an oar; the larger boats were often steered with two oars. Sail boats were the preferred type of boats on the Nile given that the winds were strong and powerful.

Boats sailed the Nile from Aswan to Men-nefer for ritual purposes when the kings wanted to build pyramids or take obelisks from the great quarries of the south. Funeral boats crossed the Nile from the east to the west to carry dead bodies and priests to the burial grounds. Many Egyptians saw their boats as the greatest possession they held; nothing could be as painful and pathetic as to be boat-less.

A record of a boat under sail is shown as early as 3200 BC in Egypt. There is no other example as early as this in human history, neither in Mesopotamia nor in China.

Boat making constituted a unique response to the need for transport and transportation; it was the way to maintain a stable society in ancient Egypt.

Boat-making evolved over the centuries. However, by the time of the Pyramid Age, the Egyptians had mastered the technique of creating boats that were fastened with ropes and wooden pegs rather than nails. Other areas of the continent also had strong boat cultures, particularly around Lake Chad. Yet it was in Egypt that the ancient boat was perfected for commercial and ritual purposes. Because all of the major towns were reachable by water, the making of boats constituted a great industry. Water and wind power combined to make the Nile one of the great working rivers of the world.

Boats in Ritual

It was as a ceremonial or ritual boat that the watercraft was most natural on the Nile. When a per-aa (pharaoh) died or when a god had to be moved, the boat had to be decorated for the purpose. Boats have been dug up from burial sites. Many boats were buried with the royal family members. In fact, Khufu's boat was 150 feet long. It was found in 1,224 pieces unassembled with matching signs in hieratic so that it could be reassembled.

It was believed that Khufu could use the boat in the afterlife. Obviously, it was part of the funeral cortege because it was found at Giza, the burial ground for the royals who lived at Men-nefer. The great king Khufu was not the only per-aa to be associated with a boat. It was the common practice of the ancient world for a person to have his own boat, but in the case of the king, he would have several boats.

During a dig in 1991 near the temple of Khentyamentiu, scientists found the remains of 14 boats that date to the first dynasty (2900–2775). It is easy to say that these boats had to be associated with King Aha, the first ruler of that dynasty. Each boat was 75 feet long, buried in parallel graves, and all made of wooden hulls. These are the world's oldest planked boats.

Ancient Africans made boats long before the presence of the wheel. Indeed, the ancient Egyptians who lived along the Nile simply used the technology of the people who lived above them. Light rafts made of bundled papyrus are thought to have been made by Africans who lived further south along the Nile. There is evidence of boats during the Naqada II culture, which came just before the dynastic period. Tomb reliefs show signs of boats being built.



Alabaster carving of a boat, from the tomb of Tutankhamen, displayed in the Cairo Museum.

Source: Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Boats as sacred vessels go to the heart of the invention of this mode of travel and transport. It is the use of the boat for the almighty god Ra that show him traveling on a reed float made of papyrus that is portrayed on the walls of temples and tombs. The religious significance of the boat may have been derived from the transportation of the god.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Burial of the Dead; Rituals

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BOBO

The Bobo people are part of the Mande-speaking people who live in the western part of Burkina Faso of West Africa north of the Republic of Ghana and in Mali. They have lived in the western region of Burkina Faso and Mali for centuries,

dating as far back as 800 AD. Their close neighbors are the Senufo, Bamana, Lobi, and Bwa.

The interesting aspects of the Bobo culture concern the art they produce, their clothing, and the unique principles of their religion. They make masks from leaves, fibers, cloth, and wood and costumes from leaves and fibers; both are used for many different rituals in their religion and in festivities.

The Bobo are spiritual in orientation. For the Bobo, God manifests in two aspects in balance. They believe in God the Creator whom they call Wuro. According to the Bobo, Wuro, the Creator, cannot be physically represented because it does not have a form and, for the same reason, cannot be described in words. Wuro is the wise entity responsible for ordering all things in the world into pairs or binaries that must always remain balanced. Human beings have the tendency to upset this balance. However, the balance can be restored through a series of offerings to pacify Wuro.

The second aspect of God is Dwo, who communicates with humans and is revealed during masking ceremonies. Dwo enters a mask, and when that mask is worn, his spirit possesses the spirit of the wearer who is then able to communicate to others in accordance with Dwo's will. Thus, for the Bobo, the God head is a pair, Wuro and Dwo; because these two are always in balance, they cannot be separated. The same entity manifests as Wuro and Dwo, and these two are always in balance. The same God who created all things in balanced pairs possesses humans and communicates with humans as Dwo.

Politically, the Bobo people have a decentralized structure similar to that of the Ga people of southern Ghana. However, unlike the Ga people, the idea of placing political power in the hands of an individual called a chief is foreign to the consensually oriented Bobo people. The various towns and villages are independent, with the decentralized power sharing at the town or village levels based on relationship among individual patrilineages. Thus, each Bobo village is basically autonomous and is organized according to this relationship among individual patrilineages. There is no overarching centralized authority that can dictate to or control the Bobo people under a common political umbrella from above. However, horizontal exchange of views and advice among

villages and towns is common. Their consensual democracy may be said to be decentralized.

The Bobo people are very good farmers; their major crops are red sorghum, pearl millet, yams, and maize. They also cultivate cotton as cash crop, which they sell to various textile mills.

Daniel Tetteh Osabu-Kle

See also God

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BOIS CAIMAN

In August 1791, a gathering of Africans, frustrated by the horrors of slavery they were forced to endure in the lucrative French colony of San Domingue, entered into a sacred ritual that would spark what may be considered the greatest effort of African resistance in the Western hemisphere. In the woods of Bois Caiman (Caiman Woods in Haitian Creole), led by a Vodou houngan or spiritual leader, the ceremony, now named after the meeting place where it was held, is said to have provided the inspiration responsible for the bloody Haitian revolution.

The ceremony, complete with the sacrifice of a black pig and oaths of secrecy and loyalty, is reminiscent of sacred rituals practiced in traditional Africa. Unlike other insurrections by enslaved Africans in various parts of the Diaspora, which failed due to betrayal, the ritual at Bois Caiman seems to have protected the rebels from a similar fate. Although there is some contention about the details of the ceremony ranging from its exact date, exact location, and the spiritual leaders present, consensus is generally reached regarding the importance of the Vodou ceremony to the people of San Domingue and the independence of this African nation. This entry explores the impact of this ceremony and its roots in Africa.

Key Figures

The Bois Caiman ceremony is said to have been presided over by the revered houngan, Boukman Dutty. Born in Jamaica, Boukman received his name because he, unlike many other enslaved people, was said to have been literate (Book-Man). He was sold by a British owner to a Frenchman in the sugar-producing colony of Saint-Domingue. Perhaps because of his spiritual post and conceivably also because he was a coachman whose duties allowed him to create connections to other plantations besides his own, Boukman was able to solicit the participation of a number of enslaved Africans at the Bois Caiman ritual.

To these potential rebels Boukman swore, as a reward for their dedication to the cause, that they would be returned to their ancestral homeland of Ginen, or Africa, if they were killed during the insurrection. To those who may have betrayed the plot, Boukman promised to remove all spiritual protection. Acting under this oath of loyalty, hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans fought what was then regarded as the world's greatest army of the French and won African independence in the former colony on January 1, 1804.

The need to create loyalty and unity among the rebels was critical to the success of the Haitian Revolution. Perhaps the attendees at Bois Caiman understood this better than most. In the French colony of Saint-Domingue, a number of African ethnic groups were represented among the enslaved population, including groups from Senegambia, Angola, and the Bight of Benin; Africans born in the colony, called Creoles, occasionally viewed themselves as separate from the *bossales*, or Africans brought to the colony directly from Africa. Additionally, it was not uncommon to find *affranchis*, or free people of color in the colony, acting as large land (and enslaved Africans) holders. These factors made insurrection of the enslaved population highly improbable because of potential rifts. However, the Bois Caiman ceremony has been said to be responsible for providing the spiritual energy necessary to overcome these boundaries.

According to some accounts, during the ceremony, a great storm rose over those gathered, and a mambo or priestess appeared and danced with a blade held high above her head. In this rendition of the ritual, it is she who actually slaughtered the

pig for sacrifice. Blood from the animal, and some say from humans as well, was given in a drink to the attendees to seal their fates and loyalty to the cause of liberation of Saint-Domingue. The mambo responsible for this vital element of the ritual is said to have been Cecile Fatiman, the wife of Jean-Louis Pierrot, a man who would eventually become the president of the small island nation from 1845 to 1846.

Whoever the mambo present actually was, she was elevated after her death to the status of *lwa*, or Vodou deity, and was given the name Marinette Bwa Chèch. As a member of the Haitian Vodou Petwo pantheon, Marinette is an incredibly powerful deity whose colors are black and blood red. Known to ride those she possesses rather violently, she is feared, but also highly respected for her role in the fight for Haitian independence. Reminiscent of her role during the Bois Caiman ceremony, this *lwa* is often offered black pigs during contemporary Vodou rituals.

By other accounts, Boukman was assisted by another houngan, Makandal, who was to have performed similar rituals earlier in the history of Saint-Domingue. Historians seldom agree on the particulars of the ceremony because few contemporary accounts have been located of the ritual and its attendees. Some have even suggested that more than one ritual ceremony has commonly been misunderstood as a single event in Haitian history. In fact, it has been argued that there were actually two rituals held in 1791 with the same purpose: One was held in Bois Caiman, usually associated with Boukman and linked to supernatural activity, whereas the other occurred on the Normand de Mezy plantation, possibly under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture. This assertion, as well as others that place the ceremony completely in the realm of myth, have been launched as scholars, usually non-Haitian, attempt to make sense of what remains a vibrant memory in Haitian culture and oral tradition.

Vodou in Haiti and Africa

Perhaps one of the most thought-of characteristics when one considers Haiti is its amazingly resilient religion. In the opinion of some, nothing speaks more of the incredible tenacity of enslaved Africans than their ability not only to retain much

of their own traditional African spiritual system, but also to adapt the system with the purposeful intention of protecting it from the plantation owners and overseers, who constantly sought to oppress what was then viewed as a dangerous element in the lives of enslaved Africans.

It was no wonder that the colonial government and its agents sought to control these systems because in Haiti, as was the case in other regions of the African Diaspora, African-derived spiritual systems as practiced in the Americas may be interpreted as a resistant response to the hostility the Africans experienced during enslavement. Beyond this, however, Vodou also provides evidence of what may be considered early Pan Africanist tendencies of African people in the Americas. For in the rituals of Vodou, including the Bois Caiman ceremony, there is evidence of contributions of a number of African ethnicities, including Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon to name a few.

Although Haitian Vodou combined the experiences and rituals of various African ethnic groups, it also retained the identities of these individual groups. This is evidenced by the division of the *lwa*, or Vodun deities, into nanchons (nations) that represent their African places of origin. For example, the Congo *lwa* come not only from the Kongo kingdom, but also from neighboring ethnicities found in this region of central Africa. As such, *lwa* are generally divided into two nanchons: the Rada and the Petwo. The Rada *lwa* and their associated rites are generally traced to the deities and traditions of West Africa, including those from Dahomey and more specifically from Allada, whereas the Petwo are generally traced to central African deities and rituals.

Although both *lwa* nanchons played significant roles in the Haitian war for independence and in the minds of many Vodou practitioners, the Petwo is the pantheon most often considered as more actively involved in the Revolution. This argument is often supported by the perceived gentleness of the Rada *lwa*, whereas the Petwo *lwa* are most often associated with violence and justice. Despite this commonly held perception, the blood rite of Bois Caiman could have its roots not only in the violent nature of Petwo *lwa*, but also in the ritual traditions of Dahomey, most often associated with Rada.

Similar rites to the Bois Caiman ceremony have been found in West Africa, especially among

the Ewe, Adja, Houla, Heda, and Mahi ethnic groups, among others. In these traditions, the drinking of a ritual preparation, often infused with blood, serves the purpose of sealing agreements among participants—the process being called *drinking vodun*. The Igbo of West Africa also have a form of the ritual pact, in which blood may be smeared on kola nuts or infused with drink and shared among participants to create relationships and foster community solidarity. Other instances of blood rites have been recorded as occurring in Jamaica, Cuba, and other African Diasporic communities during the period of enslavement. Most notably, the oral tradition of Jamaican Maroons still contains insistence that their treaties with the British were most often sealed with such blood rituals.

Although scholars continue to debate the particulars of Bois Caiman, there is no underestimating the power of the ceremony in the minds and hearts of contemporary Haitians, as well as those linked to the Haitian Vodou tradition.

Tiffany D. Pogue

See also Boukman; *Lwa*; Vodou and the Haitian Revolution; Vodou in Haiti

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BOKONON

In Fongbe, the language of the Fon people of Benin Republic, the Bokonon is an exceptional diviner, who after several years of arduous and sustained training is initiated to the Fá rituals and language. In Africa, particularly in the Republic of

Benin, the belief in divine ancestors or divinities and the consultation of the Bokonon have remained active and strong. The Bokonon is all the more revered today, although some bamboozled proselytes are in denial of the important role of a Bokonon in modern societies.

The Bokonon is a noble practitioner of the Fá divination. In the Fon Cosmology, the Fá (Ifá in Yoruba) is the Messenger of Mawu-Lisa, the Supreme God, and the spoketerson of all deities. Consisting of 256 signs, of which 16 are main signs and 240 are secondary signs, the Fá is the spirit that enlightens, guides, and controls human destiny. Only the Fá, through the intermediary of the Bokonon, can find solutions to all problems after detecting and revealing the causes. The Fá sheds light on people's past, predicts the future, and prescribes the appropriate conduct for a happy life. As a system of divination, the Fá speaks in parables, and only the Bokonon can translate and explain these parables, recommend proper recipes, and perform relevant sacrifices. Before every important ceremony or function, it is imperative to consult the Bokonon.

The Bokonon is highly respected, almost deified. He is the Counselor of the King, hence the most important person in the Cabinet. The King always refers to the Bokonon for all significant matters pertaining to the stability of the Kingdom, and his recommendations are strictly heeded. The Bokonon is consulted for all major decisions. For example, a chief cannot be appointed without consulting the Bokonon; the King must consult the Bokonon before sending troops to war. In marriage, the Bokonon is consulted to determine whether the union is a good one. Even in childbirth, from pregnancy through delivery, the life of a child is announced and oriented by the Fá, who, through the Bokonon, predicts the fate of the child and recommends applicable sacrifices to be performed for the child's well-being.

The Bokonon begins his divination by invoking the names of divine ancestors, the gods of the sky, and the Earth and sea deities to receive their blessing and guidance to carry out his work successfully. As the legitimate interpreter of the Fá, the Bokonon goes through a complex and ritualistic procedure, talks in parables, and uses allegories, which may appear like rigmarole to a nonhabituated person. Throughout the consultation, the Bokonon sings prophetic songs in honor of the deities.

At the conclusion of his consultation, the Bokonon pays due homage to the Fá through litanies while beating out the rhythm of the tune either on the ground or the edge of his Fáté (slate that bears the Fá signs) with his baton, called *Lonflin*. Indeed, the Bokonon's tools include the *Fâtê* (slate), *Houé* (kaolin powder to sprinkle over the slate), *Akpélè* (traditional chaplet), *Adjikouin* (special dried nuts), *Lonflin* (baton), *Akwêkoun* (cowry shells), 36 *Dékoun* (36 dried palm kernels), *Fá Dôkpó* (cloth bag holding all accessories but the slate), and *Zan* (sleeping mat).

An all-round Bokonon is versatile. He has a good command of all three stages of the Fá divination—*Fá titê* or *Fá kikan* (consultation of the Fá), *Vô dide* (explication of the prophecy), and *Vô sisá* or *adra* (performance of appropriate sacrifices for satisfactory results). To pass through the divination crucible and emerge as a true Bokonon, one must master at least the first two stages of the Fá divination. The profession of Bokonon is considered solely the province of men.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Fa; Ifa; Vodou in Benin

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BONDO SOCIETY

Bondo, sometimes used interchangeably with Sande, is a society exclusively for females in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and the borders of the Ivory Coast. Most women belonging to the ethnic groups of Temne, Mende, Vai, Kissi, Lele, Susu, Gola, Bassa, Kpelle, Bom, Belle, Gbandi, Loma, Dei, Kim, Kono, and others are initiated into a Bonde/Sande society. Bondo/Sande is an organization as well as a body of knowledge. A woman is initiated into the society and belongs to a chapter in her specific region. The expression "Where there

are women, there is Bondo/Sande” denotes the devotion of women to the society. Initiation into Bondo/Sande is voluntary in contemporary times and may be necessary to become a successful female politician; but in earlier periods in West Africa, it would have been unthinkable for a woman not to be initiated into a Bondo/Sande society. This entry looks at the social context of initiation, the process, and its links to African religion.

Social Context

There are numerous responses of people to the environment in Africa, and everywhere one finds commonality in approaches to the divine, the society, and the ancestors. It is this commonality or African cultural unity that allows the great cultural multiplex to be examined from the standpoint of one general civilization. Examination of the basic tenets of African female societies reveals a common theme of metaphysically transforming young girls into beautiful, refined women.

Initiation into Bondo/Sande is psychologically and spiritually transformative. Females *die* into Sande/Bondo. This means that they give up the behaviors of children and assume roles and responsibilities of adult women in the community. The belief is that children are born in the physical realm and remain children until they complete the initiation ritual; therefore, girls ritually die as children and are reborn as adults. At the appropriate time in the initiation process, initiates are taken to the river and washed as a newborn baby, symbolic of new birth.

The girls are also given new names, symbolic of an individual’s transformation into a higher being. As higher beings, young women are created to be finer, better people. The overarching ontological theme of initiation rites is metamorphic. One of the symbols on the mask used in the initiation ceremony is a butterfly, which symbolizes emergence from a lower being to an evolved higher being.

The Process

The transformation process begins in a section of the forest consecrated as the sacred forest. The campus is surrounded by a fence to ensure privacy. According to some scholars, the society is Sàndè, whereas the buildings and campus are the bònò proper. New initiates enter and remain in

the sacred forest for a period that can range from a few months to 1 year. The location is always near a river.

Water, trees, stones, the sacred forest, and other elements of nature are interconnected with the ritual of initiation. Water, for example, is regarded as the origin of life. The river is regarded as the place of crossing from the village to the forest and vice versa. Crossing the river relates to all sorts of crossings; in death, for example, the deceased is said to cross the river to the otherworld, or in the resurrection of the masked spirit of a-*Nowo*, who is fetched from beyond the water. A zigzag line, the hieroglyph for water all over Africa, is written on the forehead of the *Nöwo* mask.

Hojo—white clay, kaolin, or porcelain clay—is found in the river bed and at the riverside. The highest quality of *hojo* is found in the riverbed and is the most difficult to obtain. Initiates paint their faces, and in some rural areas, they paint their entire bodies white with *hojo*. *Hojo* is the highest ideals of beauty, perfection, and goodness. For Sande/Bondo, white is significant because the color is linked with the spirit world and with the secret parts of human society, where people strive for the highest spiritual and moral ideals. However, black indicates the metaphysical process of refinement and acculturation.

A comprehensive education is a critical component of the Bondo/Sande initiation process. There are four important leaders in the institution. First, there is a chief official who represents spirits of female ancestors. She has the ability to transform into a spirit being. When she dances on special occasions, her identity is concealed by a mask and a special dress. Below the chief are an assistant leader, a mother, and a supervisor. The supervisor is responsible for cooking, washing, and general domestic affairs. This team of women teaches young initiates myths, ethics, herbal medicine, health and hygiene, preparation of cosmetics, spinning, dancing, singing, and storytelling. In addition, they teach how to be wives and mothers and other duties necessary to be fully functioning members in an adult society.

Links to Religion

Rituals, ceremonies, and festivals are long-standing traditions in African culture. Although the rites of initiation and the meanings embedded in signs

and symbols associated with initiation are shrouded in secrecy, aspects of the African worldview are obvious in the public rituals, ceremonies, signs, symbols, and objects displayed at the conclusion of the initiation process. A public display of a graduation ceremony, called “the coming out” or “the pouring out” ceremony, incorporates singing, instrumental music, costuming, lighting from natural sources, cosmetics, and dance movement.

The graduation known as the “Pouring Out Ceremony” lasts for 2 days. Rituals create a particular place in time and space for a specific purpose. In the African context, rituals are usually linked with cosmogony and are performed at the community (village), family, and personal levels. Some graduation rituals are performed by the initiates, whereas others include the community where everyone participates. For example, the Cleaning the Town ritual is performed by the initiates, while women, men, and children participate in the Transferring ritual. Uprooting by the Serpent is another ritual in which the initiates participate. In African iconography, the circled serpent biting its tail represents the cycle of life, and the elongated serpent represents longevity. The python is the community totem of many West African nations, and it plays a major role in the initiation process.

In the Temne creation myth, when God created the first man and woman, the first thing they did was to sit down. The seating ceremony of the female initiates is connected with this cosmological idea, and it denotes the ontological concept of becoming and being.

Within the African context, Bondo/Sande is religious, philosophical, educational, and artistic. The religious orientation follows an east–west orientation, which has to do with primordial and actual beginnings as explained in the African worldview. Worldview is a culture’s orientation toward God, humanity, birth, death, nature, questions of existence, the universe, and cosmos. Aspects of the African worldview can be observed in many rituals associated with initiation. The creation story of the Temne, for example, is that God placed the new world on the head of a giant who was then facing east. Perhaps to reenact the creation of the world, in the initiation ceremony, an official dressed in white carries *e-gbaka* (the white bundle) on her head. This bundle is equivalent to

the *sande hale*, the religio-legal institution of the women’s society. The Mende say this bundle contains a python.

After God created the new world on the giant’s head, the giant began to turn slowly around to the west. The Temne indeed associate the east with the productive power of the sun and the rejuvenating freshness of the water from rivers as it moves from the east to the west. The sun is born in the east and dies in the west. In traditional West African societies, women were sent to the east of town, the “place of birth,” to give birth. In contrast, the west is the place of the dead; burial grounds are in the west, as they were in *Kemet* (ancient Egypt).

The living and dead are linked. Ancestors—those who once lived—caution and advise, they mediate between the visible and invisible realms, and they intervene in the lives of their descendants to punish or reward. The relationship between humans and ancestors is reciprocal. The chief leaders in Bondo/Sande have access to ancestors and the forces of nature; hence, these leaders have access to sacred knowledge crucial to the development, happiness, and success of the individual and the well-being and prosperity of the community. In return for help that ancestors give to humans, humans must reciprocate by making offerings to them.

One might conclude that initiation into Sande/Bondo transforms a child into a beautiful female human being. On the day of the coming-out celebrations, when the young initiates are presented to the community, it can be said that in their finishing school they have learned music, the rhythms of the ancestors, and the ways to cook traditional foods, manners, style, and propriety in the ways of the community. Thus, the female becomes mature, confident, full of joy, and conscious.

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See also Initiation; Rites of Passage; Societies of Secrets

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BONDYE

Among the most important principles in the Vodou religion as practiced in Haiti is the veneration of God. *Bondye* (also referred to as *Olohoum* by some Vodouists, from Yoruba *Olorun* "the master of the skies; supreme God") designates the Supreme Being for Vodouists, the *Gran Mèt*, the master of all matters, as he or she is often referred to. Because of the fluidity of gender in Vodou cosmology, as it is the case in African cosmology in general, although God is often called *Papa Bondye*, the ultimate Father, a male figure, some contemporary scholars view the Vodou God as also being female.

The Africans brought into the American hemisphere carried with them many of their religious beliefs and practices. The God of Vodou, as practiced in Haiti, displays fundamental African characteristics: It is the creator of all that is, transcendent, omniscient, immanent, benevolent, almighty, but also, and most important, removed from the human world. As a result, the Supreme God, *Bondye*, does not intervene in human affairs.

Providing assistance to human beings is the primary and direct responsibility of the Lwa, created by God to that end. The Lwa work in cooperation with *Bondye*, the Supreme Judge, omnipotent arbiter, and final authority, but also the God full of love and compassion for all his or her children in the midst of their terrestrial tribulations. The Lwa of the Vodou pantheon serve as the intermediaries between God and humans. Unlike *Bondye*, who does not intervene directly in worldly matters, although he or she protects the faithful, the Lwa preside over all aspects of

human life and help with problems of daily existence from love and finances to family relationships and communal issues.

As it is the case in much of the African tradition, *Bondye* is not the object of any direct cult or worship. This is reserved to the Lwa. Yet it is fair to say that *Bondye* is the ultimate recipient of all prayers, all offerings, and all sacrifices. Indeed, Haitians, and in particular those from rural backgrounds in Haiti, never start a sentence without uttering *Si Dye vle* ("God willing") or *Bondye bon* ("God is good"), another sign of God's omnipresence in the daily lives of Vodou followers. Clearly, Vodouists believe in the power and beneficence of this important cosmic force, *Bondye*, who, along with and above the Lwa, form this complex pantheon of supreme deities in Haitian Vodou.

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See also God; Lwa; Vodou in Benin; Vodou in Haiti

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BOOK OF THE COMING FORTH BY DAY (THE BOOK OF THE DEAD)

The Book of the Dead, originally called "Pert em hru," which translates as "Manifest in the Light," is also referred to as *The Book of the Coming Forth by Day*. It became known as *The Book of the Dead*, *Der Todenbuch*, in 1842 by German Egyptologist Karl Richard Lepsius. It is known as one of the most important books in antiquity.

The Book of the Dead was in circulation in Kemet from at least the 2nd dynasty to early centuries of the Christian era in various formats. Copies of *The Book of the Dead* from inscription

in the pyramid of Unas, the last King of the 5th dynasty, are known to exist. However, some have claimed that a large portion of *The Book of the Dead* is older than the Mena period, the founding king of dynastic Egypt. This entry looks at the contents and history of that book.

What It Contains

The Book of the Dead was considered a funerary text that accompanied the body of the deceased and was therefore connected to the transition into the afterlife. The people of Kemet shared a reverence for the afterlife. *The Book of the Dead* is a compilation of about 200 chants or spells. However, the chants or spells that appeared in the tombs were often those that were considered more important and affordable for families. The spells were mainly written on papyrus, but could also be found inscribed on coffins, amulets, tombs, and wall figures.

The Book of the Dead is about of the veneration of the afterlife. The nature of objects, animals, human, and deities is presented in mythology and allegory. According to *The Book of the Dead*, the ancients believed that life here on Earth as well as the afterlife were extensions of each other; hence, there were no starting and ending points. They viewed life and death as an evolutionary process and continuation of the soul's journey through the universe. This idea is closely related to the concept of reincarnation, both in the physical and spiritual realms. The ancient Africans in Egypt also strongly believed that the spells in *The Book of the Dead* would help in the process of resurrecting the spiritual body and the immortalizing of the soul. Within *The Book of the Dead*, the people were able to see the elaboration of the battle between good and evil, such as the story of Horus and Set.

The Book of the Dead was used when the deceased would be buried with some compositions, particularly those that symbolized successful matriculation into the afterlife. The ancient Africans also believed that securing these ritualistic spells alongside the body of the deceased would help him or her transcend lower obstacles, avoid corruption of the tomb, and guarantee a sound body and existence in heaven. The texts were also used during funerary rites as prayers, litanies, and chants. They particularly detailed

and emphasized the state of the departed and any trials and tribulations they may have encountered as they approached their destination.

The spells were wrapped in mummy bandage in a hallowed statuette. The inscriptions were mainly written in hieroglyphics, but also recognized in cursive scripts, hieratic, demotic, and colorful illustrations. The purpose of *The Book of the Dead* was to provide the deceased with a compilation of spells to ensure a safe transition and passing into the afterlife. The ability of the deceased to identify with Osiris was the result of acceptance into the afterworld. The spells contained therein reflected the cult of Osiris.

In some senses, the words of *The Book of the Dead* are known as the Doctrine of Eternal Life because they allude to the internal makeup of man and his struggles within himself as reflected in the nine inseparable affinities of man: (a) natural body, (b) spiritual body, (c) heart/ab, (d) double/ka, (e) soul/ba, (f) shadow/khaibit, (g) ethereal casing or spirit, (h) form/sekhem, and (i) name. For the Egyptians, the synchrony of these characteristics provides the basis and definition of eternal life. Chapter 125 of *The Book of the Dead* on Weighing of the Heart describes the judgment of lifetime behavior prior to admission into the afterlife.

How It Developed

The Book of the Dead gives us no evidence of authorship except for attributing later versions to Thoth/Tehuti. Later the Greeks claim *The Book of the Dead* in its genre of classic literature. Of course, there are four versions of *The Book of the Dead* reflected throughout four time periods.

The first version, Heliopolitan, was edited by priests of the College of Annu, named Heliopolis by the Greeks. It was originally written in hieroglyphics and known from five copies inscribed on the walls and chamber of the pyramids of the 5th and 6th dynasties at Sakkara. Sections of this version were also inscribed in tombs, sarcophagi, coffin, stela, and papyri from 11th dynasty to about 200 AD.

The second version, the Theban rendition, was also written on papyrus in hieroglyphics and divided into sections or chapters in use during the 18th to 20th dynasties. The Theban version is highly artistic, reflecting more actual artwork than texts. It was incomplete and unfair in its representation; it

reflected major omissions, grammatical inferiority, and disorganization. Those credited with compiling this version of *The Book of the Dead* were not well versed with the documents, and it is evident in the final craftsmanship.

The third version is closely related to the previous, Theban. It was written on papyrus in hieratic characters as well as in hieroglyphics, with lack of structure or logical sequence. It was in flux during the 20th dynasty. The final version, the Saite, circulated during the 27th dynasty through the Ptolemaic Period. Its chapters were arranged in definite order, written in hieroglyphics and hieratic, with consideration of alterations of important information.

The Book of the Dead was also recognized as the pyramid texts that also share similar features and purposes. The pyramid texts were to accompany the King and address matters concerning his protection and afterlife. They totaled some 80 spells, but no single pyramid contained all the spells. This ancient religious composition was authorized by the priests of the College of Annu as an official version of *The Book of the Dead* in the 1st dynasty. From these texts, edited and revised, derived what is known as the Coffin texts. Coffin texts were buried in rock-cut tombs and not in pyramids; of those that possessed such inscriptions, the expectation was to master the spells to ensure passage into the afterlife. Through time and revisions, the ritualistic aspects of *The Book of the Dead* were neglected until only selected chapters remained.

Elizabeth Andrade

See also Burial of the Dead; Death; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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BOUKMAN

Dutty Boukman (Zamba Boukman) was the Vodou priest (*Houngan*) commonly recognized as

the person who started the Haitian Revolution. Although Boukman was not the first to lead a rebellion against slavery in Saint-Domingue, because he was preceded by others such as Padrejean in 1676 and François Makandal in 1757, he is nonetheless believed to have delivered the spark that ignited the Haitian Revolution.

Boukman had come to Saint-Domingue by way of Jamaica, and he became a maroon in the forest of Morne Rouge in the northern part of the island. Prior to his marronage, he had been a commandeur and later a coachman on the Clément plantation, which was among the first to go up in flames once the revolution began. It is said that his experience as a commandeur provided him with certain organizational and leadership qualities and that his post as a coachman enabled him to follow the ongoing political developments in the colony and to develop communication links and establish contacts among the enslaved Africans of different plantations. Boukman was a man of imposing physical stature with unflinching courage. He exerted extraordinary influence and command over his followers, who knew him as “Zamba” Boukman.

On the rainy night of August 14, 1791 (some texts, however, have placed the date as August 22, 1791), in the northern part of Saint-Domingue, Boukman led a Vodou ceremony in a thickly wooded area known as Bois-Caiman (literally “Alligator Woods”). He was accompanied by a Vodou priestess (*Mambo*) named Cécile Fatiman. Fatiman is believed to have invoked the Vodou deity (*Loa*) Ezili Dantò while Boukman rose to deliver an impassionate call to arms that ended each refrain with the words: “*Koute laliberté nann ke nou tout*” (“Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us”). In his oration, Boukman called on the enslaved Africans to rely on the forces of the Supreme Being found in nearly all African religious traditions, as opposed to the “false” Christian God of the whites, to rebel against slavery. This is Boukman’s prayer translated in English:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the

symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.

This call was nothing less than a call for Africans in Saint-Domingue to draw from within themselves and from their own beliefs for victory. This is Boukman's famous prayer in its original Creole version:

Bon Dje ki fè la tè. Ki fè soley ki klere nou enro.
Bon Dje ki soulve lanmè. Ki fè gronde loray. Bon
Dje nou ki gen zorey pou tande. Ou ki kache nan
niaj. Kap gade nou kote ou ye la. Ou we tout sa
blan fè nou sibi. Dje blan yo mande krim. Bon
Dje ki nan nou an vle byen fè. Bon Dje nou an ki
si bon, ki si jis, li ordone vanjans. Se li kap kon-
dui branou pou nou ranpote la viktwa. Se li kap
ba nou asistans. Nou tout fet pou nou jete potre
dje Blan yo ki swaf dlo lan zye. Koute vwa la
libète kap chante lan kè nou.

Garvey F. Lundy

See also Bois Caiman; Ezili Dantò; Fatiman, Cécile;
Lwa; Makandal; Vodou and the Haitian Revolution;
Vodou in Haiti

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“the islands of the gods.” They are located in the region of the Buganda people (also called “Baganda”). Ruled by kings (*kabakas*) who were seen as divine, the precolonial kingdom of the Buganda, now an administrative district of Uganda, was one of the largest and most powerful kingdoms in the Lake Victoria region. According to Buganda legend, Kintu, the first Bugandan king, founded both the sacred and physical worlds of the Buganda, returning after this life to the sacred realm from which all the *kabakas* originated, “disappearing” from the physical realm rather than dying. Likewise, from this sacred realm, they continued to interact with human beings. In like manner, certain cultural heroes were translated into the sacred realm after this life, becoming *lubaale* or guardian gods, whom the Buganda traditionally venerated in several temples on various Ssesse Islands and throughout Buganda country.

The chief or dominant *libaale* in traditional Buganda cosmology was Mukasa, who was the guardian of Lake Victoria and protector of the King. Although temples to Mukasa are located throughout the Buganda region, the primary temple is on Bubembe Island, making it the most significant of the Ssesse Islands. The legend suggests that Mukasa and his brother Kabaka (also “Kibuka”) were once human beings. They were the sons of Wanema, who was the son of Musisi, the son of Bukulu and his consort Wada. Bukulu reportedly came from the Supreme God, Katonda, the creator God, who lives in the sky, and Bukulu subsequently made his home on the Ssesse Islands.

Because each temple had a priest and Bubembe Island was the main location of Mukasa, the chief guardian, the priest of Bubembe was considered the chief priest, to whom other priests deferred with respect to authority and prestige. Given the status of Bubembe, only the King, a few of the higher priests, and the immediate worshipers of Mukasa, who resided on Bubembe, could interact with and implore him to act on their behalf. The temple at Bubembe was distinct in other ways. For example, Mukasa's sacred emblem was the paddle, and each of his temples contained a paddle that the priest had blessed. For reasons that may have been hidden to anthropologists who studied the Buganda in the early 20th century, like the Reverend John Roscoe, however, the temple on Bubembe contained no paddle.

BUBEMBE

Bubembe is one of the Ssesse Islands of Lake Victoria (*Ennyanja Nnalubaale*) in the country of Uganda. The Ssesse Islands were also known as

Although the religion of the Buganda people today is diverse, having a large community of Christians and a significant number of Muslims, Bubembe Island symbolizes the precolonial reality of the culture when life was a dynamic and fluid interaction between the sacred and physical realms, when kings appeased the gods with offerings for protection, and when cultural heroes ascended to divinity after this life. Bubembe Island remains a central feature in Buganda folklore.

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See also Kings; Lakes; Priests

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BUBI

The word *Bubi* is found among the Luba people of the Congo. In Luba religion and worldview, the term *Bubi* refers to the notion of evil or ugliness. When the word *Bubi* is used, it is intended to mean that which is contrary to the best and most ethical. It is the opposite of *Buya* (goodness or the beauty of character). The word *Buya* is significant because, as the opposite of *Bubi*, it shows the power of *Bubi*. When one speaks of *Bubi*, one is talking about that which is fundamentally in opposition to the goodness of sound character. No one wants to experience *Bubi* because it means that the worst ugliness has come on the person. Within the Luba culture, the aim is to hold back *Bubi*, to render it ineffective within the society.

The question that arises is what, from a Luba ethical standard, is considered evil and what are the criteria that distinguish good conduct from abject behavior? In the Luba worldview, evil is defined in relation to the fundamental concept of life (*Bumi*). That element or concept that destroys life or diminishes life is regarded as evil.

Four major categories emerge in the expression of evil. The first category involves evil thought or evil heart, *mucima mubi*. This means that a person does not have to carry out evil actions to be considered having demonstrated *mucima mubi* (evil thoughts). Just thinking about diminishing life, one's own life as well as the life of another, is enough to place the thinking in the category of *Bubi*.

Second, evil can be committed by way of evil tongue or evil speech, *ludimi lubi*. The idea here is that speaking words that destroy or are meant to diminish someone's life is evil. The Luba philosophers understand that words can kill. Then there is the evil eye, which can convey harmful behavior toward other human beings. Thus, the Baluba speak of the evil eye, *diso dibi*. Looking at someone with eyes that suggest you wish them dead is considered evil; this is the origin of the evil eye concept. Finally, there is evil committed by way of evil actions, *bilongwa bibi*. These actions involve, among others, incest, murder, theft, lies, hatred (*mushikwa*, *nshikani*), and adultery (*busekese*).

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Baluba; Taboo

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BULLS

In Kemet, bulls were considered sacred. Because bulls epitomized a courageous heart, great strength, virility, and fighting spirit, the deification of bulls dates back to the 1st dynasty. Some epitaphs for bulls were "Mighty Bull," "Conquering Bull," and "Bull of Bulls." The king was the "bull of his mother," and his Horus name was "the strong bull." A constellation of stars for the bull was recognized; thus humans, born under the astrological sign of Taurus the bull, are linked to this constellation. Often the leg of the bull was used in offerings.

The title of bull was given to gods, kings, and sometimes queens. Slate pallets dating back as far as 3100 BC show kings as bulls. Entrainment is synonymous to synchronization; entrainment or synchronization can only occur when humans, animals, or objects have a close relationship. Bulls were entrained with humans in such a way that they were called their twin or double. For example, *Heru* (*Horus*) was entrained with the Apis bull.

Gods and goddesses could take on animal forms, or any form, and appear to humans to help them in various ways. Moreover, ancestors, those who once lived and have transcended to the underworld (i.e., the spirit world), might appear as their animal twin to people they hoped to help. Ultimately, celestial beings (i.e., stars, gods, *Horus*, kings, and humans in general bearing the bull epitaph) were entrained—that is, extricably linked.

As head of the society, the king required help from various “forces” to assist him in fulfilling his divine role. A Litany in Pyramid Texts links various parts of the king’s body with a multitude of beings. Of the bull it says, “My spine is the Wild Bull,” “My phallus is Apis.” The bull was also included in the king’s rejuvenation during the ritual of the sed fest.

All Egyptians sacrificed unblemished bulls and bull calves. Herodotus described the inspection for the selection of the sacred bull to be sacrificed. He says Egyptians regard bulls as belonging to *Apis*; the god *Ausar* (“*Osiris*”) was periodically reborn as a calf named *Apis*. He was recognizable by certain markings; a calf with similar marks might not be killed. The ingestion of the meat of the bull during the sacrificial offerings assimilated the bull’s characteristics with the king.

Although the entire species of bulls was regarded as sacred and recognized for strength and fertility, one individual bull was chosen. In a processional ceremony, the chosen bull was brought in as the manifestation of the god it was believed to be entrained with, fed, and worshipped in the temples. Festivals were held for bulls; for example, The Festival of the Apis Bull lasted for 7 days.

The *Apis* is widely written about, but *Mnevis*, *Apis*, and *Buchis* were all sacred. Herodotus said that it was believed that a flash of light from heaven fell on a cow so that she would give birth to Apis, the manifestation of Ausar (Osiris).

Moreover, the Apis was a black bull with a triangular white spot on his forehead, the likeness of an eagle on his back, doubled hairs on his tail, and a beetle under the tongue. (Perhaps the beetle may have meant a lump shaped like a beetle.) If the bull was indeed Ausar (Osiris), he was without blemish. Depending on the referenced text, *Apis* was the sacred animal of *Ptah*, *Ptah-Sokar-Osiris*, *Geb-Shu*, *Osiris*, *Re*, *Atum*, and/or *Heru/Horus*, hence, the living manifestation of these gods.

Kem ur, Great Black (Bull) Mnevis, completely black in color and represented with a solar disk and a uraeus between its horns, was identified as the living manifestation of the sun god *Rā* and the god of fertility. The mother of the *Mnevis* bull was renowned as the cow goddess, Hesat. Mnevis was the sacred bull of Heliopolis and probably dated to the 1st dynasty (c. 2925–c. 2775 BC), if not earlier. This bull was also the symbol of the 10th nome.

Buchis, the sacred bull of *Hermonthis* (*Armant*), was recognized by a white body with a black head. *Buchis* was the living manifestation of Re and Ausar (Osiris); it was the living manifestation of Month, and it was identified with *Mnevis*. *Buchis* was also entrained with *Montu*, the god of war.

After its death, natural or deliberately brought about at a certain age, the sacred burial ritual was performed. The bull was embalmed and bandaged, and artificial eyes were inserted. Its horns and face were either gilded or covered with a gold leaf mask, and the body was covered with a shroud and then laid in a magnificent tomb. A replacement for the deceased bull was “sought”; when it had been “recognized” by its markings, it was consecrated to replace the deceased bull and made to “go up into the sanctuary.”

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Animals; Rituals

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BULU

The Bulu belong to the group of related Africans called the Beti-Pahuin, who inhabit the rain forest regions including the Camaroon, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Sao Tome, and Principe. This group, sharing a common history, culture, and mutually intelligible Bantu language, includes the Beti, Fang, and Bulu, who are divided further into about 20 subnations or subtribes. Their mutually intelligible language is often referred to as the Beti or Ewondo language, and intermarriage among their subnations serves to unite them.

The Bulu can be found largely in Southern Cameroons and also in the Central and Eastern Provinces and constitute about 1 million of the population of Cameroons. They are supposed to have been slave hunters who aspired to satisfy European demand for slaves. They have also been accused of being fierce cannibals in the past. However, given the tendency of imperialism to malign those who resisted them, such accounts are not credible.

Like all Beti-Pahuin peoples, the Bulu organize themselves according to patrilineal kinships. In this respect, the paternal family live together in a village, and several related villages constitute a clan. Although such clans may come under a chief also traditionally regarded as a religious authority, the Bulu are so politically decentralized that the chief commands much respect, but does not command much political power, which is vested consensually among the village leaders.

The Bulu were highly skilled workers in wood and ivory and were particularly noted for their lively masks with associated ritualistic and festive songs and dances. However, through modernization, they have suffered cultural defoliation to such an extent that little of their traditional craft is still pursued, although some few carvers continue to supply the tourist market. Much Bulu culture has been abandoned, including their

traditional dance and song, which once attracted visitors and tourists.

Like most Bantu, the Bulu believed in a Supreme Being, ancestral spirits, and spirits who inhabited natural objects such as rivers, lakes, lagoons, trees, and plants. Spirits can be invoked and pacified through rituals and sacrifices. Medicinal plants are believed to have spiritual components that are as important as their physical and biochemical properties. The spiritual components of plants heal the spiritual body with the help of ancestral spirits and the gods while the biochemical properties heal the physical body.

Although most Bulus may have been converted to Christianity, in practice, they are equally engaged in both Christianity and their traditional worship. They may go to a Christian church on Sundays, but that does not prevent them from attending their various secret societies and consulting their traditional healers during the weekdays. Indeed, some Bulus are still deeply involved in their own indigenous religion involving sacrifices and rituals aimed at appeasing their gods who are credited with healing, protective, and blessing powers.

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See also Ancestors; God; Medicine

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BUMUNTU

Muntu, *Kintu*, and *Bumuntu* are the three fundamental concepts involved in the definition of a human being in the African context. *Bumuntu* means the quintessence of personhood, that fundamental authentic mode of being humane. *Bumuntu* stands for the content of a *Muntu*, the moral character, the essence of genuine humanity, and the essence of a deeply humane being. This word is widespread in Bantu languages. *Ubuntu*,

for instance, is a linguistic variant of *Bumuntu* in southern Africa. In other African cultural groups, one finds profound similarities to the Bantu paradigm. In fact, the Akan *Tiboa-Aboa* paradigm of personhood, the *Muntu-Kintu* paradigm of the Luba religion or the vision of humanity in Yoruba religion, all point to the existence of a common African vision of personhood.

In the Kiluba language, a human being (man or woman) is referred to as a *Muntu* (pl. *Bantu*). *Muntu* is not an ethnic concept, but rather a generic term for every human being. It is found in closely related variants in other Bantu languages. The word *Kintu* refers to things and to human beings who have lost their dignity. All over Africa, we find a clear distinction between genuine humans and bad ones. Thus, to the fundamental existential question “What is a human being?” Africans respond: *Bumuntu*. This notion conveys the fundamental African understanding of genuine personhood or authentic humanity. It is indeed the *Bumuntu* that defines personal virtue, sacredness, or gentleness.

The distinctive characteristic of *Bumuntu* is the feeling of humanity toward our fellow human beings. As John Mbiti pointed out so eloquently, a genuine human being does not define her or his humanity merely in the Cartesian “*Cogito ergo sum*” terms. Rather, he or she focuses on those thoughts of goodness and compassion toward others. Thus, the *Bumuntu* is defined in terms of hospitality and solidarity: “I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am.” This is well translated in daily greetings. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, for example, greetings go as follows:

Mangwani. Marara sei?
 (“Good morning. Did you sleep well?”)

Ndarara, kana mararawo.
 (“I slept well, if you slept well.”)

Maswera sei?
 (“How has your day been?”)

Ndaswera, kana maswerawo.
 (“My day has been good, if your day has been good.”)

Such forms of greetings clearly exemplify the feeling of humanity toward others. Thus, the *Bumuntu*, as Bishop Desmond Tutu put it, is the feeling that “My humanity is caught up, is

inextricably bound up, in what is yours” or that “A person is a person through other persons,” as a proverb has it. The *Muntu wa Bumuntu* is the *Muntu wa Buntu* (“a generous person”), one who feels that the joy and pain of others are also her or his own joy and pain, that her or his humanity is humiliated or diminished whenever other people are dehumanized. A person with *ubuntu* does not feel threatened that others are good or successful. She or he celebrates cooperation over competition. The *Bumuntu* is then that good character that believes in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. It is that ontological authenticity that governs the African quest for well-being and the African celebration of the humanity of other fellow humans. Such solidarity is not a superficial condescension. It stems from the understanding of the common origin of humanity as defined in African cosmologies. Creation myths indicate that *Bumuntu* derives from the transcendent origin of human beings. As an Akan proverb has it, “All human beings are children of God, no one is a child of the earth” (*Nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame nna, obi nnye asase ba*). For the Baluba people, as for the Akan, all human beings, men and women, are *Bantu ba Leza* (“God’s people”) and *Bana ba Vidye Mukulu* (“Children of the Great Spirit”).

It is in virtue of this transcendent origin that the true nature of human beings consists in good character, which again is the intrinsic attribute of *Bumuntu*. Thus, in many regions of Africa, people make a distinction between two kinds of human beings: those without *Bumuntu*, who are regarded as nonhuman, and those with *Bumuntu*, who are appreciated as genuine human beings. The Baluba maintain that, just like the Yoruba and the Akan, “good character is the essence of religion.”

One of the fundamental characteristics of the African concept of the person is the distinction made between what the Baluba call *Muntu wa bine* (“the true human being”) and *Muntu wa bitupu* (“an empty shell” or “nonperson”).

To the question, “What is a human being?” Luba religion responds by establishing first a distinction between two categories, *Muntu* (“a genuine human being”) and *Kintu* (“a thing”). According to Luba cosmology, every human being exists as a pendulum between two categories of being, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1 The Two Categories of Being According to Luba Cosmology

<i>The MU-NTU</i> <i>Category of Good Morality and Intelligence</i>	<i>The KI-NTU</i> <i>Category of Bad Morality and Stupidity</i>
<i>MUNTU</i> (good, respectable person)	<i>KI-NTU</i> (someone who does not deserve respect)
<i>TATA</i> (good father)	<i>KI-TATA</i> (bad father)
<i>MAMA</i> (good mother)	<i>KI-MAMA</i> (bad mother)
<i>MULUME</i> (good husband)	<i>KI-LUME</i> (abusive husband)
<i>MULOPWE</i> (good king)	<i>KI-LOPWE</i> (tyrant, stupid king)

As the table clearly shows, a human being can lose her or his humanness and shift to the category of things or the animal state. The *Bumuntu* is determined by a person's capacity to move from the *Ki-ntu* to the *Mu-ntu* state of being. This distinction is not limited to the Bantu-Luba worldview, but is found in many other regions.

Indeed, although it is not possible here to explore the worldview of all ethnic groups, it appears nonetheless rather clear that, from West Africa to South Africa, there is a widespread belief that people of bad character are not truly human. In Nigeria, the Yoruba say: *Ki I se eniyan* ("He/she is not a person"). In South Africa, we find the expression *Ga se Motho*, and the Baluba people of Central Africa say *Yao Ke Muntu* ("s/he is not human") or *I mufu unanga* ("S/he is a dead body walking"). Among the Yoruba, the concept of personhood is expressed through the term *Eniyan*. The Yoruba make a distinction between *Eniyan* as "ordinary meaning" of human being and *Eniyan* as "normative quality" of a genuine human being, exactly as the Baluba distinguish a *Muntu* ("a person with good character") from a *Kintu* ("a thing").

For the Baluba, as for many other Africans, to be is to be ethical. This implies not only the capacity to distinguish good from evil, but the ability to choose to do good. An unethical person is *muntu wa bumvu* ("a man of shame") and *Muntu bituhu* ("a zero-person"). In the Kiluba language, ethics is conveyed through expressions such as *Mwikadilo muyampe* ("a good way of being in the world") or *Mwendelo muyampe* ("a good way of walking on the road of life").

The African religious anthropology maintains that a human being can increase or lose her or his humanness. The quality of a human being does not stem from her or his gender nor her or his ancestors, but rather from their personal behavior—hence, the centrality of ethics in African religion. In Africa, to be a human being is a project to be fulfilled by each individual. Being a human being is an ongoing process. Birth alone does not define humanity. One has to "become" a real *Muntu*. One becomes more fully human through one's "way of life," by behaving more ethically. This ethic (*Mwikadilo*) is based on a clear distinction between the notion of *Bubi* ("evil") and the notion of *Buya* ("goodness, righteousness, purity, moral beauty"). The criterion of distinction is the attitude toward human life. Everything (word, thought, and action) that threatens, destroys, or belittles human life (*Bumi*) and human dignity (*Buleme*) is considered evil. Luba religion identifies four main modes of behavior (through thought, speech, eyes, and action), as Table 2 shows.

According to this logic, the violation of human rights occurs in various modes. One can violate the rights of another through evil thought and evil speech. In Africa, the whole conception of witchcraft is based on the belief that *Mucima mubi* ("evil heart" or "evil thought") and *ludimi lubi* ("evil tongue" or "evil speech") produces death and constitutes a threat to human dignity. On the concrete issue of ethics, Luba religion has a long list of taboos, that is, forbidden behavior that is considered harmful to human dignity or life. For the sake of illustration, Table 3 gives just a few elements of the Luba ethical charter.

Table 2 Luba Four Main Modes of Behavior

<i>BUYA</i> (Goodness) <i>Mwikadilo Muyampe</i>	<i>BUBI</i> (Evil) <i>Mwikadilo Mubi</i>
The <i>Mu-ntu</i> category (good human) <i>Mucima muyampe</i> (good heart) <i>Ludimi luyampe</i> (good speech) <i>Diso diyampe</i> (good eye) <i>Bilongwa biyampe</i> (good deeds)	The <i>Ki-ntu</i> category (thing) <i>Mucima mubi</i> (evil thought) <i>Ludimi lubi</i> (evil speech) <i>Diso dibi</i> (evil eye) <i>Bilongwa bibi</i> (evil actions)

Table 3 Luba Ethical Charter

<i>BUYA</i> (Goodness) <i>Virtues</i> <i>Characteristics of Mucima Muyampe</i> (Good Heart)	<i>BUBI</i> (Evil) <i>Vices</i> <i>Characteristics of Mucima Mubi</i> (Evil Heart)
1. <i>LUSA</i> (compassion)	<i>MUSHIKWA</i> (hatrate)
2. <i>BUSWE</i> (love)	<i>BUTSHI</i> (witchcraft, sorcery, killing)
3. <i>BULEME</i> (dignity, respect, integrity)	<i>BWIVI</i> (robbery)
4. <i>BOLOKE</i> (righteousness)	<i>BUNZAZANGI</i> (hypocrisy)
5. <i>BUBINE</i> (truth, integrity, honesty)	<i>BUBELA</i> (lie)
6. <i>BUNTU</i> (generosity)	<i>MWINO</i> (selfishness)
7. <i>KANYE</i> (sensitive heart)	<i>BUSEKESE</i> (fornication)
8. <i>BUYUKI/NGENYI</i> (wisdom, intelligence)	<i>BULEMBAKANE/BUVILA</i> (stupidity)
9. <i>BUTALALE</i> (peacefulness)	<i>BULOBO/BUKALABALE</i> (violence)
10. <i>BUKWASHI</i> (help)	<i>NTONDO</i> (discrimination)
11. <i>BUTUNDAILE</i> (hospitality)	<i>LWISO/MALAKA</i> (absence of control of one's desire and sentiments)
12. <i>BWANAHABO/BULOHWE</i> (freedom, autodetermination, being one's own king, nobility)	<i>KIBENGO</i> (insolence)

This ethical scheme is not limited to the Baluba. We are here reminded of the *Iwa* (“character”) in Yoruba religion. Among the Yoruba, the word *Iwa* means both “existence” and “character.” That is why a true being is a being with good character (*Iwa rere*) or gentle character (*Iwa pele*). It is crucial to understand that for the Yoruba, each person is responsible for the growth of her or his moral character as it is stated in the following proverb: *Iwa rere l'èso eniyan* (“Good character, good existence, is the adornment of a human

being”). The *Ifa* corpus is even more explicit: *Owo ara eni, Là afi I tunwa ara enii se* (“Each individual must use their own hands to improve on their own character”). This concept of free will and personal responsibility finds an interesting echo in the Luba proverb: *Vidye wa kuha buya nobe wa mukwashako* (“God gave you beauty and goodness but you must help her/him”), meaning God will not do everything for you. This notion of personal responsibility shows that traditional ethic was not about following customs

blindly. It also shows that the notion of God as the foundation of morality does not rule out self-improvement. In its attempt to define personhood, the Yoruba traditional wisdom explicitly states:

Where did you see Iwa?
 Tell me
 Iwa is the one I am looking for
 A man may be very, very handsome
 Handsome as a fish within the water
 But if he has no character
 He is no more than a wooden doll . . .
 Iwa, Iwa is the one I am looking for
 If you have money,
 But if you do not have good character,
 The money belongs to someone else.
 Iwà, iwà is the one we are searching for.
 If one has children,
 But if one lacks good character,
 The children belong to someone else.
 Iwà, iwà is the one we are searching for.
 If one has a house
 But if one lacks good character,
 The house belongs to someone else.
 Iwà, iwà is what we are searching for.
 If one has clothes,
 But if one lacks good character,
 The clothes belong to someone else.
 Iwà, iwà is what we are looking for.
 All the good things of life that a man has,
 If he lacks good character,
 They belong to someone else.
 Iwà, iwà is what we are searching for . . .
 Each individual must use their own hands
 To improve on their own character
 Anger does not produce a good result for any
 man
 It is honesty which I have in me,
 I do not have any wickedness
 Iwà lèsin
 Good character is the essence of religion.

A similar vision of ethics is found among the Akan in Ghana. Like the Yoruba, the Akan have a sophisticated ethical system that has been well articulated by Kwame Gyekye, among others. This system is based on three basic concepts: *Suban* (character), *Tiboa* (conscience), and *Papa-bone*, the antithesis (moral goodness vs. evil).

At the center of the Akan conception of personhood stands the concept of *Suban* (character), which occupies a pivotal place in Akan moral language and thought. *Suban* stems from conscience (*tiboa*). The Akan maintain that every human being possesses a *Tiboa*, a sense of right and wrong. Talking about somebody who constantly misbehaves, the Akan use the expression *ne tiboa awu* to mean that the person in question is somebody whose *Tiboa* is dead. When somebody who has persistently denied wrong doing finally confesses her or his fault, people say that her or his conscience has judged her or him guilty (*ne tiboa abu no fo*). But it is mainly the way a person listens to her or his conscience that determines her or his character. Like the Baluba, the Akan make a distinction between two categories of human beings: the person with conscience (*Tiboa*) and a beast (*Aboa*), that is, a person without conscience. The Akan notion of *owo suban pa* refers to a person who “has morals,” and its opposite, the notion of *onni suban pa*, refers to a person who “has no morals.” As these expressions indicate, the Akan use the word *suban* (character) to mean “goodness.” The word *pa* or *papa*, meaning “good” (in the moral sense), is added to the expression or dropped. This usage means that, for the Akan to have conscience, he or she must be a good person. Bad people are said to be without conscience or without morals. Thus, the expression *onni suban* (“s/he has no character or morals”) is interchangeably used with *onni suban pa* (“s/he has no good character”). In Akan anthropology, being itself is determined by the character.

Thus, being a bad person (*onipa bone*) and having a bad character (*suban bone*) are considered identical. Similarly, being a good person (*onipa pa*) and having a good character (*suban pa*) are considered identical. Here the Akan conception of the nature of human beings joins the Yoruba notion of *Iwa*, which means both character (in the moral sense) and being (nature). One fundamental characteristic of the Akan notion of character is found in

the notion of personal responsibility. Although the Akan, like many other people around the world, wrestle painfully with the issue of destiny and fatality, people clearly maintain that character can be changed (*suban wotumi sesa no*) and that human beings are not born virtuous or vicious, as the proverb puts it so clearly: “One is not born with a bad head, One takes it on the earth” (*ti bone wofa no fam, womfa nnwo*). What this proverb highlights is that, among the Akan, like many other African societies, freedom is the engine of morality. No one is evil because she or he is pushed by God or the ancestors or evil spirits, but because one is free to make choices about her or his behavior. It is also because people are free to act as they please that each person can be blamed for wrongdoing. For the Akan as for other Africans, God did not create evil and does not push any one to do evil. But what does the word *suban* exactly entail? To understand the content of *suban* is to grasp the Akan moral code, so to speak. Here, like in many other African religions, the catalogue of good and evil is not limited to 10 commandments. It is much broader. Among things regarded as praiseworthy, we find *Mmobrohunu* (compassion), *Ayamyie* (kindness, generosity), *Nokwaredi* (truthfulness, honesty), *Ahooye* or *Adoe* (hospitality), *Ahomeka* (dignity), and *anuonyam ne obuo ba* (that which brings respect). This list can be completed by various attributes of God, such as love, justice, forgiveness, and so on. Evil is distinguished into two categories: *bone*, which encompasses “ordinary evils” such as theft, adultery, lying, backbiting (*kooknsa*), and so on; and *musuo*, or “indelible evil” (*ade a woye a wompepa da*) viewed with particular abhorrence and revulsion. This type of evil is so disgusting and rare that it is remembered and referred to by people even several years after the death of the doer. These “extraordinary” evils, according to the Akan worldview, are so horrible that they provoke the wrath of supernatural beings and are considered “taboos” (*akyi-wade*, “abominations”). They include rape, incest, and murder.

It should be noted, however, that the African religious ethic is holistic because it is extended to the animals and the whole cosmos precisely because the first principle of African cosmology is not the concept of *Muntu*, but rather that of *Ntanda* (the world). God created first the world,

the whole universe, and then humans. God did not create only one village, but *ntanda yonso*, the whole world, and all its contents. All human beings have but one single source of existence, and not only human beings, but all other creatures. Indeed, as the Mashi expression clarifies, God is *Ishe Wabantu n'ebintu* (“father of human beings and things”). The natural world is the extension of the human’s body and being as the Yoruba *orisha* tradition makes it clear. This interconnectivity with nature marks the specificity of the African conception of both God and the human. Indeed, for the Baluba, as for other Africans, religion is cosmotheandric. God’s nature, as well as human’s nature, includes animals and trees because the whole cosmos is the home of the divinity. It is also the home of human beings—hence, the general solidarity that the Bantu feel with nature. Thus, a genuine human being, a person of *Bumuntu*, is the one who has a good heart (*Mucima Muyampe*), the one who extends her or his goodness to all human beings and to animals and the natural world. This *Bumuntu*, as we pointed out, is manifested in four basic ways: good thought and good heart (*mucima muya*), good speech (*ludimi luya*), good actions (*bilongwa biya*), and good way of looking at people and at the whole world. Such is the art of becoming human as defined by African religion, according to the will of the ancestors and the will of *Shakapanga Vidye Mukulu*, the Great spirit and supreme creator. It may be necessary to note that this vision of personhood reflects well the fundamental spiritual and moral values found in ancient Egypt in the Maatic charter (e.g., Chapter 125 of the *Egyptian Book of Coming Forth to Light*).

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Akan; Iwa; Ontology; Yoruba

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BURIAL OF THE DEAD

It is generally accepted in Africa that the dead will be buried. There is no extensive tradition of cremation of the dead. If a person who dies is not buried in the Earth, he or she might be left in a tree or hidden in a cave, but burning a corpse is unheard of in most societies. Those who have violated the values and norms of society are often banished in death away from the common burial area.

There is a communal attachment quality to the idea of burial of the dead. The dead person remains a member of the family and has force that will be used in support of the living community. Therefore, the death is not considered an individual experience, and the burial of the dead must be in the community near the living so the ancestor can influence life. In fact, once death has been announced, the entire community is called into action because the dead is not an individual isolated from community, but a real part of other people. In some traditions, if a man dies, his wives are stripped of their clothes by their sisters, who then cover the wives with ashes. The women are instructed not to drink, eat, sleep, or speak until their husband is buried.

One finds many styles of burial in African traditional religion, including lying on the back with arms folded in the Ausar position, burying the dead in crouching positions, lying down facing west or east if female, and standing inside the trunk of live trees, in holes in rocks, or in specially constructed tombs. All of these forms of burial have appeared in all regions of the continent.

Burial of the dead normally takes place at a special time depending on the conditions of the society. For example, if a person has great wealth, then certain conditions must be met, including the feeding of the living, and this might mean that the burial will not take place as soon as it would have otherwise. In most societies, the dead are buried with many of their gifts and possessions. Since the days of ancient Egypt, this has been the tradition of most African burials. Usually, a procession to the place of burial is led by the relatives of the dead person, and when they get to the burial spot, there is dancing and singing. The corpse follows the relatives as women fan the body, still with face in hands, and the name of the dead is said one final time, never to be stated again. Among the Azande, a member of the family recites the name and deeds of the deceased one last time before the corpse is entered into the grave.

The burial of a deceased seals the permanent attachment of an individual to his or her ancestral land. Expressions among Africans such as “she has gone to her home,” “he has moved to his village,” and so forth establish one’s place of birth as one’s ancestral home to which the person returns. It underscores the relationship among the individual, the people, the land, and the reality of deathlessness.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Death; Funeral; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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CALAMITIES

A calamity is a major disastrous event caused by natural or human agents, in which a community suffers lasting damage. The African world was intimate with the powerful forces of life, community, nature, and death. Understanding, using, propitiating, and cooperating with these forces was the main life activity of many African peoples while securing basic material needs. An imbalance in any of these forces could potentially cause a calamity. The intimacy among the people, the land, their ancestors, and traditions provided the first line of response to a calamity.

Calamities of the modern world are on a much more complex scale. The effects of enslavement, colonialism, forced urbanization, genocide, war, poverty, exploitation, and disease have placed considerable stress on African people and culture. The modern calamities that resulted from these events are often seen as exclusively economic, ethnic, political, or humanitarian in nature. With these diffused perspectives, the identification, causes, and responses to modern calamities are framed in new perspectives with new language. African religion takes calamities as broken parts of the spiritual world and seeks to reorder the balance of the environment through rituals.

There are few, if any, events that are seen as just impacting the person. A birth is more than just an “addition” to a specific family or a clan. It enriches

the entire community and is an affirmation of life. A new priestess, chief, healer, or hunter diviner has been born. An ancestor has returned. Conversely, any evil deed or misfortune such as theft does not just happen to one person, it happens to a community. Therefore, calamities are not distinguished by their scope. Calamities are sorrows or misfortunes that have immediate and devastating consequences: famine, illness, disease, epidemics, plagues, crop failures, drought, flood, and war. Many indigenous worldviews hold that every event has a natural or physical cause, as well as a supernatural or spiritual one. Through divination, great care is taken to determine the causal factors as well as identify steps to remedy the situation.

In African thought, the origin of calamities is always spiritual, yet they are not automatically attributed to the supreme deity. In some traditions, such as the Yoruba, calamities are deities. Collectively, they are the Ajogun, or “warriors against humanity and the good forces of nature.” Their sole purpose of existence is to ruin the Orisha, humans, plants, and animals. There are eight warlords of the Ajogun: Iku (Death), Arun (Disease), Ofo (Loss), Egba (Paralysis), Oran (Big Trouble), Epe (Curse), Ewon (Imprisonment), and Ese (Afflictions). These eight are just the leaders because the total number of Ajogun is 200 +1. The “+1” means that more can be added. In the fluid practice of Vodun along coastal Benin, deities that address modern challenges of homosexuality, abortion, and prostitution have been added, although not as warlords.

The Ajogun are permanent parts of creation. When their activities flare up, sacrifice is the remedy. Usually, greater calamities require greater sacrifices. This approach is found throughout Africa, although the entity to which the sacrifice is directed varies. Among the Chagga, sacrifices to God are made only during periods of extreme duress. Among the Ila, serious illness prompts an offering of food and water and prayers to God. During epidemics, the head female priest of the Leya in South Africa leads the afflicted to a nearby waterfall and performs a ritual aimed at the ancestral spirits in the water.

Denise Martin

See also Purification; Sacrifice; Shame

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CANDOMBLÉ

The word *Candomblé* refers to three things: the religious tradition of Orisha worship in Brazil, a religious festival or celebration (*xirê*), or the house of worship. The house of worship is also called *terreiro*, meaning “plot of land” or “homestead.” This fact expresses the vital significance of land, Earth, and soil in this religion. Each house of worship or *terreiro* community has its own *axé*, a form of the spiritual energy or life force that moves the cosmos, placed in a specific location called *assentamento*. In other rooms similar to chapels, called *pegis*, certain deities have their own specific *axé*. When one enacts the ceremony of grounding this spiritual force in a house of worship or a *pegi*, it is said that one is “planting *axé*,” and to institute a new *terreiro* is to plant its *axé* in its own *assentamento*.

The word *Candomblé* is one among countless examples of vocabulary imported from the

Southern and Central African language groups referred to as Bantu, but its etymology is controversial and uncertain. Nei Lopes suggests that it blends the Kimbundu *kiandombe*, meaning “black,” and *mbele*, meaning “house” (“house of black people”) or *nandumba*, *ndumbe*, meaning “initiate” (“house of initiates” or “initiation”).

This uncertain derivation of the word reminds us that the basic nature of Candomblé is one of synthesis. Although it is often identified with the West African Yoruba and Fon traditions from which most of the liturgy and many of the deities are derived, its name symbolically incorporates Southern African and other diverse origins that comprise this worship. This entry focuses on its roots in Brazil and its wider expression in worship and belief.

Brazilian Roots

Brazil is an enormous nation, in both territory and population. Comparable in area to the United States (without Alaska and Hawaii) and seven times the size of South Africa, it has almost 166 million inhabitants. According to official statistics, about half this population is of African descent. Enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil in the early 1500s, shortly after the Portuguese began their colonization, and the country was the last in the Western hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888.

The history of Brazil’s African population presents many similarities with the history of other segments of the Diaspora. Rebellions, insurrections, and maroon societies called *kilombos* were only a few forms of resistance against the slave regime. The Republic of Palmares, composed of 30,000 people, was a politically and economically organized, independent aggregate of several *kilombos*, which fought off Portuguese, Dutch, and Brazilian military forces for more than a century, from 1590 to 1695. Palmares was the most outstanding example of the *kilombo* phenomenon, which was present all over the country throughout its colonial history. But other forms of resistance were equally important, and the vitality and resilience of African culture was a mainstay of the community’s survival in many ways. One of the most important aspects of this cultural resistance is the religious tradition of African origin called *Candomblé*.



A local spiritual leader pauses before her offering of candles, champagne, and flowers for Lemanja, the goddess of the sea in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. Devotees of Candomblé ask the African gods for a prosperous new year. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, January 1, 2000.

Source: Photo by Kevin Moloney/Liaison Agency.

In the late 18th century, the influx of enslaved people from West Africa to Brazil intensified, and by the mid-19th century more than half the African population in the State of Bahia, for example, was West African. But for three centuries before this, a large majority of enslaved Africans had come from the southern and central regions of the continent, particularly Angola. Different regions of Brazil carry the legacy of specific African people. In the northeastern state of Maranhão, the culture of today's Benin prevailed. The Congo and Angola matrix is dominant in the Southeast and in parts of the Northeast. In Bahia, the prevailing traditions are Fon, or *jeje* (equivalent to the Cuban *arara*), and Yoruba, or *nagô* (Cuban *lucumi*).

Out of Africa

Candomblé refers to a variety of liturgies specific to “nations” and the ethnic identities, whether real or idealized, that they represent. Some Candomblés are considered to be pure *jeje* (Fon). There are Congo and Angola Candomblés, in which a creole language based on Kicongo and Kimbundu is used, but the structures, symbols, and practices differ little from those of Yoruba-Fon tradition. Caboclo Candomblé is a variant of Angola Candomblé articulated in honor of the original inhabitants of the land called *Caboclos*.

This syncretic tradition joining African and Brazilian indigenous religion also includes Jurema worship, centered around the sacred tree of that name. The Batuque of southernmost Rio Grande do Sul State, the Xangô of Pernambuco State, and Maranhão's Mina worship, are all examples of the Yoruba-Fon matrix crossed with Southern and Central African substrata. The ubiquitous and eclectic Umbanda blends in various European and Asian influences as well.

Thus, the striking characteristic of Candomblé is its power of synthesis, not only among the diverse African traditions it incorporates, but also within the traditions. For example, ancestor worship in Africa has a domestic tone appropriate to each household. Deities are identified with specific urban territories: In Yoruba tradition, Obatala is worshipped in Ijesha, Shango in Oyo, Oshun in Oshogbo, and Yemanjá in Abeokuta. But life in chattel slavery on a strange continent did not

favor such local or domestic worship. In Brazil, there were no individual family huts, but a collective slave dwelling called the *senzala* that housed a plantation's whole workforce, often hundreds of people. All the deities were brought under one roof where they could be called forth, worshipped, and consulted.

Ancestor worship, linked viscerally to the land, was a painful dilemma for displaced Africans deprived of household and family context. Cabula and Omolocô were early forms of worship of South and Central African origin that constitute the roots of today's Umbanda. In them the *Bacuros* were supposedly nature spirits, but the name Bacuro comes from the Kicongo *Mbakulu*, elder or ancestor. *Ba-kulu Mpangu* were the first ancestors from the time of creation. The Guinea is another early religious practice in which elders and predecessors were worshipped as *Tata Massambi*, “fathers who pray.” These Bacuros and Tatas appear today in Umbanda as *Pretos Velhos*, “old black ones” or African ancestors.

Organized ancestor worship in Yoruba tradition, the Egungun, was concentrated in Bahia, beginning in the 19th century on the island of Itaparica with the Vera Cruz and Ilê Agboulá terreiros. In Salvador, Mestre Didi (Deoscoredes Maximiliano dos Santos), Alapini (highest authority) of the Egungun, founded the Ilê Ase Asipá in 1990.

Beliefs and Ritual

The Candomblé comprises a philosophy and worldview that emphasizes the oneness of the only Creator, Olorum, whose transcendence is absolute. The cosmos is composed of the material world, *aiyê*—realm of the living, meaning all material forms of life in the universe—and the spiritual world, *orum*—realm of the ancestors, the yet unborn, and the Orisha. A continuing flow of exchange and reposition of the life force, *axé*, maintains the oneness and harmonic balance of the cosmos. This flow is assured partly by human intervention through offerings, *ebó*, made to the Orisha, the forces of nature symbolically representing facets of reality and human personality. The Orisha are intermediary gods with whom human beings interact via the offices of Exu (eh-shu').

Exu embodies the principles of contradiction, dialectics, and dynamics. He is the mediator of the exchange and reposition of axé that guarantees balance and harmony within and between *aiyê* and *orum*. He is the carrier of all *ebó* and transmits every invocation, supplication, or presentation. For this reason, ritual tradition demands that any ceremony or liturgical act must begin with a *padê*, an offering to Exu. Called a trickster or a messenger, he embodies language and communication. As a master of dialectics, he incorporates contradiction and the principles of good and evil. He was mistakenly identified by the official Catholic religion as the devil, an identification that has been extended into some heterogeneous religious practices like Umbanda.

Violent repression of African religious practice was brutal and consistent from the time of compulsory baptism during the slave trade until the 1970s, when the State of Bahia repealed legislation requiring houses of worship to be registered with the police. Persecution of African religious practices by the Catholic Church has remained a reality parallel to the policy of incorporating African elements into the Mass. Most recently, some new fundamentalist Christian churches have launched virulent and effective campaigns against the Candomblé, identifying it as the work of the Devil. Recent litigation in defense of Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiro* communities has emphasized the human rights dimension of the prosecutions brought against them for various reasons, which constitute religious persecution.

Candomblé is a religion of initiation, not evangelism, and for this reason it does not proselytize, but welcomes those who participate. In Brazil, this has come to include people of all races and walks of life. Candomblé spiritual leadership holds considerable lay power in the respective communities, and this leadership traditionally has been exercised, to a great extent, by women. This female ascendancy in the Candomblé has been linked not only to the nature of the religious philosophy, but also to African social structures, which traditionally did not transform gender attributes into status differentials.

However, particularly in the State of Rio Grande do Sul in the southernmost corner of Brazil, the rapid proliferation of Umbanda houses

recently has been characterized by a trend in which white males have taken over positions of spiritual and secular power in religious communities. This trend runs parallel to one in the samba schools. Recently, as the Carnival has become a multimillion dollar industry, these traditionally black community organizations have seen an influx of whites who have taken control of their structures of power.

In a cosmology that brings together the ancestors, the living, the yet unborn, and the forces of nature, the *terreiro* communities' activities and contemplation are always geared toward the future. Their thought and actions contain an environmentalist philosophy in which the forces of nature—the Orisha—are profoundly integrated in human life and vice versa. In their festivities, the Orisha visit and fraternize with the human congregation. Together they celebrate the essential unity between the material world of the living—*aiyê*—and the world of the ancestors, the Orisha, and those who are yet to be born—*orum*. They reaffirm the continuity among different forms and stages of life and realms of being. In this way, they overcome the uncertainty intrinsic to the mystery of death in an organic way involving the community not only of men, but of all expressions of life in the cosmos.

Elisa Larkin Nascimento

See also Orisha; Umbanda

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CAVES

Throughout Africa, one finds many types of caves, along with rich evidence of human occupation of the entrance area of caves. Some of the inscriptions and paintings on cave walls are more than 30,000 years old. Caves were and are used in Africa for rest, shelter, fires, ceremonies, secret hideaways, mining of precious stones and metals, and rituals. After a brief look at the geology of caves, this entry examines their place in African culture, with a focus on religion.

Geological Background

Caves are rock or lava tubes with openings large enough for humans to find shelter or refuge. There are many types of caves in Africa. For example, some are formed at the same time as the surrounding rock and are called primary caves. Most of these are the results of lava activity. Normally created as lava flows down a volcano's side, the cave appears when the first crust cools and another flow of lava carves a path under the crust so that the resulting opening, when the lava flows out, is a cavernous area.

Secondary caves in Africa exist when processes inside rocks called solution and erosion occur. When rainwater, over many centuries, dissolves gypsum from between less soluble rocks, caves can be made. In Africa, one finds this type of *karstification*, a special land form produced in solution and erosion, in many cave formations. There are many other types of caves, but these are the most common in Africa. Fortunately for Africa's cave formation, there are lots of limestone areas where limestone has dissolved because of rain or groundwater and produced *karsts*, sinkholes, streams, and drainage areas. Often acidic water percolating from the surface creates stalactites and stalagmites.

Historical Context

The cave in South Africa's Gauteng Province, a World Heritage Site, has yielded the oldest and most complete human skull in science. It dates to 2.5 million years ago and figures in the search for

human origins. In terms of evolution, the caves of southern Africa have simply confirmed the length of time that hominids and humans have occupied the continent.

The Khoisan people of South Africa left their marks on many caves. When one examines the myths of the Zulu, who say that they came from inside the Earth, it is clear that the idea of a cave origin is possible in their thought. Although the Zulu appear in the region long after the San and Khoi people, they may have been as struck by the mystical nature of the caves as the San. Of course, because the ancestors of the San and Khoi had lived in the area around Klasies Rivers about 125,000 years ago, they are considered some of the earliest cave dwellers having left indications of their presence on the Tsitsikamma coastline of South Africa. There are evidences of stone tools and flakes used for hunting and cooking. It is clear that the dwellers at the southern tip of Africa were modern humans in every way. They used the same skills, methods, and reasoning as modern humans, yet they lived in caves and perfected a lithic technology that included thin bladed stones and arrowheads.

The Sacred Chambers

One of the best-known caves in Nigeria is the Ogba Ogbunike Cave, which was used by the local people as a hideaway when European and Arab slave-raiding parties were seeking kidnap victims. The people retreated to the deep chambers of the Ogbunike from where they could defend themselves from their enemy. A network of chambers and tunnels made the cave especially difficult for those seeking to capture the people. Because of its rich history and the stories that accompany its long tradition, people have come to regard it with a special sacredness. In fact, one can only enter the cave with bare feet.

The Igbo people believe that a deity named Ogba lived in the cave inside of a large rock that allowed the deity to have an all-seeing eye. Nothing humans did escaped Ogba. If someone was a thief, Ogba could detect this crime. Thus, when a person was accused of a crime, he or she could enter the cave to prove his or her innocence. If he or she returned, the people considered the

person innocent. However, the guilty party never returned alive. Another famous cave in the Igbo area is the Arochukwu Cave, which has become a major tourist attraction. This cave has a special formation that is apparently made of some form of metal through which the chief priest is able to speak to the people.

Other Functions of Caves

Obviously, the main uses of caves were for shelter and protection. For example, in southern Africa, the Mpumalanga people were able to use the magnificent Echo Caves to warn of the approach of the Swazi army and to hide themselves in the far reaches of the caves. The caves extend more than 40 kilometers, and when the Mpumalanga struck a special stalactite, it made a sound louder than any drum. When it was sounded, the people knew to take refuge in the cave.

Other caves are found in Cameroon, Algeria, Niger, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and several other African nations. The continent seems to be punctured by numerous caves, some quite deep and long, and others rather shallow, being nothing more than rock cliff shelters that have been carved out of rock through erosion. The Domboshowa Cave in Zimbabwe is famous for its rock paintings, but there are other caves in this country that are famous for evidence of some of the earliest mining in the world.

The Ndorobo people of Western Kenya have always considered the caves of Chepkitale Forest more suitable for living than the agricultural lands at the foot of Mount Elgon. Conflicts with the government and other clans over land and resources have forced the Ndorobo to choose their original homeland over the land given to them by the Kenyan government. The Ndorobo are related to the Soy and form the seminomadic group called Sabaot. But when the Ndorobo lived in the highlands and the Soy in the lowlands, they had community peace; but when the Kenyan government made their area a natural preserve and forced them away from the highlands and the caves, the Ndorobo believed they had lost contact with their ancestors.

Clearly, the use of caves in African history and culture is not limited to one function. In some

cases, people have used the caves as hideouts where they could go to escape their enemies; in other cases, the cave has been seen as a sacred land, a special place, where the eye or the voice of a powerful deity could be seen or felt. Still other people have used the peculiar rock formations as drums to warn their people of impending danger. Ceremonies have taken place in some caves where Africans make contact with ancestors who are said to have come from inside the Earth. Caves in Africa have been the venues for all types of human behaviors. The cave, just as the river, the mountain, the forest, or the lake, is a powerful space for the union of people and the deity. It remains alive, historic, distant, close, and mysterious all at once.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Clay; Earth; Rituals

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CEREMONIES

Ceremonies are special occasions that mark particular social, religious, or historical moments in a society's experience. In Africa, ceremonies play an important role in every aspect of a people's social life. One finds that ceremonies inaugurate an infant's entry into life, and from that moment forward the individual as a part of a group is moved from one ceremony to another in the communal experience.

There are three types of ceremonies: *transitions*, *officials*, and *cultural*. All of these ceremonies are infused with religious content. In the case of transitions, the individual is a special participant or observer in the collective recognition of birth, marriage, or death. When a child is born in African societies, the time must be marked by

the community as a way of reaffirming the myths of the society. Family members come together with the members of the society to welcome the child into the world. There are rituals of passage as persons move from one age stage to the next or move from one social society to another and so forth. At marriage, the young people are welcomed into the state of matrimony. When a person dies, the community also performs a ceremony whose elaborateness is often dependent on the person's place in the society. But these transitions might be called natural markers during a human being's life.

Other markers are related to official duties, and there are ceremonies to mark the rise to office of a king or queen, the appointment of officers in the court, the elevation of a priest or priestess, and the recognizing of someone as a great hunter, musician, dancer, or farmer. These ceremonies mark appointments and elevations to office, and that is why they are referred to as *official ceremonies*. Then there are the ceremonies that are held in celebration of cultural moments in a people's history. For example, there are certain market days that call the people to perform a ritual on the occasion of those days as special because of history, the season, or tradition. All days are not the same, and the marker for distinction is the ceremony that goes with the day or days.

When it comes to cultural ceremonies, they are also grounded in the events and personalities that have become important in a people's history. The Shona people of Zimbabwe have special recognition of Chaminuka or Nehanda as a sort of memorial to their existence. The Yoruba always recognize Eshu, sometimes called Legba, when they are preparing a meeting. A ceremony in honor of the keeper of the ways is one way to signal the importance of an event—that is, the seriousness of the occasion.

One sees this pattern throughout African history and culture to the degree that is possible to say that "Africans are a ceremonial people" and mean that whether it is birth, puberty, official recognition, or holy days, the people have always just had a ceremony or are preparing for one very soon.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Rites of Passage; Rites of Reclamation

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CHAGGA

The Chagga are a Tanzanian people who speak both Chagga and KiSwahili, the national language of the country. According to the elders of the Chagga people, the name of their Supreme Deity is Ruwa. In many ways, this name has correspondence with the ancient Egyptian name, Ra, for the Supreme Deity. Ruwa is also the word for the sun and, as such, might be seen as a form of the ancient Sun God. This is not to be understood in the sense that the sun was god, but that the sun was a representative of the energy and power of god.

Ruwa is the central figure in Chagga existence and is seen as the almighty liberator, protector, and sustainer of the Chagga community. There are many narratives of Ruwa's sensitivity, mercy, tolerance, kindness, and charity when the people need him. In this sense, he is not simply the creator god who creates and moves away, but an active participant in the affairs of the Chagga.

The names of the ancestors are important to the Chagga, and they have enshrined past kings such as Orombo, Marealle, and Sina in their rituals as outstanding personalities who made contributions to the Chagga. But it is not only the ancestors who are important to the Chagga, but children as well. Among the elders, there is a saying that a person who lives for eternity must leave a child behind. It is considered a positive value that people can live eternally through their children because posterity is responsible for remembering the deceased.

Each community takes the teaching of children as a measure for survival, and therefore introducing children to responsibilities early is a way to prepare them for handling the more significant rituals of memory for the ancestors. Thus, young children are given chores and are required to carry out their duties with diligence. Some children are herders; they wake early and

go follow the herd of cattle. Others learn to grind corn or clean out the cattle stalls.

Although children have these duties, they must still go through the *kususa* rite. This is an elaborate ritual that has one principal goal: to intercede in the lives of unruly children. Thus, a child of 12 years old may be brought before an elder woman who teaches the child about good behavior. Other children who are already initiated will be asked to give the new initiate advice about morality. The previously initiated children sing songs and chant proverbs that are meant to influence the new initiate. Thus, both the elders and the youths are brought in to assist with the ritual of *kisusa*. Afterward there is both a sacrificial and a purification ceremony, one followed by the other after a month.

In previous generations, the Chagga also held separate rituals for boys and girls before they were married. The young males had to experience and participate in the *Ngasi* ceremony. They would be sent out into the forest where they would perform certain ordeals for several days, hunting, fishing, and demonstrating their ability to live in the woods without family and community. Young women had to go through the *Shija* ceremony, which included instruction in rituals as well as learning about sexuality, procreation, and childrearing. However, the Germans who ruled Tanzania from 1885 to 1946 abolished all Chagga initiation rites. It might be said that abolition of these rituals created a crisis in identity and culture that continues to plague the society today.

Clearly, everything did not disappear with the presence of the colonial administrators; the Chagga have retained the greeting rituals that show the elaborate forms of previous generations. How you greet the elders is important to the society. One does not greet the elders the same way that one greets peers. Furthermore, the greeting may vary depending on the time of the day. Because the older the elder is, the closer he or she is to the ancestors, it behooves the person to ensure that he or she practices the proper greetings.

Propriety is also shown when wives and husbands meet; they must always face each other less one believes that the other is offering a curse. Indeed, even when a daughter-in-law meets her father-in-law, she must show him respect by bowing before him. Likewise, the father-in-law must always treat the daughter-in-law with respect and must show no hostility toward her.

As in a great many African societies, public displays of affection, such as hugging and kissing in public, are considered inappropriate. Thus, although Chagga have changed some of their customs, they remain grounded in the principal concepts of their culture.

Molefi Kete Asante

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CHAMINUKA

Chaminuka is an ancestor of the Shona people, who include VaZezuru, VaKaranga, VaManyika, VaNdau, VaKorekore, BaNambiya, BaVenda, and BaKalanga. These are dialect groups of the Shona as a family. Chaminuka's stature as a religious figure is best understood in relation to his place in the Shona lineage as a family and the role that he played as a founder of Zimbabwe. The original Chaminuka belongs to the lineage of Tovera, the earliest known ancestor of the Shona according to their history. Tovera's son, Mambiri, is the father of Murenga Sororenzou, the founder-architect of Zimbabwe. Murenga's children include Chaminuka, Nehanda, and Mushavatu. Mushavatu's descendants are the preferred mediums of Chaminuka.

The original home of the Shona before they came to Zimbabwe was Tanganyika (Tanzania), which means Origin of the World in Shona. The Shona migrated from Tanganyika to southern Africa as a family. They maintained their family structure as a model for their political and religious systems. That is why it has proved difficult to penetrate or divide them to set one group against the other.

God is the head of the Shona family and their political and religious systems. The ancestors are the guardian spirits, followed by the Mutapa as the ruler of the nation. The first Shona settlement in southern Africa was at Mapungubwe near the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashi Rivers. A town

south of Mapungubwe is named Thovela after the Shona ancestor Tovera. Another is named Thoho ya Ndou after Murenga Sororenzou. The Shona later moved to Zimbabwe and built their capital at Wedza in Marondera.

Chaminuka's son, Kutamadzoka, became Mutapa I. After his death, Chigwangu, his brother, became Mutapa II and moved the capital to Great Zimbabwe, where he became known as Rusvingo, which means Builder of Stone Walls. After the deaths of Murenga, Chaminuka, and Nehanda, the Shona continued to revere them as their ancestors and founders of the nation. Their spirits are invoked together especially in times of wide-scale wars and struggles.

Murenga's spirit operates as a voice from the caves of Njelele in Matopo. This is where the First Chimurenga started. It was organized in his name. All wars of the land in Zimbabwe are Wars of Murenga. They are called Chimurenga. The organizing spirits behind them are Chaminuka and Nehanda. Both operate through mediums. The first medium of Nehanda was Nyamhita, but the best known was Charwe, who guided the First Chimurenga and was executed by the British in 1897.

The first medium of Chaminuka was Kachinda, but the most famous was Pasipamire. His fame was associated with miracles and as a great prophet, healer, and rainmaker. His powers were especially manifest during the conflict with Lobengula, at the time when Europeans were invading southern Africa from Natal, forcing Africans to migrate northward and come into conflict with one another. Lobengula had tried several times to attack the Shona and take away their land. But Pasipamire would take the message of peace to him from the ancestors suggesting harmony and coexistence with the Ndebele. Lobengula would not listen.

He hatched a plan to invite the prophet to Bulawayo and kill him on the way. The prophet knew of the plan ahead of time, but was ready to obey the ancestors and face his fate. He took his wife, Bavheya, their sons, Bute and Kwari, and a few soldiers with him. Lobengula's soldiers were waiting for him in ambush near the Shangani River. Bavheya begged her husband to run away, but he was resolute to face his fate. Ndebele soldiers fell on the little party that the prophet came with and killed many of them. Kwari was

wounded in the leg, but managed to escape. Bute had already sneaked away to tell the Shona to prepare for war. Bavheya was left untouched.

The assailants struck at the prophet's body with spears, but the spears caused no harm. They fired at him with guns, but the bullets had no effect. When Lobengula's soldiers were exhausted, Chaminuka's prophet addressed them, saying they would not be able to kill him. For he had come in peace, not war, and was innocent. Only a young boy would be able to kill him because he would be innocent and not responsible for his actions. Soon a young boy was brought, and he struck the blow that killed the prophet instantly. Lobengula's soldiers cut open the prophet's body and took out his heart and liver as charms.

They proceeded to Chitungwiza to wipe out the entire village. The village was deserted. The people had gone to hide in ambush, ready for war. Lobengula's soldiers were surprised and repulsed. In his last words, Chaminuka's prophet had said they would never rule his land. A race of people would come from across the seas and defeat them and rule for a while. The rightful owners of the land would rise up and fight to take back their land.

Chaminuka's prophesy has since come true. Europeans came and defeated Lobengula. The children of Zimbabwe took up arms and got back their land. All these wars were fought in the name of Murenga as the founder of Zimbabwe and guardian of the land. They were organized and led by the twin spirits of Chaminuka and Nehanda. Chaminuka's role in all this is phenomenal. He is ancestor of the Shona and founder of Zimbabwe, together with Murenga and Nehanda. He is father of the first two rulers of Zimbabwe and has played a significant role through his prophet Pasipamire as a messenger of the humanistic values of peace, harmony, and coexistence that unite Africans in Zimbabwe today as a people and a nation.

Vimbai Gukwe Chivaura

See also Akhenaten; Nehanda

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CHEWA

The Chewa people live in Malawi and Zambia. There are more than 2 million Chewa spread throughout these countries. They claim origin from the Nyanja people, who were part of the great migration of the tropical people from West Central Africa to the southeast. The Chewa people believe, as told in their oral traditions, that they came from the region of Nigeria and Cameroon around 1000 AD. They are related to the Baluba of Congo. Many of the people moved to the high mountainous region of northeastern Zambia and northern Malawi, where they are concentrated around the city of Lilongwe. This entry looks at their culture and the religious roles of men and women.

The Chewa Culture

The Chewa people have always been deeply devoted to their ancestral traditions, exercising an enormous energy toward preserving the records of their origins and migrations. They are rich in cultural forms, dances, societies, and art. They are committed to advancing their cultural values among their children through rituals and ceremonial dramas. In fact, most cultural elements in Malawi are influenced by the Chewa.

The Chewa people retain much of their culture from the past in terms of religion and organization. For example, the unity of the Chewa based on their ethnic divisions, such as the Phiri and Banda clans, remains a factor in Malawian politics and society. The surnames *Banda Phiri* suggest the widespread presence of the ancient Chewa identity.

Religion among the Chewa starts with the idea of the Creator Deity Chiuta, who created all living

things on the mountain of Kapirintiwa along the borders of Malawi and Mozambique. Like many other traditional beliefs, the Chewa hold that the ancestors and spirits are necessary for the proper organization and operation of society. They believe that one can contact the ancestors and spirits and they can reciprocate through ritual. One way to ensure contact is to be initiated into Nyau, a society of secrets.

In general, the Chewa people have incorporated many ideas from the West into their culture. Surrounded by neighbors who have different origins, the Chewa have been steadfast in keeping their African traditions at the center of their social and religious lives. This strong protectionism of Chewa culture may be what is responsible for their constant support of cultural rituals and ceremonies.

Men's and Women's Roles

It is traditional to speak of the "giant dance" called Gule Wamkulu among the Chewa as the best way to understand the religious culture. These formal dances, Gule, are organized to allow the spirits and the ancestors to appear in the society. Dancers who are selected through initiation are considered powerful because of their spiritual state of possession. Men dressed as ancestral spirits in the form of trees, humans, and animals present themselves in formal societies. During these dances, the men who are dressed as ancestral figures are not to be touched. Indeed, if you pass one of these men on the road, you must make a sacrifice, give some money or a gift, or else you might fall victim to the unpredictable behavior of the Gule in their ancestral state.

The strength of Chewa kinship seems to be the Gule formations in small groups of four or five members who move about a village. They create a spirit of order and community as they move through the villages. People run inside houses to avoid approaching or touching the Gule Wamkulu spirits as they move about. Nevertheless, there is a sense of security and solidarity when the people see them because they are a part of the continuation of the society.

Gule dancers may be requested by the king to perform at funerals, weddings, and births. They are always present at initiation rites and ceremonies. The dances are celebratory and ritualistic,

but they are also a combination of fun and mystery. The Chewa Gulu wear some of the most diverse masks of any African community. They have hundreds of different masks that represent the numerous personalities in the legendary history of the Chewa.

The men are initiated into the Gule Wamkulu, whereas the women follow the Chisamba for their own initiation rites. Once a woman reaches the age for initiation, she is taken to a house where she is instructed on the proper responsibilities of being a good Chewa woman. Her elders seek to ensure that the initiate understands the correct knowledge of the Chewa culture. Solidarity between the elders and the initiates takes place in the ceremony and during the Chisamba dance. Foreign religions have influenced the Chewa during the past several decades, and yet the people have held onto their ceremonies and rituals in support of the ancestors.

The Chewa have been a matrilineal society, but they are now mixed with some families following a patrilineal system defined by Christian or Muslim religious followers. Elements of the matrilineal system abound among those persons who are most dedicated and devoted to the ancestral shrines. They see matrilineality as a function of being truly Chewa.

Men and women cooperate in working the land and harvesting the crops. Among the Chewa, this process is called Ganyu. It is an informal type of employment that binds the community together in common purpose. If someone works for you as a Ganyu, he or she might be paid in corn. Children start to work as early as 6 or 7 years old. They may be used to gather wood, retrieve water, care for young children, and take corn to the mill. Among the Chewa, women and children, not men, are responsible for preparing the Nsima, the staple crop. It is sorted, dried, pounded, and then cooked into a pasty patty, on which is placed vegetables and meats. One uses the hands to eat the Nsima.

Molefi Kete Asante

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CHI

Among the Igbo people of southern Nigeria, the Great Chi is Chukwu, the one Creator God. In fact, the entire culture of the Igbo people may be said to revolve around the idea of “Chi.” Taken from the concept of Almighty Chukwu, the idea of Chi is one of an omnipotent and omnipresent entity with numerous signs, symbols, activities, and sanctuaries to attest to the energizing power of Chi. Although one might find different names for the sanctuaries in various region of the Ibo nation, clearly the idea that Chi can be personalized is characteristic of every region and is therefore an idea that is shared by the community. In many everyday expressions, one hears the word *chi* as in the name Chika or in the expression by a male, “Aha m bu Chike,” that is, “My name is Chike.” This entry explores the role of the Chi in Igbo life.

A Complex Concept

Igbo culture is quite complex, and the concept of Chi stands in the middle of that complexity. In fact, the person, according to the Igbo, is composed of three parts: the Chi, the reincarnated ancestor, and the personal will. The chi is considered the core element in the person because it is the energizing aspect of the person. In many senses, it may be like the idea of nyama in the Mande culture because, like nyama, it is pervasive and therefore is found in every living thing. The physical form of a person has three separate parts: *isi*, *afo*, and *ukwu la aka*. Each of these parts has a counterpart in masculinity, femininity, and Chi, respectively.

One of the abiding philosophical questions in Igbo epistemology is where is the Chi in a material sense? Of course, this issue has been dealt with by the ancient philosophers of the culture, who

have argued that Chi is in the extremities of the physical body and has no materiality. You cannot see it; you can only see its evidence. Indeed, the Chi is the nonmaterial aspect of the person, which is different from the material aspects that a person inherits from the mother and father. One can say that it is invisible or hidden, yet the evidence of its existence is real.

Of course, this means that one is able to have a specific identity because of this material inheritance, which marks one as distinctive. The Chi gives people features and forces, however, over which they have no control whatsoever. The Igbo believe that what makes one person different from another is choice. Alongside choice is behavior; therefore, a person must go through the process of reasoning, decision making, and behaving to be a complete human being distinctive from another human being. Thus, the idea of choice is at the center of distinguishing features between one human and another.

Chi and the Individual

However, in the reincarnated ancestor, the complete cycle is more completely revealed. One has to follow the Igbo philosophical reasoning to see how this concept figures in the person. In the first place, the idea of reincarnation in the Western sense is called properly in Igbo, *ilo uwa*, meaning “returning again to the world.” Among the Igbo, it is believed that this process occurs when a new baby comes into the world. This infant is not a duplicate of a deceased person, nor is this child the deceased coming back in material form. Rather, the Igbo say that the child is unique. It is through the umbilical cord that the ancestral traits are transmitted, and consequently the umbilical cord must be ritually buried within the boundaries of family land.

It is impossible to overstate the relationship of the child to those who have gone before. In fact, the very existence of the child is dependent on the ancestors, and the Chi is the energy, the force, the feature, the “soul” of the person in the sense that the person is a direct link to the past. One cannot escape his or her Chi. It is what creates difference, but it is also what people have in common with each other. Among the Igbo, the idea of this aspect of the great Chukwu is understood as being a part of what makes people human.

The Igbo also believe that the Chi has a definite role in one’s life chances and possibilities. Each person receives a personal providential Chi from Chukwu that governs the overall life of a person until death. Upon the death of the person, this Chi returns to the Almighty Chukwu from whence it had come. This personal Chi may be energy for good or evil. Inasmuch as one’s ancestors constantly watch over Earthly matters, the idea is to demonstrate appreciation and reverence for the ancestors by praying to them for future happiness. You cannot speak badly of your Chi, nor can you say evil about your ancestors. This is a large taboo that requires much sacrifice.

Those ancestors whose lives are models of decency, reverence, and respect for their ancestors, and whose deaths are socially approved, live among the world of the dead, which is a mirror of the world of the living. In some senses, this harks back to the ancient African concept in the Nile Valley, where the idea of the land of the deceased mirroring the land of the living was an authentic piece of the common philosophy of the day. It is the same with the Igbo people. Those ancestors, who lived so well and died so well, are periodically reincarnated and given the title “*ndichie*,” meaning the “returners.” In this way, Chi continues forever and is never completed; the Chi is like Chukwu, its ultimate source, always present.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ka; Nkwa

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CHILDREN

In African religion, children are of primary importance. Indeed, children fulfill two significant roles. First, they remember and honor their

departed parents. Second, they allow departed ones to come back into the world of the living. This entry looks at the underlying beliefs about ancestors and explains each of the child's critical functions in turn.

Beliefs About Ancestors

In the African worldview, there is no fundamental difference between life and death because the latter is perceived as being simply a different mode of existence. Life, by definition, is infinite and eternal, and can, therefore, never end. Death, in that context, is a rite of passage that allows one to enter the ancestral realm. The primary difference between the world of the living and the ancestral universe has to do with their respective level of materiality, with the world of the living being totally visible and the realm of the ancestors being partially visible.

Therefore, as expected, there is not a waterproof separation between the world of the living and the ancestral world, but, much to the contrary, constant interactions and communication. The ancestors are still very much a part of their community. Among many African people, like the Guen-Mina of Togo, for example, it is believed that the dead keep the living company when they sleep or move around. When water must be thrown on the floor, for example, the ancestors are first warned with "Agoo" so that they can move away and not get wet.

The living cultivate and welcome the presence of the ancestors among them because, as spiritual entities, the ancestors are able to bestow protection and guidance on them on a constant basis. In fact, the ancestors are the guardians of the family and community's traditions, ethics, and affairs. The ancestors speak both the language of the living and the language of God and are therefore in a uniquely privileged position to intervene on behalf of the living and ensure their well-being, provided, of course, that they are satisfied with the way the living treat them.

The ancestors, in contrast, imperatively need the living so that they will not experience the worst possible form of death, that is, social death. Indeed, although death is understood and accepted as a necessary rite of passage leading to a higher form of existence, it is also, nonetheless,

experienced as a loss. What matters foremost, then, is that the person who died is not forgotten by those still on Earth. In the African universe, where one draws one's sense of existence from being related into a cosmic web to all that is in the world, be it other human beings, animals, or minerals, the importance of being remembered on one's death takes on its full meaning.

Being remembered means that one is still part of one's community and still exists. Conversely, being forgotten means being excluded, which is a terrible fate as far as Africans are concerned. In that context, to die without having had the chance or time to give birth to children is a real calamity because it is one's children's primary responsibility to remember one. This is why, everywhere in Africa, marriage and procreation are of the utmost importance.

Children's Role

The first responsibility of children is to ensure that all necessary funerary rituals are correctly and duly performed upon their mother's or father's death. The importance of such a responsibility cannot be underestimated because a person whose death and departure are not handled correctly might be denied access to the world of the ancestors and never be able to enjoy peace. Such a troubled spirit would, in turn, prove quite dangerous for members of the family as well as members of the community by mercilessly unleashing its fury and anger on them. Such a disaster must be avoided at all costs by performing appropriate funerary rituals that will allow the departed person to smoothly transition into the abode of the ancestors.

Once such rituals have been performed, it is incumbent on the children to perform other rituals throughout their own lives to maintain their parents alive, such as making offerings (like libations or sacrifices) to them, or maintaining family traditions, such as ancestral ceremonies or observing taboos. The memory of the deceased is usually cultivated for about five generations. Some African people, like the Yoruba, hold special and collective *Egungun* rituals to honor all those spirits who are no longer remembered individually due to the passage of time.

The second major role played by children in the African religious universe is that, through them, the

deceased may come back and enjoy life once more or complete unfinished business. For most African people, there is a close relationship between newborn children and the ancestors because newborn babies are frequently conceived of as returned ancestors. The ancestors return not so much as physical entities, but as spiritual personalities.

Upon discovering that one of its female members is pregnant, a family will commonly, through divination, find out which one of the family's ancestors is coming back. A child is therefore treated with great respect and always as a blessing from the ancestral world. Children are welcomed into the community of the living during a special naming ceremony that usually takes place on the seventh or eighth day after their birth. Although that ceremony officially separates children from the spirit world, the closeness between newborns and ancestors continues nonetheless for a while.

For example, the Akan believe that young children are happier when left alone because they are in the company of their spiritual siblings and mother. When a young child smiles, laughs, or cries while apparently on his or her own, it is simply in response to a spiritual stimulus that only he or she can receive by virtue of being a child. In the end, children allow life to continue. In the African religious tradition, which is, above all, a celebration of life, to have children is both a social and a spiritual obligation. Children are a sacred gift to be truly appreciated, cherished, and cultivated by all in the community.

Ama Mazama

See also Family; Women

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CHIWARA

The Bamana people of Mali, often called Bambara, are known for the carved antelope figure called Chiwara, the original animal. The antelope represents a mythical animal that taught humans the fundamentals of agriculture. Because the Bamana believe that farming is the most important occupation, they honor the Chiwara with elaborate ceremonies. In fact, the animal is thought to have derived from a union between the Earth and a snake. This entry looks at the Chiwara figure and its representation in art.

The Legend

According to the story, the animal used its antlers and pointed stick to dig into the Earth, making it possible for humans to cultivate the land. Humans watched the Chiwara and then followed in its footsteps to create their own farms. They loved the lessons of planting that they had learned from the antelope, the Chiwara, working animal. In fact, the Chiwara had used its hoofs to cover the seeds and humans watched this so closely that they became experts at planting seeds.

So bountiful did the Bamana farms become that they had too much corn for their own use. They wasted it, thinking that it was so easy to cultivate. Chiwara grew disappointed and went and buried himself into the Earth. This action disturbed the elders of the Bamana, who regretted that they had lost their chief agricultural teacher. They then ordered that a mask be made in memory of Chiwara.

No one can possess the Chiwara mask. It is held for the persons who are the best and fastest workers in the land, and so it is passed from one person to another depending on skill and expertise. It is a high prize to be able to dance the Chiwara dance and to wear the mask. A dance, representing both male and female genders, commemorates the teacher where the dancers wear the beautifully carved headdresses to indicate that they can never be separated as Chiwara was once separated from the people.

Once they dance the Chiwara dance and wear the Chiwara headdress, the chief teacher will always be with the people. The dancers are usually



Masked performer with antelope headdress (Ciwara, Chiwara). Bamako (national district), Mali.

Source: Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

experts at imitating the antelope; they leap and turn, moving their heads and feet like the antelope. In fact, according to the Bamana, any person who tried to separate the two dancers, male and female, representing the great teacher spirit Chiwara would be killed. Thus, the dance carries with it moral lessons, social implications, and religious symbolism.

One is struck by the beauty of the dance, where the dancers suggest fertility, reproduction, propitiation of the spirits and ancestors, and gratitude to the great agricultural teacher. The movement of the dancers is grounded in hundreds of years of tradition, and the dancers demonstrate the vignettes of culture and the nuances of communication in the Bamana society as they dance. They become, just for the time of the dance, the full embodiment of Bamana men and women. Children can see their own history in the dances of the experts.

Sculptures and Other Art

There are three principal kinds of Chiwara sculptures. Each one represents a certain region of the Bamana country. For example, the style that has the vertical antelope shape is usually found in the eastern part of the country between Koutialia and Segou. This style reduces the body and hoofs to a minimum, but elongates the neck and the horns. The male antelope carries a mane, and the female with a slender neck has a young baby on the back.

A second kind of sculpture is more naturalistic than the first. The head of the image is attached to the body with metal clips. This type of sculpture has not gained wide popularity because it defies the general idea in African art, which is unity of the subject and material. One rarely finds African art that is made of pieces hammered or clipped together. Yet there is a form of this in some parts of Mali.

As for the third kind of sculpture of the Chiwara, it is found in the region around Bougouni. Here the artist presents the most abstract types of Chiwara that use angles and forms that are so stylized and unique that they present Chiwara on the back of a turtle or lizard. The artist rendering of the philosophical, moral, and religious concepts is part of the nature of Bamana culture to see gradual evolution of images in the direction of abstraction.

During the 20th century, Bamana art in the form of the Chiwara became popular in Western circles, where artists copied the form on two-dimensional surfaces and art dealers sold the authentic pieces of Bamana art for good prices. The use of the Chiwara as a model art piece in contemporary homes was a widespread practice in Europe and America during the latter part of the 20th century. It may be that the Chiwara and the Dan mask were the two most frequently used pieces of African art in the Americas and Europe.

Noted by Westerners for its spectacular nod to abstraction, the Chiwara is one of the best examples of African religious art expressing the sentiments of a people. The Bamana place in the Chiwara the principles of balance, harmony, and order, which are fundamental to their own way of viewing reality. There is no way that the Bamana person can approach the sacred without appreciation of the spirit of Chiwara.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Bamana

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CHOKWE

The Chokwe ethnic group is situated in northeast Angola with a close contact with Zambia, Congo, Botswana, and Mozambique. Chokwe constitute

one of the most important ethnic groups in the Angola culture, among the Ovimbundu, Kimbundu, Bacongo, and Ngangela.

The Chokwe people are descendants of the Bantu group, and their primary language is Chokwe, which originates from Bantu. The Chokwe traditional religious history is derived from the Lunda Empire or the “Mwata Yanvo” Muatianvuas, which had its heroic period, development, apex, and decline from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Hordas coming from East of Angola, led by their chiefs Chokwe-Lunda Tshinguri, Tshinyama, and others, settled near the source of rivers Cuango, Cassai, and Alto-Zambeze; these regions were already inhabited by the Bantu group before the Chokwe settlement. This entry looks at their religious beliefs and practices.

Chokwe Beliefs

The Chokwe have strong religious beliefs that are associated with their internal history and their moral geographical position within the Angolan history. Chokwe religious ideals are the continuation of their ancestor’s traditions that reflect their everyday life. This means that, within their religious traditions, the linkage with the ancestors is inevitably a primary concern.

An appreciation of the Chokwe concept of God must involve an understanding of the pride of place given to ancestors. To the Chokwe people, life has no value at all if the presence and power of ancestral spirits are excluded. Ancestral spirits are the most intimate gods of the Chokwe people; they are part of the family and are consulted frequently by its members.

The concept of *sacred kingship* in Chokwe religion was originally introduced to the Chokwe by a foreign Luba hunter of royal blood called Chibinda Ilunga. In fact, Chibinda Ilunga remains at the core of the chiefs’ central position in Chokwe religion today. Chiefs or kings are regarded as the representatives of God (Kalunga or Nzambi) on Earth and as the intermediaries between the world of humans and the realm of ancestral and natural spirits that affects humans and their environments. The Chokwe king, or Mwanangana, is literally the “owner/overseer of the land,” the individual who is ultimately responsible for the well-being of the people, fertility, and the continuity of his or her people.

The most common name used to refer to the high God among the Chokwe is Kalunga or Nzambi. This supernatural being is said to have created the World and humans and can therefore also be called Samatanga, meaning the creator. The word *Kalunga* or *Nzambi* among the Chokwe today is viewed as a unitary and remote principle that is distinguished by its greatness, infinity, and ubiquity; this change obviously has been heavily influenced by the Christian conception of God, and it likely differs considerably from the view held before the Christian missionaries entered Chokwe land.

The prestigious items, objects that relate to particular chores, activities of their everyday life, and concepts of beauty, dress, and well-being become part of the Chokwe religious cosmology in terms of spiritual connection with their ancestors and God the creator. These include pottery and basketry, as well as combs, hairpins, staffs, and pipes. Most of these items incorporate images of tutelary ancestral spirits that symbolically support concepts of wealth, fertility, prosperity, health, and social status.

Religious Practice

The spiritual connection in Chokwe religion happens through close contact with nature and its mysticism; the sand, in which they draw, becomes the spiritual intermediary with the divine. The Chokwe people have a unique way of drawing; their drawings are based in vertical and horizontal lines with lots of crosses and small dots. Their drawings are a vivid expression of the multiple complexities of their culture and tradition, which is difficult for outsiders to comprehend.

The term *God* among the Chokwe is thus not only the creator of the World and its people, but also of a basic element of the social fabric. The cultural changes that have affected the area over the past 100 years, however, have led to the current neglect of this traditional blue print of human organization.

Chokwe religion, as well as most African religions, does have a tradition of oral religious practice as a way to communicate between the elders and the newest initiates. Oratory in the religious practice among the Chokwe is the foundation of the Chokwe Empire. Indeed, the oratory and the

religion, of which oratory is a major factor, served to unite and define the Chokwe to a significant degree. Historically, it has also played an important role in their social structure, internal development, and social and technological evolution during the 19th and 20th centuries. The oratory tradition in their religion serves as a mechanism to transcend the physical and reach the metaphysical world.

Chokwe is a patriarchal society where the male is the dominant figure in the culture; the chiefs, the diviners, and the intermediates in the spiritual World tend to be male. Within the Chokwe culture, there are no specialized priests because elder men or women can make ceremonies. However, male elders are eligible to make offerings to the ancestors before and after perilous expeditions or during times of trouble in the villages. Women seldom make such offering mainly because most of their lives are spent in their husband's village, where there is no shrine dedicated to their own lineage ancestors. It is sometimes said that women suffer more than men from ancestor-related afflictions because they are not able to make frequent offerings to the ancestors in the way that men do.

Yet female elders have the power to initiate ceremonies to cure diseases. Women are not without powers. Chiefs are the initiators of the ancestral spirits that may manifest as a form of painted body, ritual performance, with masks to dramatize cosmological principles. A *makishi* performance, for example, evokes publicly the cosmological ideas within the Chokwe system, which connects humans to the spiritual world. In the delicate relationship among body, soul, and mind, the *makishi* performance reinvigorates the history and beliefs of the people. A *makishi* performer wears a traditional mask and may scare the children by chasing them during the ritual to bring direct contact with the divine spirit. The *makishi* often serves to sanction and validate social and political institutions.

In Chokwe religion, the ideal woman for the Lunda and Luvale is the mother. Mothers take the lead in initiations ceremony for women; they prepare a young girl to earn her membership among adult women. Indeed, the young girl is celebrated as a potential mother. Mothers among the Chokwe are honored in religious rituals; the

major purpose of the religious rituals that celebrate mothers is to satisfy mothers as primary sources of knowledge and spiritual powers. Women have the ability to create and end life, and the ceremony seeks to show respect for this power. Normally, the mothers respond enthusiastically and appropriately by dancing, singing, screaming, and clapping to the masked performance.

It is the role of the chiefs, as the highest religious representatives of God on Earth and mediators between the natural and supernatural realms, to perform propitiatory ceremonies and to commemorate the achievement of the founders of the Chokwe lineage. This means that the chiefs ensure that the past fuses with the present to work harmoniously toward an auspicious future for all Chokwe people. Royal ancestors' figures among the Chokwe also reflect the king's responsibility to maintain a sense of balance with the spiritual world to secure the well-being of their community.

In the cosmology of Chokwe religion, remembering and honoring the ancestors ensures fertility, success, and continuity for all in the community. Neglecting deceased relatives results in chaos, confusion, calamity, catastrophe, and war for both individuals and their related community.

At the beginning of the summer season, the elders among the women and the children organize a spiritual giving celebration to the river Cuango. They come with food, the pouring of libations of beer and wine, and the evocation of songs and dances to the ancestors as a way to please them for the goodness, protection, and guidance they received throughout the year. During the spiritual celebration to the ancestors, members are allowed to cry, dance, throw food in the river, and ask for more rain for the fertilization and improvement of the harvest.

When things go well and life is pleasant, the Chokwe people give praise and thanks to the ancestors. Chokwe ancestral spirits play a crucial role of providing for their living kin if they are properly addressed and honored by the living ones; this is the source of happiness and peace among the people.

Chikukuango Cuxima-zwa

See also Ancestors; Bantu Philosophy

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CIRCUMCISION

Various forms of surgical and ritual operations known as circumcision are performed on human sex organs throughout the world. In Africa, it is an old practice. Erroneously believed by many people to be of Israelite or Islamic origin, circumcision actually predates the births of Jesus Christ and Mohammed. It is a much more ancient practice than Judaism and Islam, one that came to the Israelites from the Kemetians, the ancient Egyptians. This entry looks at that history and the practice in Africa.

Historical Background

The oldest documentary evidence for male circumcision comes from ancient Egypt. Proof of circumcision rite abounds in the ancient Egyptian temple reliefs and paintings; tomb artwork from the 6th dynasty (2345–2181 BC) shows men with circumcised penises. In addition, one relief from this period shows the rite being performed on a standing adult male. Ancient Egyptians sacrificed the foreskin to Min, the fertility and sexuality god, by burning it. Min was shown as a human male with an erect penis.

It must be noted, however, that although circumcision is of ancient Egyptian origin and was prevalent in this powerful ancient African kingdom, it was not systematically performed on all men, nor was it required of all. As a matter of fact, the examination of the ancient Egyptian

Hieroglyph for “penis” reveals either a circumcised or an erect organ. Likewise, the examination of ancient Egyptian mummies of the pharaohs has shown some males who were circumcised and others with foreskins. The tool used to perform circumcision was the flint, a piece of hard gray stone that sparks or makes small flashes of flame when struck with steel.

In Ancient Israel, circumcision was ritually performed during a special ceremony (berith or briss) on the eighth day after birth, and it involved male children of natives, servants, and aliens. It was initially carried out by the father. The tool the Jewish people used to perform circumcision was a knife, but later specialists known as *mohels* (circumcisers) were employed to carry out the berith.

In the Islamic tradition, *khitan* (male circumcision), also called euphemistically *tahara* (purification), was to be performed on a boy only when he reaches the age of 13. Arabic Bedouin ethnic groups would circumcise males the day before they were to marry. It was a test of endurance, valor, and honor, in that during this operation the groom was to sing, thus proving to the surrounding crowd that he is stronger than pain. However, it is becoming acceptable for Muslim boys to be circumcised years earlier, even as early as the seventh day after birth. Muslim *Sunneci* (trained and experienced circumcisers) also use knives or razor blades to perform the operation.

Practice in Africa

In African countries, the age at which circumcision is carried out varies considerably among ethnic groups and families and is dependent on religious affiliations and, in some cases, on personal preference. It can be performed at any time of human development, as early as at birth or as late as at adult age. The tools utilized to perform the rite vary as well and include knives, pairs of scissors, razor blades, and other sharp-edged tools. Although today circumcision is performed for the most part by physicians or RNs, it is embedded in a wide range of cultural contexts and is quite different in mode, rationale, scope, significance, and effects.

Indeed, depending on whether the ritualistic surgical operation is performed on a male or a female genital, the word *circumcision* takes different meanings and connotations. Until recently, the term

circumcision, invariably called in medical jargon *Acucullophallia*, *Peritomy*, or *Posthetomy*, was used to refer exclusively to the surgical operation performed on male genitalia (male circumcision). This original meaning is still carried in several African languages. The word *circumcision* is called *Adà gbigbó* (*Adà* = penis, *gbigbó* = cutting) in the Fongbe language of Benin Republic, *Okó didà* (*Okó* = penis, *didà* = cutting) in the Yoruba language of Nigeria, and *Evo sosso* (*Evó* = penis, *sóssó* = cutting) in the Mina language of Togo Republic.

Female Circumcision

Conversely, the term *excision* for a long time was used to name exclusively homologous surgical operations performed on women (female circumcision, or *khafd* in Arabic). In fact, the French word for a woman who performs any form of female circumcision on her peers is *exciseuse* (female circumciser). However, what is known as female circumcision nowadays has taken many dimensions in shape and techniques to the point that the word *excision* is used to name only one of the different types of female circumcision. Following the World Health Organization (WHO) classification, female circumcision is referred to as female sexual mutilation (FSM), female genital mutilation (FGM), or female genital cutting (FGC). There are four types.

Clitoridectomy, also called Type 1 FGC, is defined as the removal of the clitoral hood with or without removal of the clitoris. The clitoral hood corresponds to the foreskin of the penis, which is removed during circumcision. *Excision*, also known as Type 2 FGC, is the removal of the clitoris together with part or all of the labia minora. *Infibulation*, or Type 3 FGC, is defined as the removal of part or all of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minora, and labia majora) and stitching and/or narrowing of the vaginal opening, leaving a small hole for urine and menstrual flow. Unclassified Type of FGM or Type 4 FGC encompasses all other operations performed on the female genitalia, including

- pricking, piercing, stretching, or incising of the clitoris and/or labia;
- cauterization by burning the clitoris and surrounding tissues; and

- incision to the vaginal wall; the scraping or cutting of the vagina and surrounding tissues; and the introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina.

Rationales

There are several theories accounting for the nature and rationale of the circumcision rite. One of the most common is that it is an initiatory rite. Circumcision was performed before marriage or at puberty, a rite of passage for teenage boys. In other words, the ritual was regarded as a necessary preliminary to marriage. Among many African ethnic groups, especially the Masai of Kenya, there are specific periods during which the circumcision rite is performed. Boys must prove themselves ready by performing certain manly tasks, including attending to cattle before they can be circumcised. When the boys feel they are ready, they approach junior elders and ask them to open a new circumcision period.

Another explanation is physical hygiene. It is believed that circumcision is a necessary health procedure, which prevents the attraction or transmission of diseases. On a medical plane, a number of diseases, such as penile carcinoma, posthitis, phimosis, and balanitis, are said to afflict only uncircumcised males. Moreover, the risk of getting a urinary tract infection is believed to be far greater among the uncircumcised males. It has also been reported that 9 out of 10 uncircumcised men have difficulty or experience pain in getting the foreskin to pull backward upon erection.

Of course, there is a controversy over the medical validity of circumcision to the point that, in developed countries such as the United States, some men who were previously circumcised blame their parents for making them go through the procedure. Consequently, these men seek the restoration of their foreskins by undergoing medical procedures known as foreskin restoration and penis shaping.

In several cultures, circumcision is a rite of entry into the community of faith. Among the Israelites, circumcision became the sign of the Covenant People. Whoever was uncircumcised was looked down upon and could not partake of the hopes of the nation, nor could join in the worship of Yahweh.

It can also be an ethnic mark of distinction. Among many African ethnic groups, circumcision is regarded highly as a mark of distinction and a symbol of valor and/or manhood. For the Masai of Kenya, circumcision determines the role a boy will play throughout his life, as a leader or a follower. A boy who cries out during the procedure is branded a coward and shunned for a long time and his mother is disgraced, whereas a boy who is brave and who has led an exemplary life becomes the leader of his age group. It takes months of work to prepare for circumcision ceremonies among the Masai, so the exact date of such an event is rarely known until the last minute.

Both male circumcision and female circumcision have cultural and religious significance in African societies. For example, if the request for a new circumcision period is approved, the Masai boys begin a series of rituals, including the *Alamal Lenkapaata*, preparation for circumcision or the last step before the formal initiation. Before Masai boys are circumcised, they must have a *liabon*, a leader with the power to predict the future, guide them in their decisions. The boys decorate themselves with chalky paint and spend the night out in the open. The elders sing, celebrate, and dance throughout the night to honor the boys. It is worthwhile to note that, once a circumcision period ends, it may not be opened again for many years. The circumcision rite is taken seriously in African culture and religion.

Controversies

Of the two ceremonial genital surgeries, female circumcision is inarguably the more controversial, the more debated and written about, and the more publicized. Articles, books, disquisitions, documentaries, and films are plentiful on the topic. Although some are in favor of the practice on the argument that it is purifying, others suggest a revisitation of the rite to improve on the methods used in performing it. Other literatures, probably the vast majority and mostly written by outsiders to the rite, still oppose female circumcision altogether and call for the stoppage of the practice they deem the most horrendous and barbaric torture and injustice done onto women.

The documentary film *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of*

Women, produced jointly by Alice Walker and Indian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar in 1992–1993, belongs to the latter group of literature on female circumcision. These two activists collected accounts, photographs, poems, interviews, and medical testimony suggesting that female circumcision may contribute to the spread of AIDS. Prior to this documentary, which is lauded by some and deemed inflammatory by others, Walker released another book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), in which she urged women to break their silence and resist female genital mutilation. In recent years, many works that are similar to Walker's have followed suit.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Clitorectomy; Rituals

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CLAY

Throughout Africa, creation stories according to which the first human beings were created out of clay are common. One may think, for example, of the Yoruba creation story, in which Obatala, the son of Olorun, the supreme Yoruba God, created the first 16 human beings out of clay, which he molded. The Shilluks of the Sudan also tell a story in which God, Juok, made human beings out of clay. The different colors that distinguish

the races are attributable to the color of the clay available at the time of their creation. Similarly, according to the Efe (a Bantu people), God kneaded the body of the first human beings out of clay, an account reminiscent of the Ewe story about the coming into the world of the first woman and the first man. In fact, a common metaphor for God, as he or she creates the world and all that exists in the world, is a *potter*. Although clay is definitely not the only material from which humans are said to have come, its reference as the very stuff of life nonetheless appears frequently. This is understandable given the omnipresence of clay in African lives: It provides the ground upon which Africans walk and grow their food, and it is a material commonly used to make plates and pots, among other things related to the sustenance of life.

Interestingly enough, throughout Africa, clay pots have also been assimilated with women and their power to create and regenerate life in an intimate and profound way. Indeed, the clay pot is often seen as a symbolic representation of the woman's womb. This is the case among the Bemba people of Central Africa, for example, where a woman about to get married is given a clay pot by her father's sister. Because the main purpose of marriage is procreation, the clay pot stands for the womb that is expected to be filled and blessed with many pregnancies. A similar ritual can be observed among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, when the paternal aunt hands a clay pot full of water to a bride. Water is also intimately associated with fertility in Africa. Then, just like God made the world out of clay, women are the sacred repositories of life, a fact best expressed through the metaphor of the womb as a clay pot.

In effect, the making of pots is an activity primarily reserved for women. It appears that African women have been making pottery for at least 8,000 years. Regarded as a spiritual undertaking, many restrictions and taboos apply to pottery. Among the Chewa women of southern and central Africa, potters are not supposed to engage in sexual intercourse during certain critical stages of the pottery-making process, just like sexual intercourse is forbidden during pregnancy. Similarly, when women menstruate, they cannot gather clay, as is the case for Manda women, or cannot make pots, as is the case for Asante women.

Given the value attached to fertility in general, and women's fertility in particular, clay pots also participate in defining a woman's identity. Learning how to make pots is part of the initiation training that young Bemba women undergo. Among the Chewa people already mentioned, for example, when a woman passes away, one of her pots is broken and buried with her, thus signifying the end of her life. This is also done when a Gurunsi woman (from Burkina Faso) dies. Her pot is broken as an analogy for her now broken and lifeless body.

Clay pots are also perceived and used as spiritual vessels. Indeed, they may house the spirit of those whose body has died. Such is the case with Ifè terracottas, or with Mma ancestral pots. The same phenomenon is observable in the African diaspora. Thus, in Haitian Vodou, the *govi*, which is a jar made of red clay, allows the deceased to resume their active involvement in the affairs of their original community. In that capacity, the *govi* is quite precious to the living because, when called on, the spirit is able to dispense advice, guidance, warnings, protection, wisdom, and so on to the living from the *govi*. *Govis* are regularly fed—that is, they receive food offerings and sacrifices from the living.

Finally, one must also mention the frequent use of white clay during religious ceremonies. White clay is generously smeared over faces, masks, bodies, and so on because it is widely believed to facilitate communication between the living and the spirits. Among the Saramacca people, in Surinam, South America, for instance, white clay is known as *pemba dote* and is commonly spread over ritualistic and religious items.

Ama Mazama

See also Air; Earth; Wind

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CLITORECTOMY

The practice of cutting away, altering, or removing some or part of the genitals in both men and women is generally referred to as excision or circumcision (male) or clitorectomy (female). This was a prehistoric practice found globally and in all religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and within the spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples. This practice is found on the continent of Africa as far back as ancient Egypt (Kemet) as a social, religious, and cultural custom practiced on females. More recently, opposition to the clitorectomy has developed. This entry focuses on the tradition of clitorectomy, its social meanings, and the recent controversy.

Traditional Roots

As a powerful cosmological-spiritual force, the scholar Cheikh Anta Diop demonstrated the link of the practice to that of ancient Egypt (Kmt) and the remainder of Africa. African Gods directed the rite of circumcision. For example, among the Yoruba in Nigeria, the God most associated with circumcision is Ogun. In traditional Africa, clitorectomy was performed for social as well as spiritual reasons; the practice denoted that the female was making a transformation into womanhood. The practice was instituted at the onset of puberty, incorporating two age ranges for the female candidates: 7 to 15 years and 15 to 19 years.

Other spiritual notations reveal that the practice was related to the duality of males and females and the need for gender differentiation. Therefore, clitorectomy functioned to eliminate the male aspect in females. It reinforced the cosmological ideas that acknowledged the dual or androgynous nature of the Gods. The act was much more than an operation on the flesh, removing what are considered the traits of the opposite

sex; without it, people could not marry or have socially sanctioned sexual activities, nor could they have access to the secret or hidden information that gave them the right to function as adults.

Thus, clitorectomy symbolized the death of the girl and the emergence or rebirth of a new person—the woman. As a result, females were believed to experience greater fertility and more live births. As a spiritual ritual, clitorectomy ceremonies were performed as a significant rite of passage for females. It has been described as an archetypical activity of the ideal feminine. Clitorectomy was considered a highly meaningful act that signified the sacred symbolism of feminine fertility. It was generally performed in sacred ceremonies by traditional female healer/practitioners or wives who held high social status.

Some contemporary societies, however, have provided for clitorectomy to be performed by licensed medical personnel in hospitals and clinics. Finally, the importance of traditional African circumcision rituals is indicated in literature, art, and music, and the origins of circumcision are found in many of the creation narratives of African societies. In one Yoruba creation narrative, the story of Ogun and Olure, marriage and procreation were facilitated through female circumcision.

Social Context

It has been suggested that over time the major religions external to traditional African societies have contributed significantly to social and cultural reinterpretations of the meaning of the existing practice. For example, circumcision as a practice in some African societies may have fused Christianity with traditional ancient ideas about spiritual purification. In societies where patriarchy is the predominant social and political system, clitorectomy is sustained. Some of the social reasons for practicing clitorectomy today include the effort to ensure premarital chastity (virginity) among females. It was also believed that the practice would help females maintain fidelity during marriage. In addition, because of social demands, both men and women believe that female circumcision would increase a woman's marriage opportunities. It has also been suggested that females who undergo circumcision

are viewed as courageous members of their communities because of the pain associated with the procedure. Furthermore, in societies that valued fecundity, clitorectomy was thought to reverse patterns of childlessness.

Long-established customs of marriage and women's roles have interpreted clitorectomy as a paradigm of feminine modesty and an example of upholding family honor. Proponents of clitorectomy, both male and female, have also suggested that it is a protection against rape, a form of birth control, and a means to reduce sexual urges in young women. In modern society, it is believed to preserve morality in an increasingly sexualized atmosphere brought about by the West. In some parts of the Islamic world, the practice is called *sunna*. A term for circumcision (or the act of cutting) among the Yoruba is *da'ko*, while excision is sometimes referred to as *dabo*. The Bambara of Mali have practiced the ceremonial cleansing known as *seli ji*. Among the Zhusa in South Africa, the ritual initiation is known as Umkhwetha.

Millions of women worldwide have experienced some form of clitorectomy, and many African countries continue the practice. It is part of a system where social pressures converge with a number of legacies associated with spirituality and tradition. First, clitorectomy confers gender identity among females. Second, it gives women the perception of control and order, where women's power rests in the ideation of virtue. Third, women who exercise this form of power are thought to participate in sexual equality. Fourth, as a form of social control, it asserts kinship and a filial expression of ethnic identification. Fifth, clitorectomy has been connected with a higher social status in some societies.

Opposition

Clitorectomy is a highly controversial practice in many modern cultures. In contemporary society, the practice is sometimes called female genital mutilation (FGM). The custom is subject to a major global campaign to end the practice and to educate women about the health dangers. In particular, African women and many other activists and scholars have brought this practice to the

forefront in calling for its ban. It is often interpreted as a consequence of unequal male–female relationships and women’s status in the societies that continue to practice it. Opponents cite the health dangers of the surgery and the patriarchal implications inherent in the custom.

There are four major types of clitorrectomy, which range from the least cutting to a complete surgical procedure. Type I involves cutting away the clitoral foreskin and/or clitoris. The most severe form of clitorrectomy is called *Pharaonic* (or in some areas *Sudanic*) and involves the removal of external genitalia and stitching of the vulva. Scholars have asserted that clitorrectomy is a life-threatening procedure, especially when performed in nonmedical and unsanitary environments. Other health concerns have included generalized genital pain, retardation of sexual development, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse), vaginal disorders, and medical complications that appear later in life.

FGM opponents have placed the custom within the context of human rights violations. It has been compared to the Chinese practice of foot binding. Clitorrectomy is viewed as a form of cruelty to the spiritual, physical, and psychological female self. Opponents also argue that language is critical to the contemporary discussion. For example, they advise that female circumcision is an incorrect term and that the experience is not parallel to male circumcision. There is also a movement among those interested in ending the practice that focuses on and acknowledges the process of cultural reformation. They note that the practice is not found among all groups of people and that there is a diminishing demarcation between those family groups that are circumcised and noncircumcised. They also have advocated the development of alternative initiation rites and other coming-of-age ceremonies, which preserve the integrity of the meaning of the act without performing the act. It is an example of the embedded nature of some traditional ideas that challenge the processes of cultural reaffirmation and reorganization.

Many African nations have been in the forefront of eradicating the practice of clitorrectomy. Agencies such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Kenya), Tostan (Senegal), and the Inter-African

Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (Ethiopia) are among those many organizations dedicated to ending clitorrectomy and educating women and the community about other concerns of women in their societies.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Circumcision; Health; Initiation; Rituals

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COLOR SYMBOLISM

Color symbolism is especially important in Africa, not just in terms of art or aesthetics, but in relation to traditional spirituality and spiritual practices. Unlike more recent Western esoteric analyses that acknowledge the ability of particular colors to elicit specific emotional responses, within most African conceptualizations, colors are reflective of specific life forces and, as such, are often relied on and furthermore utilized in the manipulation of cosmic energy. The use of particular colors in certain situations for specific purposes is believed to release their intrinsic powers. Thus, extreme care is taken to use and wear, as well as avoid, particular colors on ritual occasions.

Throughout the Diaspora, the importance of color symbolism can be witnessed through the representations of various deities and the subsequent ritual practices of their devotees. In Yoruba,

Obatala, the oldest of the orisa responsible for literally shaping human form, is considered the “King of White Cloth.” Obatala is regarded as the orisa of wisdom and purity, and his representative items are always white. Similarly, the Obatala of Santeria and Lukumi also wear white. When an *okomfo* (traditional priest) of the Akan tradition embodies the spirit of Nana Esi Ketewaa, the *obosom* who protects fertility and children, she is recognized by the blue and white cloth that she wears, the same cloth associated with purity, healing, and childbirth, and more often used for traditional naming ceremonies. Similarly, ritual artifacts used by devotees also reflect the attendant care and specificity given to color representation. Thus, the altars constructed and *elekes* (Yoruba)/*collares* (Santeria)/*ahenes* (Akan) (traditional/spiritual beads possessing the energy of the respective deity) worn by devotees are easily recognized by their colors.

Although there are similarities in the color symbolism of various cultural groups within Africa, the topic of an “African” color symbolism is too broad to be covered here given the numerous and variable specificities of each cultural group. This entry, then, examines the color symbolism of one cultural grouping, the Akan of Ghana.

Color symbolism among the Akan represents a complex language through which to read the beliefs of the people, which are unquestionably related to their ontology and cosmology. The specific symbolism of particular colors is more commonly recognized through the production and adornment of Akan textile arts, namely *kente* and *adinkra* cloths. In the example of *kente*, the quintessential and most revered of Akan textiles, combinations of colors are selected to communicate particular symbolic meanings and messages. Individual choice in *kente* is thus determined more by the occasion on which it is to be worn than by individual taste. In the case of *adinkra* cloth, the combination of both colors and symbols imply particular messages related to morality, ethics, sociopolitical status, and faith in the power of *Nyame* (Creator/Supreme Being) (see Table 1).

For ritual purposes, the Akan rely on three main colors: red (*Kobene*), white (*Fufu*), and black (*Tuntum*). All other colors are considered to be variations of the three; white is composed of white, yellow, and pink; red is composed of red, purple, darker pinks, and orange; and black is composed of black, blue, indigo, and darker

Table 1 Symbolic Meaning of Particular Colors

Black (<i>Tuntum</i>)	Darkness, loss, death, spiritual and physical maturity; used to express sorrow and bad fortune, as is the case when worn for funerals; but also used to express spiritual potency, as is the case of the blackened stools of traditional rulers and elders
Grey	The color of ash, thus representative of healing and spiritual cleansing
Maroon	Same symbolism as reddish-brown; associated with <i>Asase Yaa</i> (Mother Earth); associated with clay, which is seen as a healing and purifying agent
Purple	Similar to maroon; also associated with femininity and thus more often used and worn by women; also associated with royalty
Red (<i>Kobene</i>)	The color of blood; associated with both life and death; also associated with ritual sacrifice; more often used to express a heightened spiritual state
Pink	Femininity; associated with calmness and sweetness
Blue	Associated with water and thus represents healing and spiritual peacefulness
Green (<i>Bun</i>)	Associated with vegetation and herbs; symbolizes growth, abundance, fertility, and spiritual rejuvenation; used in purification rituals
Yellow	Associated with the mineral gold; symbolizes preciousness, royalty, wealth, and fertility
Silver	Femininity; associated with the moon; purification; mothering; a form of white and, as such, symbolizes purity
White (<i>Fufu</i>)	Associated with victory and spiritual purity; sacred; expresses joy and well-being; associated with <i>hyire</i> (white spiritual clay) used in spiritual purification; communicates transition from one spiritual state to a more elevated one

shades of brown. Thus, the colors red, white, and black should be understood as representative of themselves as well as the range of colors associated with them.

During ritual, the use of these colors communicates the roles of the individuals involved, the transitions between stages, as well as the spiritual significance of particular involved individuals and/or stages. For example, during the initial stages of *ayie* (funeral rites), as the departed lies in state, she or he is dressed in white, while friends and distant relatives wear any combination of black, red, maroon, or brown, and close relatives wear black. After burial, attendees continue to wear variations of black, while close relatives often change into red as a sign of extreme grief. Then, during the final stage of thanksgiving, everyone wears white to communicate celebration, rather than loss, of life.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Adinkra Symbols; Akan; Red; White

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CONGO JACK

Congo Jack, also called Gullah Jack, appears in history in connection with the insurrection planned by Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822. He was the person Vesey relied on to strengthen the rebels against harm.

Vesey, like so many other African American leaders of the 19th century, came from the “upper class” of slaves: the engineers and craftspeople who were given a high degree of independence and self-actualization, as opposed to field workers or house slaves. He purchased his own freedom and settled down as a carpenter in Charleston, South Carolina.

Despite the surface placidity of his free life, he was fired with anger over slavery and the situation of black slaves. Throughout his entire free existence, he planned and thought about freeing his fellow slaves. He was so full of anger that companions say that he could not even remain in the presence of a Euro-American.

Like Gabriel Prosser, another rebellion leader, Vesey was also deeply inspired by Christianity, in particular the Old Testament. An integral aspect of slave and free Christianity was its emphasis on the delivery of the “children of Israel” from bondage in Egypt. This story was perhaps the most powerful religious and cultural influence on the worldview of 19th-century Americans. Although most historians stress the passive nature of the Israelite deliverance, that deliverance was also yoked to the Israelite invasion of the land of Canaan.

Although this invasion was barely successful, the Old Testament books telling the history of the Canaan occupation and its aftermath are ruthlessly violent and present a warrior god with no mercy toward non-Israelites. All evidence suggests that slaves understood that these two events were connected and that deliverance along Israelite lines would be bought with human blood. Vesey, who went around quoting biblical texts to slaves to inspire them to revolt, particularly loved to quote Yahweh’s instructions to Joshua when he demands that Joshua kill every occupant of the cities of Canaan including women and children.

Congo Jack was the spiritual guide who convinced Vesey that it was alright to rise against enslavement. In fact, Vesey, having come from the West Indies, probably the Virgin Islands that had been controlled by the Danish, believed more firmly in Congo Jack than many of those he wanted to lead.

Vesey’s task, as he saw it, was to incite enslaved Africans into revolt. In 1821, that focus changed dramatically, and he began to organize his own revolt. He organized a working group of lieutenants that included Gullah Jack, a religious man considered absolutely invulnerable, and Peter Poyas, who was one of the great military and organizational geniuses of the early 19th century. Poyas organized the revolt in separate cells under individual leaders. Only the leaders knew the plot; if any slave betrayed the plot, they would only betray their one cell.

By 1822, almost all the slaves in the plantations surrounding Charleston had joined the revolt. The plan was brilliantly simple. The rebels would all station themselves at the doors of Euro-Americans; late at night, a group of rebels would start a major fire. When the men came out their doors, the rebels would kill them with axes, picks, or guns. They would then enter the houses and kill all the occupants. Like Prosser's revolt, this one almost succeeded. The rebels were betrayed early in the game, but the cell structure prevented officials from finding out the plot or identifying any of the leaders. It was only the day before that a slave, who knew the entire plot, betrayed Vesey. He and his co-leaders were hung, but only one confessed. The insurrection failed, but not before it demonstrated that a religious man, Congo Jack, played a role in inspiring the people to revolution as the spiritual advisor to Denmark Vesey. What was clear in the insurrection was that Africans, many of them recently from the continent, were partly persuaded to join Vesey by Congo Jack's ritual ceremonies.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Chaminuka; Seers

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CONJURERS

The word *conjurer* is often used to describe someone in African religion who possesses unusual powers of discernment based on the manipulation of objects. Although the term is usually applied to men, such as "the conjure man," it can equally apply to women who have the ability to perform extraordinary deeds.

Often the term is used for someone with power who practices African religion in the Americas. It was a favorite description during the enslavement for a particularly spiritual person who, because of his reflection and meditations, often in the woods or mountains, could foretell the future, heal the sick, cause the lame to walk, and put obstacles in

the way of one's enemies. In this regard, the conjurer man was of considerable importance to African societies in the Americas.

Africans in the American South found their link to the ancestors in the special knowledge and ability of the conjurer. In fact, when the Civil War ended, only 15% of the Africans in America were Christians. It took the efforts of white Christians and black African Methodists to evangelize the recently freed populations to make them Christian. Consequently, the African people relied on the spiritual visions and sacred talismans of the conjurer for comfort in the times of sickness, strength in the times of weakness, and hope during the many times of disappointment and hopelessness.

Thus, by virtue of his omnipresence during slave society, conjurers became, in effect, the spiritual leaders of the masses of black people until the increasing numbers of Christian ministers displaced them during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indeed, the conjurer and the preacher were often the same person, suggesting the ability of the older trade to transform itself into the newer one among Africans after the Civil War and into the early 20th century.

In literature and practice, the conjurer is the person who holds the key to ethical, moral, spiritual, and physical well-being in the community. Quite clearly, the conjurer can "fix" situations that might have seemed hopeless to those who were unable to manipulate the spiritual powers. There was no fear in the conjurer because he had conquered all forms of fear, becoming for the ordinary person a character and personality that was sent to correct all faults. In some cases, the masses believed that if you were truly "fixed," it would take a powerful conjurer, that is, spiritually gifted individual, to heal you.

There has always been a link between the spiritual and the material in African religion, the one flowing into the other so imperceptibly that it is hard to recognize any distinction that makes sense to the average person. The spiritual and the material are not really separate entities, but parts of one massive whole of human experience in African thought. Thus, the conjurer might be thought of as the person who best negotiates the interstices between the extremes of the human condition. In the annals of African American,

including Caribbean, history, no one made this negotiation easier and more natural than the conjurer man.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Seers

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CONVINCE

Convince is a term used for a branch of African religion found in the Americas, namely in Jamaica and the southern United States. It denotes a uniquely African diasporan form of African religion that takes the spiritual elements most closely associated with transformation into the culture of the African Americans. Where some of the mythology that relates to the specific African context may be changed or modified, most of the concepts that may be called spiritual are used in the new American context. This relationship to Africa is a cosmological connection based on the memory of ancient African ideals.

Indeed, the diversity of African expressions in the Americas attests to the strength of African cultural forms in religion. One sees Convince in Jamaica and the southern United States, but related forms of African religion may be found throughout the Americas. One of the reasons that Convince has become so prominent in some communities is because it responds to the existential condition of Africans fighting against the legacies of slavery. It provides the believer with the power to overcome all adversity.

When one examines the persistence of African religions in the Americas, it becomes clear that

they are all similar, have characteristics that might be seen as the same as those of Convince, and are deeply dependent on the spiritual activities of invisible forces. This is true whether it is Santeria in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico; Vodun in Haiti; Shango in Trinidad and Grenada; Candomble and Umbanda in Brazil; Convince and Cumina in Jamaica; Big Drum Dance in Carriacou (Grenada); Kele in St. Lucia; Maria Lionza in Venezuela; Espiritismo in Puerto Rico; and Rastafarianism in Jamaica.

In Jamaica, Convince is a nontextual religion that bases most of its worship and spiritual access on the deities of Africa as they have been transformed in the Americas. It highlights possession, ritual dancing, and healing services. Similar to most other forms of African religion, Convince practitioners seek harmony and balance in life through appeals to the ancestors and spirits.

Because Convince is experienced as an African form with particular powers against established religions of the West, it has been, along with other African religious expressions, persecuted. In Jamaica, there were legal regulations to control Convince as early as 1781, and later in 1784, 1788, 1808, 1816, 1826, and 1827, there were restrictions placed on Obeah, another Jamaican version of the African religion. Since the 20th century, the Rastafari have come under similar attacks by the authorities in several nations. Although Convince has been subjected to persecution, it has remained a strong influence in the rural area and in some urban areas of Jamaica.

Molefi Kete Asante

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COSMOLOGY

Cosmology refers to worldview and myths in general or, more specifically, to the cultural and religious imagery concerning the universe. African cosmology, which often takes the form of oral narratives, describes the web of human activities within the powerful spiritual cosmos; it transmits the beliefs and values of African peoples. African cosmology, then, is an attempt to describe and understand the origin and structure of the universe, how humans relate to the cosmos, and how and to what extent their thoughts and actions are shaped by it.

African religion poses an interesting and complex problem of description and interpretation. In fact, African languages have no equivalent word for *religion*. Indeed, African social structures and cultural traditions are infused with a spirituality that cannot be easily separated from the rest of the community's life at any point. To analyze religion as a separate system of beliefs and ritual practices apart from subsistence, kinship, language, politics, and the landscape, for example, is to misunderstand African religion in general and African cosmology in particular. Thus, African culture could be described as a complex web of religion, attitudes and behavior, morality, politics, and economy. The African thought system influences the African cognitive process and lifestyle.

Owing to the apparent complex diversity of African societies and their religious systems, it may seem, at first sight, problematic to homogenize Africa into a single whole or develop overarching generalizations about the religious life of its

people. However, a survey of a great number of various traditions in Africa allows one to identify certain common themes and affinities. For example, a common and most obvious denominator of the respective local cosmologies is orality. Indeed, the beliefs and practices are transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions, myths, legends, art, paintings, sculpture, songs, and dances. This is not all, however, because African societies display many common affinities in their religious worldviews, such as the belief in spiritual entities, the use of concepts to represent them, in rituals and similar attitudes toward their manipulation and control.

To understand the complex spatial and temporal constructions of African cosmology, and the values associated with it, one must comprehend a multiplicity of local cosmologies. These cosmologies consist of constructed special spaces that provide the setting for ritual action and an enabling environment for ritual enactments, special roles that evince the pertinacity of actors in the religious activity, and special powers or beings with which the actors form prescribed relationships within a ritualized context.

Symbols and Myths

Inherent in ritual praxis are religious symbols that inform the actions that characterize life stages and patterns. Myths represent one source for understanding African cosmologies, creation of the universe, human origin, death, and societal norms and ethos. African societies such as the Yoruba, Akan, Zulu, and Dagomba have their creation narratives located in religious mythology. Yoruba perception of the world was the kernel to their religious beliefs as structured in their creation myth, praise songs, and sayings. Although there are variations of the creation myth, the most widely accepted cosmogonic myth locates Ilé-Ifè as the cradle of civilization. In Zulu cosmological tradition, myths connect the human and natural cosmos. The creation myth relates the gods to the birth of the first humans. They trace their ancestry to creation by *inkosi yezulu* (the God of the Sky) or *uMvelingqangi* (that which appeared first) who lives up above along with *inkosazana yezulu* (the Goddess/Princess of the Sky). The first human, *uNkulunkulu*, who existed was believed to have

creative power. Although there are mythical variations, they provide images of the cosmos and pantheons of supersensible entities. Myths are perceived as the key toward understanding life and its provenance.

African religions are concerned with underlying life forces, vital forces, energies, or other supra-mundane powers. Such themes as belief in transcendental reality, a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are central, although the names, functions, rankings in hierarchy, and emphasis vary from one context to another. Some animals, forces of nature, natural objects, and unseen forces qualify as spirits, but African peoples assign the same objects different hierarchical ranks.

The relationship between humans and spiritual entities is expressed and achieved through ritual action. Mediation plays an important role in the African religious systems because the source of power from the supreme deity cannot be received directly. Beliefs and rituals associated with spiritual forces constitute a distinctive pattern of religious thought and action. The religious world is characterized by a multiplicity of divinities, spirits, and ancestors; and beliefs and practices concerning them are a dominant element. Although the divinities and spirits are proxy to the affairs of the living, they mediate between the Earth and the sky.

Among the Zulu, three elements that are capable of exerting *amandla* (power) are the God of the Sky, the ancestors, and medicine. They have a religious relationship to the sky, as well as to the Earth, the abode of the ancestors. The God of the Sky is a male-father figure, whereas that of the earth is a female-mother. Both are believed to have brought *abantu* (the people). Yoruba worldview divides the cosmos into *aye* (earth) and *orun* (sky). The cosmos is believed to be the creation of *Olorun/Olodumare* (the Supreme Being), and the names and attributes reveal its nature. Their religious world is characterized by a multiplicity of *orisa* (divinities), and beliefs and practices concerning *orisa* are a dominant element. The divinities and spirits are proxy to the affairs of the living: They mediate between the human and spirit worlds. They act on behalf of the Supreme Being and are approached through ritual action.

Ancestors also play an intermediary role between the mundane and supersensible realms. They are the guardians and custodians of moral and religious values of society. Most African societies believe that death does not terminate the relationship between the living and the Dead. Death is only a stage in life. Only those who lived a good life, lived to a ripe age, died a good death, and are accorded a befitting burial can qualify for the status of an ancestor. Among the Zulu, the world below is divided into three levels: the level of the unborn spirits, the recently deceased spirits, and the ancestors. The *amalozil/amathonga* (ancestors) is of fundamental significance. Their religious life revolves essentially around veneration of ancestors, and this attracts extensive ritual obligations. The relationship between the living and the Dead is one of mutuality, which excludes nonkin and reflects the major emphases of Zulu kinship, particularly patrilineal organization. The most important ancestors for a *kraal* are males, particularly the former headman/priest. As religious powers, ancestors are capable of acting for the good or ill of their descendants. For this reason, they are revered and treated with great respect. Special shrines and rituals exist as contexts for maintaining proper relationships with them.

Spiritual Forces

Human beings also occupy a significant position in African cosmological thought. The Zulu make a distinction between three aspects of being that are important for their religious thinking. They distinguish among *inyamalumzimba* (the physical body), *umoyalumphfumulo* (vital force or breath), and *isithunzi* (literally "a shadow," personality or force of character). Once the *umoya* leaves the body, then the person is dead. His *isithunzi* lives on as an ancestral spirit; it goes to the ancestors who live in the nether world. Among the Yoruba, each human being is believed to have a dual makeup: the *ara* (physical) and the *emi* and *ori* (spiritual mien). *Olodumare* charged *Orisanya*, the arch-divinity with moulding *ara*, the physical body with clay, while *Olodumare* supplies the *emi* by breathing life into man. As the principle of predestiny, *ori* is the most important *orisa* as far as human welfare is concerned.

The concept *agbara* (spiritual power) is evident in Yoruba religious thought. Words of *agbara* are legitimated by *ase* (charm of command, vital force) from the Supreme Being. The cosmos is populated with malevolent spiritual forces and other sources of mysterious powers such as medicine, witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. Apart from the spiritual entities, chiefs, kings, priests, diviners, healers, witches, and sorcerers are believed to possess power of one kind or another, and they play special roles within the religious praxis. In many cases, political, social, and religious functions overlap.

The pursuit of health, fertility, and a balance between humans and nature constitute some of the basic concerns of African religion. Ritual and sacrifice structures draw on a philosophy of relationships. Rites of passage are a common feature of religious life. An individual's passage through life is monitored, marked, and celebrated from prebirth, parturition, childhood, transition to adulthood, adulthood, marriage, old age, death, and the living dead. Divination is an important activity, although the mode varies from place to another. People divine in their quest to know the behest of the supernatural beings and to inquire about their destiny. *Ifa* is the most widespread means of divination among the Yoruba. The *izangoma/babalawo/nganga* (diviner-healer) is a pivotal force for order and rapprochement between man and the spirit world. The role of diviner/healer is held by either men or women depending on the local context. They are approached with much awe and respect.

Sacral kingship represents one important feature of political organization in most societies. The myth narrative establishes the Yoruba kingship system as a sacred kinship line that emanates from the primordial kingship of *Oduduwa*. The sacrosanct nature of the *Oba* (King) is rooted in religious belief. The *Oba* is regarded as *Ekeji Orisa* (the deputy of the divinities), set apart from his people by the spiritual powers with which he was endowed at his installation.

Women's Role

The role and status of women in indigenous religions and societies are normally defined by what is deemed to be wholesome to the welfare of the entire community. Although Zulu society is patrilineal, women have significant areas for religious

action. The ritual role of women is further exemplified in the relationship between women and the Princess of the Sky. She is associated with virginity and fertility of all creatures, and she is capable of instituting rules of behavior and ritual action. The location of the divinity is a specific hill or mountain. In most Yoruba communities, women are in charge of some shrines where they carry out cultic functions. *Iya Nla* (the Great Mother) is at the apex of a hierarchy of female *orisa*, who are collectively known as *awon Iya* (the Mothers).

Some of these cosmological aspects are not peculiar to Africa. The encounter with Islam and Christian cosmologies has at times transformed indigenous religious thought and practice, but did not supplant it. African religion preserved much of its beliefs and ritual practices while also adjusting to the new sociocultural milieu. In fact, in many cases, Islam and Christianity became domesticated on the African soil. New religious initiatives attest to the continuity of African worldviews and ritual cosmos in the midst of change.

Afe Adogame

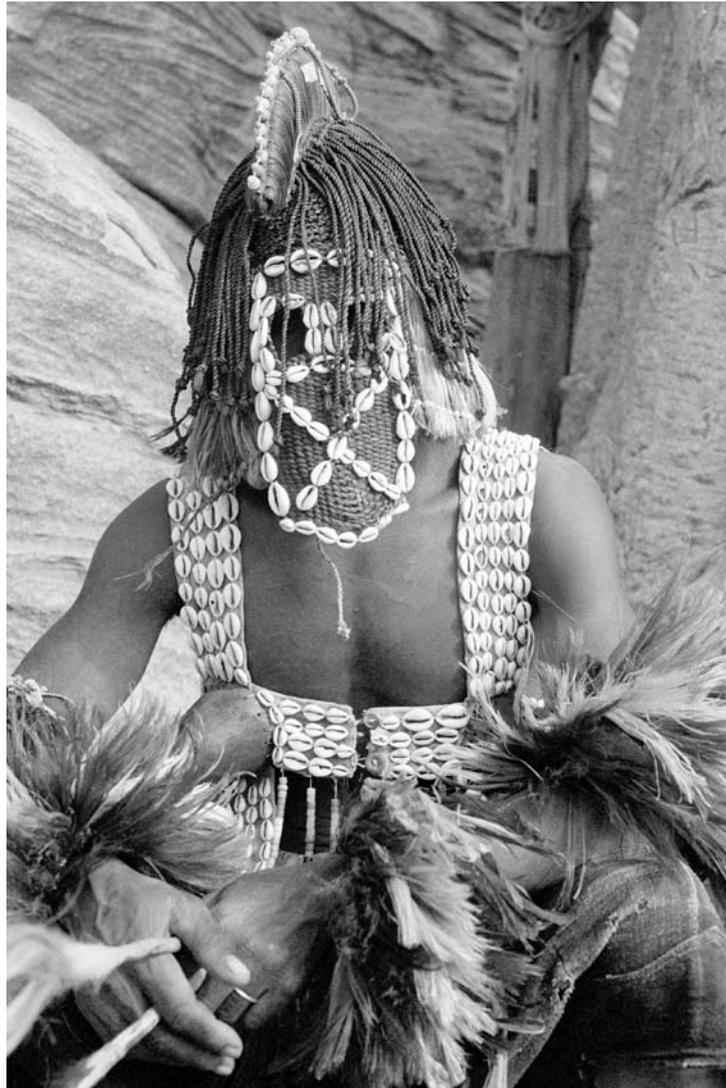
See also Ifa; Maat; Orisha

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COWRIE SHELLS

Seashells, in general, belong to the vast family of mollusks, which are a myriad mix of animals. They have been used by humans as a food supply, naturally decorated and collected items from the



Masked performer with antelope headdress (Ciwara, Chiwara). Bamako (national district), Mali.

Source: Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

sea, as currency, decoration, adornment, signaling horns, protective amulets, and tools for spiritual divination. Cowrie shells, derived from small snail-like creatures native to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, became important in the culture and religion of Africa. In the ethos, belief, and soul of many African-descended people, cowrie shells speak a symbolic spiritual language on artifacts, garments—and about the past, present, and future. They are also used as tools in spiritual divination oracle readings. This entry begins with a brief look at their natural history and then discusses their role in African religion past and present.

Natural History

Seashells as a food source are rich in protein and trace mineral nutrients. They are still in abundance and easy to attain along thousands of miles of coastline. However, humans' long encounter with seashells is infinitesimal compared with their existence in the ocean. Currently, according to some scientists, single-shelled life forms have been discovered fossilized dating back to approximately 500 million years, during the Cambrian period.

Primarily located around the areas of coral reef in the enormous Indian and Pacific Oceans (the

two combined equal over two thirds of the ocean water) are unique mollusks that produce mostly smooth egg-shaped, colorful shells with a porcelain shine and long narrow aperture opening. The genus *Cypraeidae* or cowries has approximately 200 species. Their massive breeding habit has prevented them from becoming an endangered species despite their great popularity in various ancient cultures to the present.

Cowries can lay from 100 to 1,500 eggs in a single breeding period. Their size can range from 1/5 inch to 6 inches; they live intertidally, concealing their shells around colorful coral reef in the day and coming out to feed at night. They eat mostly on algae and dead organic matter in the tropical oceans around coral reef. There is and has been great demand for the smaller and durable yellow, brown, purple, and white cowrie-shell color patterns, which have been collected and used from ancient times in Kemet, Nubia, and Ghana (as well as China, India, North Africa, Germany, and Central America) up to current times in the African Diaspora—the Americas, Caribbean Islands, Canada, and Europe.

Use in Kemet

The current historical records indicate that cowrie shells were removed from the tropical oceans and their shorelines because they were an excellent food source, in addition to being aesthetically attractive to the eyes and spirit of humans. Archeological research has reported that Paleolithic (approximately 750,000 years ago) Africans drew pictures of cowrie shells on cave walls. Archeological excavations revealed that, during the Predynastic Kemet period, approximately 3500 BC, many of the poorest people in gravesites in the city of Hierakonpolis were buried with cowrie shell necklaces.

The significance of the cowrie moved from aesthetic appeal to currency in foreign exchange in Kemet. Millions of cowrie shells were found in the elaborate burial tombs of Pharaohs by archaeologists to symbolize their wealth and status. The physically irregular outlined purple, white, and yellowish hue characteristic of currency cowrie shells was insufficient for its demand. Its low supply created a high demand, which increased its value significantly as natural currency. The law of

supply and demand ruled the uniquely colored cowrie shells' importance and attraction as natural money in Kemet and other countries on the continent of Africa.

For example, yellowish and white cowrie shell natural currency was used in trade activities among the people of Nubia Nation. Current archeological data confirm that the Nubians were the first builders of pyramids (approximately 220) and that their empire was known for a high number of power queens who ruled their land.

The physical shape of cowrie shells resonated with black people thousands of years ago as a feminine symbol because the bottom side resembles the genital orifice of a woman and the top-side resembles a pregnant woman (when topside is kept intact, not cut off). Thus, to the Africans, it appeared as if from the vast ocean had come a living organism with an outer shell that bore a striking resemblance to the physical features that defined the female human: sexual organs and the womb. Therefore, the cowrie shells' natural design primarily encouraged women in Kemet to wear them on their clothing, belt girdle, and jewelry. Cowrie shells developed into a feminine symbol worn initially by women for various reasons.

Cowrie shells transcended from jewelry to amulets in the spiritualized social environment of the burnt-golden skin people of Kemet. The mythological system of Kemet was the spiritual force that inspired the belief that cowrie shells were protective icons. Women were encouraged to wear a cowrie shell belt during pregnancy to protect their unborn and themselves from any misfortune. Cowrie shells act as a catalyst to enhance the belief that they will survive during the child-birthing phase and have a healthy baby.

The power of belief is paramount to people of African ancestry when there is a need to protect a life, complete an arduous task, or connect to a higher force (God/Goddess) in the universe. Belief can enhance, expand, or limit a person's existence. Although spiritual belief systems are outside of the realms of science, for a substantial population of black people, a spiritual or religious system is desired to function positively, live right, feel spiritualized, and be connected to an omnipotent force. (People of African descent are rarely atheist or agnostic.) The spiritual, positive, and protective

belief in cowrie shells as amulets moved them from a unique-shelled animal from the tropical ocean water to be sacred and spiritual icons for generations of descendants of black people to come.

West African Currency

On the west coast of Africa, approximately starting in the 14th century, several nations used cowrie shell currency as a means to acquire goods just as much as gold. Initially, cowrie shells were transported from the Maldives, located in the Indian Ocean, by Arabs. Europeans took notice and were startled that West Africans on several occasions accepted cowrie shells as a means of exchange for goods over gold. Eventually, the Dutch and English imported cowrie shells into the gateway of West Africa by way of the Guinea Coast.

In time, cowrie shells diminished as a monetary means of exchange, but they were spiritually elevated, made sacred by myths, and adorned traditional West African people's masks and sculptures.

Traditional West African art in general emphasized the human figure as the primary subject, with visual presentation in an abstract form to represent an image, rather than creating a natural likeness. Art became important in a ceremonial context, and artistic creation can reflect a multiplicity of meanings to various members in the social network.

When the African artists place cowrie shells on their creations (mask, sculpture, clothing, etc.), the artwork can cause an inspired believer of African descent to transcend emotionally and spiritually, especially if presented in a ritual and ceremonial context. There are references in the deep collective unconscious of Africans caused by thousands of years of attraction to and reverence for cowrie shells.

Some examples are the magnificently adorned cowrie shell Helmet Mask *Mukyeem* and Face Mask *Ngaady A Mwaash* from Kuba, Democratic Republic of Congo; Helmet Masks from Cameroon; the splendidly saturated cowrie shells Image of Twins—Ibeji wood sculpture from Yoruba Nigeria; nicely placed cowrie shells on an exquisite Dogon walking stick; fully covered natural gourd shekeres from Nigeria; and a Priestess

crown for Dada Bayonni (gentle ruler and sister of Shango) in Maceio, Brazil. These functional pieces of artwork were created by Africans.

The Diaspora and Divination

Also, cowrie shells adorned and spiritualized the hand-made garments and jewelry of the traditional African religions in the diaspora. For example, Chief Priestesses of Yemaya in Brazil and Cuba embed cowrie shells on elegant white and ocean blue garments and majestic crowns. In addition, they adorn themselves with several long cowrie shell necklaces, as well as cowrie shell earrings, bracelets, and rings, during sacred and ceremonial times.

Likewise, the Chief Priests of Shango in Brazil and Cuba placed cowrie shells on white and fire red elegant garments and majestic crowns. They also adorn themselves with long cowrie necklaces, bracelets, and rings during sacred and ceremonial events.

Divination is one of the inner circles of African descendants' cosmology and epistemology. For a substantial amount of traditional people of African descent, participators and believers in the diaspora, there is no partition or disconnection from the omnipotent force (its names and concepts are many, but it is one), higher souls (powerful intermediaries), and those who made their transitions from this realm of existence (ancestors) into another. They believe that the love of the omnipotent force and powerful spirits can change conditions and events for the better with human belief and effort.

A divination oracle reading with cowrie shells is a ritual that worshippers in the faith believe can move the veils between the spirit and human world to semitransparency and open windows and doors for positive changes. People of African ancestry who are devotees of their traditional religions believe that cowrie shells act as a catalyst to facilitate personal communication with powerful spirits in their traditional religions.

Divination is a dynamic and complex procedure based on the up and down positions and patterns of the cowrie shells after they are shaken up and dropped on the ground. The positions and patterns of the dropped cowrie shells to the ground speak a coded language that priests or priestesses can interpret with insight and wisdom to counsel, encourage, or

warn their clients who seek personal information and spiritual knowledge. The divination ritual can bring knowledge of a person's past and current conditions so that beliefs, actions, and behaviors can be adhered to or planned to improve or enhance future circumstances.

African descendants of the old ancient religions have deified, spiritualized, and infused cowrie shells with power of myths and a belief system to be used as tools in the center of spiritual divination oracle readings.

Ibo Changa

See also Amulet

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CREATION

African people have highly constructed myths and legends that explain how the universe or cosmos was created. Found in ancient texts, and more often in the formal oral traditions, these stories are referred to as *creation narratives*, and they clarify that which is considered mysterious or unknown to man. Although ancient African creation stories vary among the continent's people, they are as old as the continent of Africa. African creation narratives reinforce the people's cultural and spiritual histories. This entry looks at some commonalities among African creation narratives, examines some regional expressions, and briefly discusses what these myths have to say about people.

Commonalities

For hundreds of thousands of years, Africans have transferred knowledge about creation (the origins of the sky, man, plants, animals, and the Earth). Creation has two main components within the African context. The first has to do with the spiritual/religious and mythological aspects of how Africans interpret the origin of the world. The second is related to the scientific data surrounding the connection between the creation of the world and the genesis of mankind. In addition, African creation narratives involve internal and external group explanations. They center on the origins of specific ethnic groups and nations or attempt to explain the existence of the whole of humanity. Africans have played a major role in the global understanding of the concept of creation. In the academic study of African creation, there are distinctions made between spiritual/religion interpretations and mythology. However, what was once characterized as myth is a central component of the spiritual/religion aspect. African creation systems are composed of cultural components that are central to the foundation of the nation and the state.

In general, Africans believe that the universe was brought into existence by the action of a single God, or a set of Gods, on behalf of the Supreme Being. African creation systems are predicated on a pre- or self-existing entity bringing something into existence out of nothing. Often there was nothing in existence before creation—except the flow of cosmic-spiritual energy emanating from God. This energy flow is the essence of the Supreme Being and is infused in all things on creation.

The idea of creation within the African context is important to understanding the relationship that human beings are having with God and with one another. Thus, the creation events are told through broad (epic) narratives. The primary concepts aiding traditional African Creation epics are (a) the existence of one God, the Supreme Being; (b) intermediate divinities who serve God, the ancestors, and man; (c) ancestral spirits who interact with man and divinities; and (d) natural/elemental spirits.

African ethnic, cultural, and spiritual diversity indicates that creation narratives may be different, but similarities can be distinguished in

precolonial Africa. Further, the influence of Islam and Christianity has impacted African creation myths as well as traditional intra- and intercultural exchange as a contributor to the various interpretations of creation with respect to African peoples.

Regional Myths and Legends

In eastern and southern Africa, there are a variety of creation legends. The Kamba in eastern Kenya and northern Tanzania (into southwestern Kenya) believe that the Supreme God, Ngai, created man and that man's ancestors communicate with god. In east South Africa, among the Zulu, the great God, Unkulunkulu, rises from a primordial marshland to go on and create the Earth. The southern African creation stories consistently feature the work of the Supreme Being. The Lozi in Zambia are witness to the creation of Kamura (the first human beings) by Nyambe. Nyambe created everything, including man, his own wife, and mother. In Malawi, God Chuita created the Earth and became aligned with rain and fertility among the Tumbuka people.

In the Congo region, Efile Mokulu, god among the Baluba, not only created the world and mankind—but he gave human beings their heart energy and balanced all of the forces of nature. The Bambuti (BaMbuti) god, Khonvoum, created the world and then made man from the Earth. Further, Bumba, god of the Bushongo, also created the heavens, plants, animals, and human beings.

In northeast Africa and the Sudan, God is consistently self-existing. Among the Dinka in southeastern Sudan and southwestern Ethiopia, the Supreme Being Nhialic was present at the moment of creation. Associated with sky and rain, Nhialic also controls the fate of all living things.

The ancient Egyptians (Kmt) of northeastern Africa have one of the oldest sets of creation narratives in the world. There are many localized beliefs about creation. However, one of the most persistent involves the preexisting primordial waters (the chaos of precreation) in which Ra-Atum rose and created Shu and Tefnut (Air and Moisture). They created Nut and Geb (Sky and Earth), who produced the God pantheon: Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys, and Horus-the-Elder. The creation of the

Earth out of chaos sets the stage for the drama of good and evil, birth and resurrection among the ancient Egyptians.

In West Africa, particularly in Ghana, the Supreme Being is omnipresent and omniscient. Among the Akan, Brekyerehunuade is the high God who knows everything within the affairs of mankind. In the Ashanti tradition, Nyame, the Supreme Being is married to Goddess Asase Yaa (an Earth goddess). They give birth to the divine children, Bia and Tano. Tano is the father of the divinities within this pantheon. The Fon of Benin recognize Mawu/Lisa, the God who created the world and brought order and balance to it. Mawu/Lisa created plants, animals, and humans, and gives humans everything to be successful in the world.

In Nigeria and Cameroon, the creator, Abassi, and his Goddess wife, Atai, created two human children who were the first people on the Earth. The Igbo (Ibo) of southeastern Nigeria believe that the Great Spirit Chukwu created everything that exists. The Dogon of Mali and Burkino Faso believe that the creator God Amma fashioned the Earth out of clay and populated it with the four ancestral pairs: Arou, Dyon, Ono, and Domnu. In the Yoruba tradition, the Supreme Being, Olorun Oludumare, tasked Oduduwa to create the Earth and take sacred clay and create human beings. In one version of the narrative, Oduduwa accidentally creates the Earth on top of the primordial waters at Ile Ife, and Obatala goes on to bring humans into being. Important symbols of this creation include the metal with which a rooster scratched and expanded the land and the palm seed that provided the plant matter.

Implications for Human Beings

African creation narratives seek to describe divine justice and the rules that human beings should follow. Many African creation narratives strongly feature the idea of infusing God's power energy into the human being and also focus on the theme of destiny and fate of man. African creation narratives also explore the challenges of chaos and the benefits of establishing order. In addition, they initiate the processes of human birth and death by giving cosmic reasons for life and mortality.

Creation myths in Africa are almost always linked to traditional activities of agriculture, technology, or the primacy of nature. In traditional African creation narratives, the God head takes many forms or no form at all. God in Africa works with dieties who often represent aspects of God's personality to accomplish the work of creation. Creation narratives are also concerned with relationships once a firmament is established. These relationships include any combination of man, animal, nature, ancestors, diety, spirits, and the realm of the supernatural.

With the advent of colonialism and imperialism, creation narratives in Africa were often reinterpreted to support political aims. This includes the need to establish territory, gender roles, and the uses of knowledge and information. The extent to which African creation myths have been compromised is not easy to determine. However, the strength of myth and legend remains strong within the continent and in the Black diaspora.

Creations myths associated with African people do not have to be considered ancient or indigenous to the continent to have an impact. For example, in 1878, a southern African American (gulf coast) creation myth explained the different races of man and the power imbalance among them. In one myth, Africans, Asians, and Native Americans were created by God out of clay, whereas Europeans (Frenchmen and Englishmen) were made out of insects. This myth identified the source of European aggression against people of color in North America as a source of animate energy. James Weldon Johnson's 1927 *The Creation* provides an African American interpretation of how a self-existent God created the Earth and mankind. The Nation of Islam's European origin myth explains racism and racial discrimination against blacks.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Cosmology

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CROSSROADS

The crossroads is a major concept in African religion. It is a pervasive idea that suggests there is a point where good and evil, humanity and divinity, the living and the Dead, the night and the day, and all other contradictions, opposites, and situations involving decisions must meet. At this point, there exists an intermediary to open the way, to provide humans with choice, and to teach wisdom at the gate. This gatekeeper goes by many names, but is known in the Yoruba as Legba, Eshu, or Ellegua depending on the language and country of practice.

In the sense that the crossroads is literally the place where several paths cross, where several roads intersect, it is really a philosophical concept. As such, the African idea is that, at the point of decision, the human has the possibility of touching divinity or forever remaining locked in mortality. As a profound philosophical concept and idea, the notion of crossroads sits at the entrance into the study of African religion, initiation, ritual performance, spiritual resources, benefits, and indeed reincarnation. One cannot escape the space of decision. Everything is decided, and in the greatest, most poignant moments of the spiritual quest, the human being must, out of relative ignorance of all the possibilities, choose and, by choosing, express an existential life that gives value and meaning to the quest. This is the first and last thing that must be done.

Because the Yoruba see Legba as the deity who stands at the crossroads, some have been inclined to see him as a trickster prepared to trick humans into making the wrong choice or having difficulty discovering right from wrong, but this explanation is limited. Legba is the personification of the space that belongs to no one; it is a space given to the person who is best able to negotiate its demands, and, as such, it is called the crossroads. Among the Yoruba, Legba's music is the first and last played and he is the first invoked in a ceremony.

There is a belief that one can dispose of remnants, things left over from disputes and contests, such as anger and jealousy, at the crossroads because it is a neutral place. As an altar of space or, rather, a space for a neutral altar, one can arrive at the crossroads feeling bad and leave the crossroads, after having decided, feeling much better. Of course, the opposite is also true. Because of this possibility, the African believes that the idea of Legba, Eshu, Ellegua is that humans are bound to decide, but must not take the decisions to be simple; it is like life—quite difficult, complex, and demanding. The person who navigates the crossroads successfully, in African belief, will be rewarded with the wisdom that is reserved for the one who respects the crossroads.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Esu, Elegba; Orisha; Yoruba

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CULTURAL RELOCATION

Cultural relocation, sometimes referred to as cultural reclamation, is a central theme in Africana life and a cultural concept in the Afrocentric study of Africana history and culture. The term originated in the United State in the early 19th century; it is associated with various movements in the Africana experience: Pan-Africanism, Negritude, New Negro, and black Nationalism. The concept should not be confused with the cultural explication of the black experience, which narrates text

and contemporary contexts without specific cultural meaning for Africana peoples. In addition, the concept is more than a black diaspora aspiration to embrace an ancient African ancestry.

Rather, it is a social, cultural, and political statement of black unity and Africanity. Cultural relocation, once recognized only as a life theme for Africans in the diaspora, has also become a regenerative concept for indigenous African people. It is a response to the holocaust of enslavement (Middle Passage), cultural genocide, and subsequent cultural deprivation theories. As a global concept, cultural relocation has also inspired Africans and gives support to other groups that have addressed the debilitating legacies of colonialism and imperialism.

For many Africans scattered throughout the world as a result of enslavement, cultural relocation is the people's direct response to domination. For African Brazilians, the concept is expressed through the history of Quilombismo. It is contained in the ideology of Steven Biko's Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa. For African Americans, cultural reclamation has found expression in the early back to Africa movements, the African Blood Brotherhood, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro American Unity (OAAU).

From the late 1980s through the 1990s, cultural relocation was likened to a second awakening of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. However, one of the most significant expressions of cultural relocation is found in the Asantian literature. Molefi Kete Asante initiated the Afrocentric movement, providing one of the most important 20th-century topics within African cultural and intellectual circles by elevating the discourse on cultural relocation. Asante advanced theories of cultural relocation, which explained the impact of the distance that people of African descent have traveled as a result of forced migration, cultural genocide, and attempts at assimilation. His expansion of the concept of relocation through Afrocentricity included important terms such as *agency*, *location*, *dislocation*, and *centering*.

Asante situates African agency as the primary idea in the actualization of freedom of black peoples. In addition, people of African descent had been verifiably dislocated from Africanity and

agency; they possessed the means to center themselves within the expansive legacy of black history and culture. Using the writer as an example, Asante defined the basis of the term: "Dislocation exists when a writer seems to be out of synchrony with his or her historical/cultural location. Determining historical/cultural location becomes one of the major tasks of the Afrocentric scholar. Relocation occurs when a writer who has been dislocated rediscovers historical and cultural motifs that serve as signposts in the intellectual or creative pursuit."

Four fundamental premises of cultural relocation for Africana people are (a) self-definition, (b) self-determination, (c) a consciousness of victory, and (d) access to ancient, traditional, and modern legacies and aspects of the African experience. Within the Africana experience, cultural relocation is evident in all areas of black life. In the area of religion, cultural relocation is found in the manifestation of Africana religion around the globe in the forms of Vodun and Ifa. In psychology, cultural relocation is found in the African personality theories of scholars and therapists such as Linda James Myers, Kofi Kambon, Joseph Baldwin, Ama Mazama, Yvonne Bell, Daudi Azibo, Wade Nobles, Jerome Schiele, and Na'im Akbar. In black art, cultural relocation themes are found in the work of John Biggers and many others. Cultural relocation is evident in the development of the Kawaida theory and the African American holiday Kwanzaa by Maulana Karenga. Politically, cultural relocation is demonstrated in the work of TransAfrica, the black American lobby for Africa and the Caribbean founded by Randall Robinson and in the legacy of black political conventions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Africism

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CURSE

In Africa, a curse is any attempt to use an invocation to cause harm to someone. An utterance whose cause is to do damage to the intended victim is a curse. It may be uttered by an individual with a particular religious or moral status. In such a situation, it is often considered necessary for the victim to invoke an ancestor, spirit, or deity to respond. Ordinary people have been known in some cases to curse their enemies, but for the curse to be accepted as significant and real, the maker of the curse must have credibility, that is, must be seen as capable of offering the curse.

In African thought, it does not take an expert to determine whether a person has been cursed, although it will take an expert to help a person overcome the curse. When physical or mental harm occurs in a person's life to a degree more than in the life of a neighbor, it is often said that the person is cursed. This means that the cursed person, in an African sense, has done something that brings about the curse. In the case of an entire village that does not seem to be able to succeed well, it may be that someone from the village has violated an oath or taboo and is responsible for the curse on the village. Of course, it may also be that a curser is jealous or envious of someone and therefore decides to curse the person or a whole village.

From the earliest times in ancient Africa, curses were used to frighten enemies and explain certain conditions of harm that came to people.

Those who believed they had been cursed, particularly if they looked around and saw that others were prospering and they were not, could easily be persuaded that they had been cursed. Although we have no evidence that a person could bring occult powers to bear on a situation, and therefore bring about a curse, we do know that those who believe they have been cursed have essentially been cursed. Acceptance of the curse on the part of the accursed is more than half the job of the curser.

When a group believes in curses, it makes it easier for ordinary people to accept that bad things can happen to good people who are simply the victims of curses. Thus, if a woman cannot have a child, a man is impotent, a child is killed by an animal, or someone is betrayed by a close friend, it seems likely that such people are candidates for the idea that they have been cursed. Among Africans, the idea of the cursed family is an active part of the process of determining who is legitimate and who is illegitimate so far as power is concerned. Keeping the avenues of power open and clear is a function of the spiritual leaders who are able to discern certain methods of control and power.

When one is cursed or when one believes that he or she is cursed, it is necessary to have the curse removed. This is the realm of the clairvoyants and the African psychic or mental doctor who is able to remove the curse if certain sacrifices are made. Once the accursed person has paid a fee or done the sacrifice, the curse could be removed and he or she lives a normal life afterward.

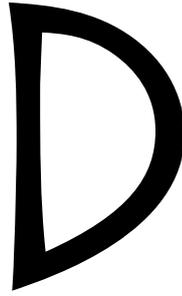
African traditional religion accepts the idea that humans can have curses placed on them, but it also rejects the idea that God has placed a curse on certain people or races. Curses placed on human beings by human beings are inevitably removed by force that must be equal to or greater than the force of the curse. Thus, African religion often proffers a healer or reliever of curses who can interdict the action taken by someone who intends harm.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Purification; Taboo

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DAGU

The Dagu are an ancient people whose origins go back to the area around Tunis in North Africa. The ancient Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans considered the Dagu the indigenous people of the Tunis region of Africa. However, the Dagu have experienced a long history of warfare and invasions. From the time of the Phoenician invasion in the 9th century BC, they have absorbed other groups. The small band of Phoenicians who left Tyre with Princess Elyssa and settled in North Africa was soon assimilated into the indigenous populations such as the Dagu and other African ethnic groups.

After numerous wars with Arabs, during the Great African Upheaval of the 7th to the 19th centuries, the Dagu were forced into the interior of Central Sudan. They now occupy a considerable region of Darfur and Kordofan in West and Central Sudan. The Dagu have retained many of their customs, although they have increasingly become Arabicized by the policies of the Sudanese government.

They were known in the past for their ability to absorb other ethnic groups. For example, the Dagu assimilated many of the Fur and Arab people into their communities while maintaining their strong matrilineal structure. Thus, although the Dagu express a belief in Islam, they also rely on their more ancient traditions. In the past, when areas of Sudan were Christian, the Dagu also held fast to their traditional ancestral customs, thus

weathering both the Christian and Islamic onslaught. However, during the 20th century, the increasing centralized power of the Sudanese government forced the people to accept more Arabic elements into their culture because Arabic is the preferred language among the elites.

The pattern of Dagu disintegration is like that of many ethnic groups in the Sudan. The Arab armies met with great resistance from the Dagu kings. This was also the case with the Nuba royals. However, the Arabs who fought against the indigenous people were often more victorious among the matrilineal people of the Sudan when they took the daughters of the kings they defeated as wives. The offspring of these Arab fathers and Dagu mothers would become the rulers of the country because these children, especially males, would inherit from their mother's side of the family.

In this way, most historians of the Dagu believe that the Dagu, Nuba, and Fur people often moved from being African to being Arab. Once patrilineality was introduced in an area by the Arab Muslims, it meant that the older African matrilineal form ended. As one writer claims, all vestiges of authority and tradition usually disappeared in the lands where this occurred, and the old patterns of authority were exchanged for the new Bedouin Arab authority.

Elements of resilience exist in all cultures, and from time to time, even among the Dagu, there are periods of reevaluation and reassessment that suggest a neo-renaissance of even the more traditional customs that have disappeared over time. Consequently, although the outward religion of

many Dagou is Islam, they retain the cultural forms of their ancestors in their music, dance, festivals, styles of women dress, and specific Dagou elements of courtship and kinship patterns. The memory of the ancestors, a central aspect of African religion, is never far from the Dagou. They are profoundly impacted by the integrative nature of all forms of human life, and the cyclical nature of the African world is still a part of their deepest thinking.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Dinka; Nuer

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DANBALA WEDO

Danbala Wedo is pronounced to be one of the oldest and most beneficent African *lwa* (also known as *loas*) spirits of the Vodou religion in Haiti. He is imaged in the form of a snake or serpent. The name *Danbala* originates from Dahomey, a kingdom in West Africa that is now positioned in today's Benin; it is constructed out of the terms *Dan* and *Allada*. “Dan” is the cult of the snake in Heaven, whereas “Allada” is the name of the coastal kingdom in South Dahomey, which is the native land of the Aja people who founded the kingdom of Dahomey and eventually dominated the Fon people, another West African group in Dahomey. In Africa, where Danbala Wedo is known as Dan or Danbada-Wedo, he is thought to be the grandson of Nana-Buluku, the Fon people's Supreme deity, and the son of Nana-Buluku's twin siblings, Mawu-Lisa, deities who created the universe. Danbala assisted in the creation of the universe and supports it with his snake coils. Thus, Danbala, the

snake, is most closely associated with cosmic motion—that is, life itself. He is the patriarchal god of fertility and rainbows.

As a *lwa* of the Arada or Rada rite, one of three major rites of Vodou in Haiti, that represents the lost mystic world, Danbala embodies gentleness and peace; he is portrayed as a warm, benevolent presence who sustains the world. He plays a significant function through certain healing processes, and his principal characteristic rests in the fact that his actions are directed toward excellence.

Danbala is associated with wisdom and rain. Since Danbala is seen to be able to solve the problem of drought, he is accorded the status of a spirit of wisdom. This means, of course, that the people see Danbala as one who guards morals, principles, customs, and all African traditions. He is connected to the color white in representation of his pureness and is married to Ayida Wedo (or Aida Wedo), the goddess of the rainbow. His lover is Erzulie Freda Dahomey, also known as Ezili, goddess of beauty and grace.

As an Arada *lwa*, Danbala Wedo will be one of the first *lwa* served during the ceremony, and his *vèvè* marks that he will be part of the coming ceremony. Danbala's *vèvè* is a religious coat of arms or symbols that personally identify him. It is made up of a series of intercrossed lines, triangles, snakes, and flags and is usually drawn on the ground by a *Houngan*, a Vodou priest, or a Mambo, a Vodou priestess, with corn maize. An offering of pure white eggs, Danbala's sacrificial sign, is then placed on his *vèvè* as part of inviting Danbala into the *Houmfort*, the designated temple for Vodou practice. Danbala and his wife, Ayida Wedo, are also often provided with a basin of pure water, and the person mounted by Danbala may decide to “swim” in it. Danbala can ride his horse only when he is called or invoked by a particular drumbeat. The *hounsi* will respond only to the beat that corresponds to Danbala. He or she simply needs to focus on Danbala's rhythm to surrender himself or herself to it, and this is executed through the movements associated with the Yanvalou dance, a dance that imitates snakelike motions.

Once Danbala arrives in the peristyle of the *houmfort*, a barn-like addition to the *houmfort* used to distinguish it from other farm structures, he takes possession of a devotee or an *hounsi* (initiate) who becomes the “horse” of Danbala.

The lwa now embodies or rides the male or female devotee or hounsi. Danbala is verbally uncommunicative. He never speaks, but hisses. He never stands up or walks about because he shows himself in his snake form during his possessions. Therefore, the “horse,” under the possession of Danbala, begins to act like a snake, hissing, creeping about in curves along the ground, crawling up pillars, and hanging about in snake-like form. The hissing is related to the ancestral, sacred language of Vodou, which further shows Danbala to be an intermediary between the Creator and humans and a facilitator of Africa’s spiritual communication. Also, when Danbala comes in possession of a devotee or hounsi, during a Vodou ritual, the person will be covered with a white sheet. In some peristyles, four hounsis will hold the four corners of the white sheet, and they will occasionally create ripples in the sheet by shaking it.

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See also Vodou in Haiti

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DANCE AND SONG

Dance and song are related to African people’s most significant cultural expressions, and they reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces. Thus, there is a deeply dramatic and narrative quality to the creation of this physical and symbolic means of expression.

Dance and song are based on the fundamental aspects of African life; they are a common response to the need for social readjustment or restructuring and the reestablishment of balance and harmony. They are also linked to people’s

relationship with supernatural powers; they are aesthetic expressions of Africa’s ontological and cosmological orientation.

Dance, décor, drumming, music, song, and costumes are essential and inseparable aspects of every African dramatic or narrative, religious or secular performance. In fact, African culture and history have relied on oral forms of transmission and expressions that are extremely rich in signs, gestures, colors, sounds, movement, forms, symbols, and nuances. These may evoke the spirituality of the sacred or laughter, the awe of veneration, or the ecstasy of possession.

Song and dance are always punctuated by the rhythmic pace of drumming. Together, these provide a means to communicate with the ancestors and evoke spiritual forces. Through the kinesthetic freedom that dance and drumming afford, the energies of the human being and the world are harnessed. Music and movement, rhythm, and words or sounds invoke a larger primordial force capable of transforming the human community and restoring balance and harmony. Through dance and song, African communities have kept their traditions and passed along the narratives and metaphors that stitch together the fabric of society.

Dance and song performances—for example, the *eboka* that are part of ceremonies among the BaAka—often incorporate the use of masks to recreate and symbolize the character of the spirit dancers impersonate. Masks and the performance attached to them therefore reflect the community’s history, as well as the political, social, and economic forces that influence its life. Almost all ancestral dances are masked dances because they articulate the roles of ancestors that are not seen by humans. These invisible energies are unleashed in singing and dancing in the African community, which express the community’s legacy. Using masks to demonstrate the invisible power of the ancestors is universally appreciated in Africa.

The colors and the styles of the masks as well as the songs, the music, and the dancing are a form of storytelling, indeed an aesthetic narrative about the identity of the community, of its place of origin and creation, of its practices, of the teachings of the ancestors, of the myths and legends, and of the character, virtues, and morals of the spirit that the masks symbolize. They reflect the cosmological orientation of the community.

Dance and song call on the benevolent spirits to bring blessings into the community or to restore peace and harmony where chaos was disrupting the rhythms of nature or the balance between the people and the universe of their lives. They also are part of the community's rites of passage: births, marriages, and funerals. Music and dance are also there to help the community deal with the great threats that have to be met in everyday life.

Such ceremonies usually take place in the common grounds of the compound or the forest nearby. The women, men, and children of the community, along with their guests, form a circle, and inside it, the drummers and the dancers take the floor. In some cases, the community also joins in singing and clapping; in other cases, the active participation of the community is not welcome, as is the case with the Mossi religious ceremonies.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Rituals

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DAUSI

The Dausi represents a massive complex of historical and mythological dramas associated with the development of the peoples of the Sahel region in Northern Western African. These oral traditions and songs were ancient in the area long before Leo Frobenius, the German ethnologist, visited the Sahel from 1899 to 1915 and collected some of them for translation into German. What is clearly revealed in the corpus of African oral traditions

from this region is the relationship between the ancient Garamante people found in the writings of Herodotus in the 5th century BC. Actually, the ancient city of Ghana seems to have been linked to the current city of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, through a series of historical events.

According to the Dausi, there was a twin-city called Garama. One section of the city was for women and the other section was for men. During a great annual festival, the men and women could come together for social and physical interactions, and after that time, the women would become pregnant. This twin-ness of the city lasted until a great king named Ghasir ascended the throne and decreed that the city should become one.

There is a legend that Alexander, the conqueror of Egypt, visited this region, where he met the great warrior women of Africa. He was informed by one of the sages of the region that if he attacked the women and won, the people would say that he was a coward who only fights women. However, the sage told him, if he attacked the women and lost, the people would say that he was a weakling because he was defeated by women.

The Dausi record the history of the Garamantes who controlled a region from Libya to Niger. It is said that the Garamantes founded the town of Agada and other cities in the Sahel and moved closer to Niger when the Arabs invaded the region after the 9th century AD. In the Dausi, one learns that there was an ideal city (it might have been Ouagadougou) that was composed of the four cities of the epic: Agada, Jerra, Ghana, and Silla. Some have speculated that the names *Ghana*, *Jenne*, *Guinea*, and *Garama* refer to the same town. It is not clear in the Dausi that these towns are one city. We know, of course, that the four cities were founded one after another. The city of Ouagadougou was built and destroyed four times. The fact that it kept coming back meant that it was a miraculous city that prospered and grew wealthy.

In the Dausi, the story is told that every year in this great city a girl was sacrificed to Bida, the serpent deity who lived in a pond near the Niger River. Every year Bida would fly over the great city and spew gold out of its mouth like a golden dust storm. One year, the girl who was to be sacrificed was called Sia Yattai-Bari. She was the most beautiful of the girls in the city. She had a lover whose

name was Mamadi Sefe Dekote, the Silent Sword. He was the owner of a sword that was longer than any sword in the city, and he honed it to perfection so that when he used it to cut a grain of millet, the sword edge did not make a sound. There was no one that Mamadi Sefe Dekote feared, and he was honored by both Sia Yattai-Bari and Bida, the serpent. Soon Mamadi married the girl and became the protector of the serpent Bida.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ceremonies; Pythons

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DEATH

Ngewo, the Supreme God of the Mende people, sent two messages to people: life, carried by the dog, and death, carried by the toad. The dog rested along the way and had a meal. The toad never stopped, thus reaching humans first with the message of death. According to many African mythologies, death was not part of the original state of humans, but arrived later by a message from God, which was usually subverted, slow, stammered, misdirected, wrong, or late. Other stories explain death arriving as a result of man's indebtedness, arrogance, tardiness, or disobedience.

Although death was not part of the original human condition, or maybe because of it, traditional African societies are laden with rituals, beliefs, and practices that acknowledge, affirm, grieve, and heal the inevitable effects of death. Death stands between the human and spiritual worlds. Without it, there would be no distinction between the two. With it comes a disruption of harmony. Therefore, rituals associated with death are designed to restore order.

For the community, the age and circumstance of a person's death are important. Natural deaths are rare with the exception of extreme old age. Africans often suspect malevolence, from humans or spirits, as the first cause. The prolonged suffering, pain, or sickness that may accompany death is often an indicator of malevolent activities. Typically, bodies are buried in family compounds, although in some cultures they may be left in the forest. Rituals consist of preparation of the body and periods of public grieving, which include singing and dancing, settling estates, and transferring family eldership. These rituals are spaced out over days, weeks, and months after death. The deaths of children, the unmarried, or the childless are treated differently and traditionally do not receive full burial rites. Those who die by lightning also receive special treatment. In contemporary times, death rituals may reflect the influence of the modern world as well as Christian and Islamic traditions.

The transition into the spiritual realm starts during life, when individuals are moral and generous. Thus, they can look forward to continuing to be a member of their family as an ancestor. Ancestors can offer protection and guidance and, in return, are given life through the acts of remembrance by their families. It is believed that once an individual is no longer mentioned by name or remembered, they become a part of the collective immortality. Those who do not transition into the world of spirits as an ancestor are those who are not properly mourned or remembered, did not have children, or engaged in evil practices. These dead will not be in any position to assist the family and, in fact, can cause misfortune to the community in general.

The Fon practice of Vodun has, at its core, the premise of deification of the ancestors, that is, increasing status of those who died. In this system, the circumstances of a person's death are not a barrier to improving their status in the land of ancestors. It only takes the commitment of time resources on the part of living to help them.

Generally speaking, in the African religious tradition, death is conceived of as a rite of passage into the spiritual realm. Because spirits are very much present, although partly invisible, death constitutes another mode of existence, rather than an end of life. In fact, because many African

people believe in reincarnation, it can be said that life is born out of death and that death is the prolongation of life.

Denise Martin

See also Afterlife; Reincarnation

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DESOUNEN

Desoumen (also sometimes written *dessounin*) is an important ritual of death that is observed by Vodou practitioners in Haiti. It has its origins, like much of the Vodou religion practiced in Haiti, among the Fon people of Dahomey (Republic of Benin), West Africa. It is the first among several rituals performed after the death of a Vodou initiate and can only be conducted by a Houngan (priest) or a Mambo (priestess). This entry looks at the belief and practice and its roots in Fon cosmology.

Vodu Belief

The word *desoumen* is French in origin and implies the extraction of sound from a voice and, by extension within the world of Vodou, the removal of the life substance from the body. The life substance or spiritual entity is removed or extracted immediately following the death of a Vodun practitioner. This delicate ritual is meticulously carried out by a priest who is familiar with the guardian entity that first possessed the deceased. The main purpose of this ritual is to properly remove the guardian lwa and *mèt tèt* that were placed into the practitioners' head when they were initiated or called out by the

lwa/loa. This process has also been referred to as the dispossession of the *gwobonanj*, which is the essence of one's soul.

According to Vodou belief, the soul resides in the body and consists of at least two aspects that are of particular relevance for the *desoumen* ceremony. The *gros-bon ange* and the *tibonanj* comprise the soul and represent the spiritual and physical natures of an individual. The *ti-bon-age* is responsible for one's personal character, and it is this aspect of the soul that stands in judgment to account for the life one has lived. The *ti-bon-age* is related to the Egyptians' *Ka* or one's double, which is responsible for bestowing personality; it possesses an independent existence. It is one's *tibonanj* that lingers around the body for 9 days after the funeral and finally goes to a place to receive judgment. After this, the *tibonanj* will not "mount" another horse (any living person in spirit possession), nor can its powers be accessed for any use.

The *gwobonanj*, in contrast, is the primal substance that gives life to a human being. It is the divine essence of an individual, and it derives its force directly from *Bondyé*, the Supreme Being, whose presence permeates the cosmos. Unlike the *tibonanj*, the *gwobonanj* is recycled and given a new life to continue its eternal mission, which is to carry out the will of the Creator. The *desoumen* ceremony, therefore, aims to extract this sacred nature or vital force from the deceased to ensure that it ends up in the proper place.

Extracting the *gwobonanj* from the deceased properly removes the force and sacred substance that makes one fully human. Releasing the *gwobonanj* provides for a new body to be given the mission of the lwa and, on the completion of its obligations, it too will be received among the community of spirits in Ginen, only to be rebirthed again in another's soul. Hence, death is not the ending, but simply an essential part of the cycle of life.

The performance of the *desoumen* ritual requires the direction of a person initiated at the highest level, that is, a Houngan or Mambo. Pieces of the physical body, such as pieces of nails or hair, are removed and placed in the deceased's *govi*. The lwa who was the *mèt-tèt* of the deceased is then called on and invited to mount him or her one last time. Sacrifices are made, blood is sprinkled on the deceased's body, and the lwa is asked

to permanently leave the body and settle in the deceased's sacred necklace, an important item during the initiation process also kept in the *govi*.

Roots in Dahomey

The theology and practices governing the Vodouists' beliefs and behaviors have their origins in Dahomey. In the late 15th century, French seamen began patrolling off the coast of Dahomey, and by 1505, they had kidnapped a sizeable number of Africans and taken them to the French colony of Saint Domingue. This trend was to continue, and, thus, it is commonly admitted that a large number of enslaved Africans were taken from Dahomey to Haiti. As a result, the religion or the theological tenets governing Vodou were brought to the American hemisphere by West Africans primarily from the Dahomey region. Therefore, one must look to Fon cosmology to acquire a historical and philosophical understanding of *desoumen*, which is only a small part of an elaborate death ritual.

According to Fon cosmology, every individual is made from clay and water. The Fon referred to the soul as "*se*," and it is equivalent to the *gros-bon-age*, which continues throughout eternity. The *se* is an immaterial divine substance that comes directly from Mawu Lisa (Godhead). Upon dying, one's *se* is returned to Mawu Lisa and replanted into a newborn of the deceased's family. Therefore, according to Vodun cosmology, in both Africa and Haiti, an individual's life is part of a continuum that links them to an unbroken heritage connecting grandfather to father to son, extending throughout space and time as a single-branching organism. Thus, in traditional African families on the continent and throughout the diaspora, following the death of a grandfather, it is expected that his spirit will be transplanted in the soul of the next male entering the family.

Death is an important time in traditional Haitian culture, as well as in most African societies, because, according to Dahomean cosmology, upon death one is reconnected to one's essential nature. This is the time when the immortal spirit returns to *Ginen* (Africa), where it awaits replantation into a new physical body. While in *Ginen*, it is reunited with the *lwa*, assigned a body, and continues the mission it was ordained to complete before the beginning of time. Thus, death is not the

end, but a new opportunity for the cycle of life to continue birthing new energy to carry out the will of the ancestors and divinities. The *desoumen* ritual plays a critical role in protecting the integrity of this life cycle.

Douglas Edwin Thomas

See also Vodou in Haiti

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DESTINY

Destiny in Africa is the idea that a person's path through life has been predetermined. The notion of destiny, for example, among the Akan and Yoruba people in West Africa is not fatalism. There is no sense that one's destiny is bad or evil, but rather that one must work each day to work out the destiny that was designed before birth.

African religion does not trivialize the idea of destiny to ideas like romance or the futility of working. One does not have to try to outmaneuver destiny, but one can embrace it because one can choose to accept destiny or fight against it. Rather than see destiny in Africa as a fixed sequence of events that is inexorable, one should view it as *nkrabea*, the Akan idea of destiny that takes its character from human uniqueness. Thus, *nkrabea* begins with the person. This entry uses Akan culture as an example of the African concept of destiny and also explores more general elements.

Akan Perspectives

In the Akan culture, a person is basically composed of several components: *okra*, *mogya*, and *sunsum*. But people are also members of an *abusua*, family, and exist in the context of community, which includes both the living and the Dead. Therefore, certain ritualized ideas of *nkrabea* are based essentially on the concept of family. Among these thoughts is the idea that a person exists within a community and therefore must work to assist others in carrying out their destinies. In addition, one cannot be “saved” alone; because there is no dancing alone, there is no destiny alone.

Even the idea of kinship reflects communal closeness so that age groups share common mothers and common siblings. There are no first cousins, only brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and uncles and aunts. Destiny in African religion is interconnected, although there are unique qualities to each person. In fact, *nkrabea* suggests that each human is unique and has value apart from others, although this value is meaningless without community. No person is without *nkrabea*, although many people will never discover their *nkrabea*. Only through communicating with other people can one truly discover *nkrabea*.

The reason for this is because, within the community of humans, there is an endless variety of possibilities. When people interact with others, they observe what completes them, makes them feel whole, satisfies them, and brings them to consciousness of their destiny. In ancient Africa, the priests would express the satisfaction of the divine when an action had been achieved that was considered difficult or extraordinary. One wanted to arrive at the point when every action, however small or large, would seem natural and expected, like water running off a duck’s back. Then one would have achieved all the possibilities of *nkrabea* because there would be order, balance, and harmony.

Throughout Africa, there is a general belief in human destiny. It recognizes both the power of the unknown as well as the limitations of human beings. It is composed of several important elements. One can take the Akan word *nkrabea* as an example of the complexity of this concept. In the first place, the verb *kra* means to take leave of or bid farewell to the realm of the unknown so as

to capture the idea that when one is born one is actually saying goodbye to providence. *Nkrabea* literally means “the manner in which a soul departs for the earth.” One may call this “fate,” “allotted life,” or “prescribed lot.”

The centrality of human beings in the universe is a part of the African idea of destiny. This means that the person must show respect and reverence for both the visible and invisible spheres of life. In the Akan view, the human must be in harmony with both the animate and inanimate worlds to claim the energies and vital forces in them. The Akan say “*Nkrabea mu nni kwatibea*.” This means that the destiny you have been assigned cannot be escaped. In effect, the order that has been given is settled and cannot be altered unless one carries out certain rituals of behavior. So for *nkrabea* to be fixed does not mean that it is immutable; it only means that if one believes that his or her destiny is negative, then ritual is necessary to change the destiny. However, it is not easy.

Among the Akan, it is believed that a person’s *okra* receives his destiny before his birth. Thus, the *nkrabea* is often called the *hyebea*, which means “the way and manner in which one’s destiny was ordered.” Once the *okra*, similar to Western idea of soul, has been imprinted with destiny, a person enters the world with certain attributes that would aid in the destiny. The idea of destiny is not like saying that one’s destiny is to be a teacher, engineer, lawyer, or any other professional occupation, but rather like saying that one’s character will reflect justice, mercy, truth, righteousness, and goodness. Thus, it is critical for a person to communicate with others. Everyone wants a good destiny. It is an indication that the person “fits” well in the community of ancestors and the living. A good destiny is *Akraye*; a bad destiny is *Akrabiri* in Akan. When one seems to have *akrabiri*, a bad destiny, as indicated by how they get along with others, treat their parents, interact with strangers, and “fit” into the society, it is a serious problem that can only be dealt with through ritual.

African Themes

One finds similar ideas among other groups of Africans. For example, among the Yoruba, the

idea of destiny is well developed. A good destiny is *Olori-re*, whereas a bad destiny is *Olori-buruka* in Yoruba. Among the Yoruba, the idea of destiny is called *ipinori*, the ori's allotted part. The Yoruba believe that one receives this in one of three ways. A person may kneel and choose his destiny; this is called *A-kunle-yan*, that which is chosen. One may kneel and receive his destiny; this is called *A-kunle-gba*, that which is given. One may have a destiny attached to him, that is, *A-yan-mo*. Both the Akan and the Yoruba believe that, although in theory the destiny is unalterable, in practice there are some factors that can influence it for good or evil. A person may consult a divinity to have a good destiny maintained or prolonged. The Yoruba believe that a good destiny that is accompanied by a bad character is disaster. Among the Akan, it is said that *Opanyin ano sen suman*, that is, the words of the elders, is worth more than any amulet or charm.

In conclusion, destiny is not a fatalistic concept. People work to have their destinies prolonged and changed. It is only the inexplicable traits of humans that are explained by destiny. In the African world, humans are not the masters of their own lives or the universe; they are beneficiaries. How to live in the world is the job of the individual who is aware of his destiny. The universe has existed long before humans and will exist long after humans; it is important to maintain the idea of humility even as people walk upon the Earth. The Akan say the Earth is *Asase Yaa*, a sacred place, and must be walked on carefully.

Thus, the idea of destiny among Africans, especially as seen in Akan and Yoruba areas, is one that claims the Supreme Deity set in motion a certain path for the universe and humans at the beginning of creation. How one goes about negotiating his or her path can determine how pleased one is with the adventure of life. Therefore, respecting the ancestors, claiming dignity-affirming actions, following the proper rituals, and remembering in humility the importance of character are at the center of embracing destiny.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Esu, Elegba; Predestination

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DIASPORA

Diaspora is a term used to describe communities of people, often taken away from their homelands

by force, who now live away from their country and culture of origin. Since the 1950s, the term has been used to describe the worldwide presence of Africans. As they moved—or were moved—to other countries, Africans brought with them their religious views and practices. This entry briefly describes the history of the concept, looks in more detail at the African diaspora, and discusses its impact on religion.

Background of the Concept

Diaspora derives from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over) and was first applied by ancient Greeks to signify expansion, migration, and settler colonization. Earlier conceptions of diaspora have changed to acquire new definitions and meanings, partly representing a collective trauma, forced exile with myths of home and return. The biblical exile of the Jews represents one classical notion of diaspora. In recent times, diverse ethnic-national groups living outside their local communities and countries of origin who maintain collective identities have often engaged in self-description as diaspora. One unifying thread of diasporic communities is their settlement, temporary or permanent, outside their imagined old-home, natal territories.

African diaspora was employed from the mid-1950s and 1960s when the discourse on the historical phenomenon of dispersion and settlement of Africans abroad began to lay claim to *diaspora* as a descriptive label. The African diaspora assumes a dynamic character of an ongoing, complex process located across space-time. It embodies the voluntary and forced dispersion of Africans, their descendants, and their cultures at different historical phases and into diverse directions (such as the Americas, Europe, Asia, Mediterranean, Arab worlds, and the cross-migration within Africa). In recent years, African diaspora is transforming to include a rising influx of voluntary as well as forced emigrants, refugees, and refugees within and beyond the continent. African diaspora is one theoretical construct to describe this global dispersal of indigenous African populations at different phases of world history.

Historical Perspective

The transcultural encounter between Africa and the rest of the world is not a recent phenomenon. Contacts between Europe and Africa in particular were constant throughout Europe's Antiquity, Middle Ages, and the so-called Modern Age. European presence and interest in Africa through these periods is split along the contours of commerce, politics, and religion. The imperial expansionist agenda generated new situations and posed as a catalyst toward diaspora formation. One inherent consequence was in creating situations that brought Africans at varied times to Europe and the New World.

The emergence of diaspora communities is linked to different waves of emigration. The earliest included virile Africans collected in human trafficking and moved involuntarily to various metropolises in Europe and the Americas. Prior to the transatlantic African diaspora, Africans had prolonged encounters of slave trade and forced migration during the Islamic hegemony of the 7th and 8th centuries, in which slaves were trafficked across the Sahara, up the Nile Valley and the Red Sea, and across the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and India. Survivors of these ordeals constituted the first African diaspora enclaves.

The historical African diaspora in the New World generated a number of myths about its origins. Their most important notions of the homeland were imbricated in "Ethiopia," with biblical credence to Psalms 68:31: "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." This connection was more of a concept of "blackness" and "Africanity," rather than any geographical connection with the country. In the 1930s, Ethiopianism became the precursor to Rastafarianism in Jamaica.

The initiative to reinvigorate black consciousness, restore self-esteem and human dignity among African Americans, and revamp Africa from an image condemned to poverty, enslavement, denigration, and inferiority brought some populist leaders of the African diaspora such as Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. into the limelight. Their ideas and activities launched the early movements of Black Consciousness (Garveyism), the Pan-African Movement, Négritude, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Impact on Religion

Physical contact between Africa and the West increased in frequency in the 19th century. An upsurge in the demography of African migrants into Europe, North America, and elsewhere heralds a new phase in the history of African diaspora. Religion is a constant identity variable within African diaspora communities, where many Africans carry traits of their religiocultural identity. Sojourn in new contexts enlivens them to identify and reconstruct their religion for themselves and their host societies.

African migrants of diverse origins largely retained their religious symbolisms and worldviews. Contact with religions of the Americas from the 16th century resulted in a complex synthesis that produced African-derived religions, such as Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodoo, Orisha, and Ifa traditions. Some of them have transcended ethnic precincts, while increasingly turning proselytizing religions. For instance, Ifa priests and devotees now include Yoruba, Africans, and non-Africans alike. *Umbanda*, the Afro-Brazilian religion, was a synthesis of religious elements from West Africa, South America, and Western Europe. The proliferation of these new religions evokes nostalgia, with people of African descent charting new paths toward rediscovering their ancestral African homelands.

The African American community has been integral to the reshaping of the American religious mosaic. In the context of slavery and racial discrimination in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, America gave birth to African American Christian denominations from the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian backgrounds. The modern Pentecostal movement in the United States began in 1906 with William J. Seymour, a black holiness preacher. Although the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition fueled the quest of the Pentecostal movement prior to 1901, its origin is mostly traced to the Topeka, Kansas, religious revival. The earliest groups included the predominantly African American Church of God in Christ (1897), the Pentecostal Holiness Church (1898), and the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee (1906).

There were also enslaved Muslims from parts of Africa who brought their religion to parts of North America. Two religious groups that

emerged to challenge segregation in America and colonialism in Africa were the Moorish Science (Timothy Drew) and the Nation of Islam (Wallace Fard, later known as Farrad Mohammed).

The last 3 decades, characterized by significant demographic shifts of African immigrants, have witnessed the further proliferation of varieties of African religions in diaspora. African indigenous, Islamic, and Christian religions in diaspora are remapping the old religious landscapes and widening their clientele base, as well as playing increasing visible civic roles within the diaspora.

Afe Adogame

See also Africism; Candomblé; Vodou in Haiti

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DINKA

The Dinka are a Sudanese people whose culture centers on their cattle. The Dinka believe that each family group should occupy an area that will provide pasture and water for their cattle herds. All of life's rituals and ceremonies are connected to this reality. In effect, the cattle are responsible for an understanding of the Dinka way of life in terms of births, marriages, death, and the meaning of the universe. Thus, they use every aspect of the cattle. For example, every aspect of the cow's body and skin is used for something in the culture. The urine is used as a cleaning soap when one is washing. It is also used to dye the hair, to tan hides, and so forth. The dung is used for fires, and the ash from the fires is used to keep the animals clean of ticks and other bugs.

Personal adornment of the body is a part of the physical creativity of the Dinka. They use cattle in this process as well. For example, the Dinka

decorate themselves with blood from their cattle. The blood could also be used as a tooth cleaner. The cattle hide becomes mats in the homes of the Dinka as well as drum skins, ropes, and belts. The horns and bones of the cattle are used for musical instruments as well as utensils. Few people have invented as many uses of a single material as the Dinka. In much the manner of George Washington Carver, the great African American scientist, who invented three hundred products from the peanut, the Dinka have shown that their ingenuity and genius at creativity equal that of any people in the world. This entry looks at their social structure and lifestyle and their religious practice related to marriage and initiation.

Social Structure and Lifestyle

The Dinka divide their year according to the seasons. There are two seasons that matter to the Dinka: the dry season and the wet season. In the wet season, the people live in their traditional houses, often scattered among palm trees and fruit trees. They remain in these houses until the dry season, when they can take their herds out to the grasslands. It is impossible during the wet season for the Dinka to take the herds to camps near the river. They wait patiently for the proper time, and when that time comes the people move to the new area.

Only the infirm and the nursing mothers and small children remain in the homestead. Of course, when the rains return, the homesteads are again happy that the Dinka people and their cattle are united with the people who were left behind. There are stories to be told, incidents to report, exploits to be revealed, and narratives of the growing of the cattle. Everything seems to depend on the spirits of the cattle, the grass, the rain, the pastures, and the rivers.

The Dinka do not have a hierarchical authority. Although the Islamic government of Sudan has attempted to influence them to change to a hierarchical structure, the people have rejected it. Imposition of structured authority by selecting high-status elders has not worked effectively among the Dinka. Although major leaders of clans often settle disputes, most of these courts are held in informal ways. These meetings are not structured in a manner that would imply established courts.

Each person is allowed to talk to the listeners, giving his opinion, reacting to the arguments of others, and persuading the listeners that his position is valid. Anyone can listen in to the dialogue or monologue given to the special listeners. The elders of the Dinkas are considered with high regard because they are closer to the ancestors. They are listened to with deference.

Marriage and Family

Because families are very important to the Dinka, each family has its cattle tethered nearby to the homestead, which usually has a cooking area in the center. Kinship among the Dinka also suggests linkages, traditions, and respect. The Dinka honor those who have contributed to the life of the people. But blood lineage is also important because it assists the people in determining initiation rites as well as who should marry whom. One is not permitted to marry from within the direct lineage.

The man who is going to marry must provide cattle to the future wife's family because this is how wealth is accumulated and is an expression of the man's respect for the woman and her family. In the Dinka society, family is important because children are keys to the continuation of the society even in the sense of the ancestral world. If a person does not produce a child, then there is no way to become an ancestor. One then would wander in a state of total oblivion because there would be no child to remember the person. No one wants this type of nonexistence.

Therefore, the Dinka prevent this from happening by creating various ways to answer the coincidents and incidents of life. For example, if a young child dies before he or she can marry, then a relative takes a wife or husband in the name of the dead child to ensure that they will have children. The children born will be the dead child's children as well as those of the biological father and mother. A man whose wife dies may also take her sister and have children with her to ensure that there will be those who will remember the parents.

All female infants are looked on with a special joy for two reasons: They will become the source of a family's wealth, and they are the source of children who will provide the basis for eternal life. However, the young girl will not be able to continue the name of the family; the name of the

family will be ensured by the sons of the family. A man receives the names of his father and grandfather and ancestors.

Initiation Rites

When a boy is initiated, he is no longer asked to do the labor of a boy. He does not tether the animals. He does not milk the cattle. He does not cart cattle dung. He receives the scarification on his forehead that identifies him as a *parapuol*, one who does not milk. When a boy becomes an initiate between the ages of 10 to 16, he can be called on to be a warrior, guard, and hunter. The boys remain with their cattle during the dry season, and they farm during the wet season.

Initiation is a major part of the Dinka tradition. The boys sing songs of their families. They have their heads shaved. They get up early on the morning of the initiation and are taken by their parents to the ceremonial grounds. They receive blessings and are asked to sit with their legs crossed in a row with their backs to the sun. As the rising sun makes an aura of innocence around them, they are asked to recite the names of their ancestors. The person in charge of the initiation then takes each boy by the crown of his head and then spins the head toward a sharp knife. The boy is cut. This is repeated until the boy has all the cut marks of his particular clan. He has recited the names of his ancestors without stopping all the while he is being cut. This is truly the bonding of the Dinka during initiation. A boy cannot flinch or cry during the initiation because it will show him to be a coward.

Afterward, there is great joy with dancing and music for many days. The *parapuol* is granted his song oxen, the most precious object he will ever possess. In addition to all the attention, the boy will also receive attention from the girls, who prefer boys who are *parapuols*. The Dinka have retained many of their religious traditions as a result of the continuation of a strong resistance to outside influences. They represent a bulwark of African culture in the midst of Christian and Islamic penetration.

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See also Dagou; Initiation; Rituals

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DIOLA

The Diola (also called *Jola*) are an African people found in the area of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. It is believed that the Diola migrated to the Casamance region of Senegal during the 11th and 12th centuries in an effort to escape the increasing Islamic jihads. Mande-speaking (Dioula) and Fula-speaking people followed the Diola to the region. Diola are not to be confused with the Dioula or Doula people; these are separate and distinct people.

Unlike some of their neighbors, the Diola do not have a hierarchal system of governance. There are no djeles, nobles, or kings. The Diola do not have a class system that divides people by leather workers, farmers, iron workers, and so forth. Indeed they have created a community based on the large family settlement form of organization. Many of these families give their own names to their communities, such as Jola Jamat, Jola Brin, Jola Kabrouse, Jola Foni, and Jola Karon. Like the Baga, Balanta, Konyagia, and Serere, the Diola have remained tied to the village as their largest political organization.

Most authorities agree that the Diola have a long history of fishing, farming, domestication of animals, palm wine harvesting, and the processing of palm wine; they have a comprehensive and intensive engagement with the rich natural environment in which they live. They are most well known for rice production. This is the key to much of the structure of their thought, celebrations, holidays, and responses to the environment.

The Diola were the last of the Senegambia people to succumb to Islam. Their ancestors had handed down to them the idea of one God, supreme and omniscient, who was called Emit. The deity Emit was associated with the natural phenomena of

Earth, rain, storms, sky, and night. When Emit referred to the Sky God, he was often called Ata Emit. This was the creator God, not an ordinary, daily deity. Among the Diola, ancestral spirits, nature spirits, and various sacred lands and forests filled with energetic spirits were at the core of the religious experience.

It is believed that the Diola accepted the power of the spirits to prevent them from being influenced by Islam or Christianity, as well as to provide protection for their rice farms and families. These spirits (Bakin) are found in all places in the community. One does not have to go far to discover the Bakin. Actually, the Diola understand the Ata Emit as being the creator, but the ancestral and nature spirits are responsible for daily life. Even the Kajando, an instrument used in rice farming, is ritualized as a sacred tool in farming.

Because the ancestors are central to the continuation of society for the Diola, the funeral ceremony is most important. In fact, the Diola believe that the dead person's soul cannot go to its final destination properly unless the funeral is carried out in a respectful manner. For the soul to enter the presence of the ancestors and the Ata Emit, the family seeks to ensure that the good life of the deceased is represented to the ancestors. If a person does not live a good life, one that is based on character, then that person is punished and will become an exiled spirit, lost forever, and separated from the ancestral world.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Bamana; Dogon; Yoruba

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DILOULA

The Dioula are a West African people who are most closely associated with Côte d'Ivoire but

were also common to Mali, Togo, and other parts of West Africa. The word *Dioula*, elsewhere *Dyula*, *Djula*, and *Juula*, has several meanings in Mande language and dialects. The most common meaning for the word is "itinerant trader." At the same time, the term *Dioula* signifies "Muslim," and in some cases replaced the word *Wangara*, which also refers to Mande-speaking Muslims.

The Dioula converted to Islam to strengthen their relationship with Saharan merchants. As early as the 11th century, the Dioula were identified as traders of gold, cloth, and cola nuts in the western Sudan, but their economic enterprises extended to the far reaches of the Muslim world and connected them to the Middle East, Europe, and beyond because their primary customers for gold were *Kafir*, or those who were not Muslims.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Dioula, however, is their religion. Like many Muslims in West Africa, the Dioula practice Sufi forms of Islam (*turuq*). The many Sufi orders represent mystical, esoteric versions of Islam that are distinct from Sunni Islam or what some refer to as "orthodox" Islam. Briefly, West African Sufi Islam differs from Sunni Islam in that Sufism is based on a leader/disciple hierarchy. A second feature is the practice of remembrances (*dhikr*), collective ritual recitation of prayers, which foster group identity. Third, Sufi Islam is distinguished by excessive veneration of walis (*awliya*), that is, Sufis who are considered to have a special relationship to God. This veneration includes pilgrimages to their burial sites. A fourth feature is the most important in relation to the Dioula. That is to say, West African Sufism is characterized by extreme rivalry between religious groups, and the two dominant Sufi groups are the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. Usually, these groups stand in opposition to one another, and that opposition is sometimes violent.

Among the Dioula, however, this rivalry is absent. To that end, the more conservative Qadiriyya is the oldest group, tracing its origins to Abd-al-Qadir al-Jilani, who lived in Baghdad in the 12th century, although it is most associated in West Africa with Shehu Usuman dan Fodio, the 19th-century founder of the Sokoto Khalifate. In contrast, the Tijaniyya trace their roots to Ahmad al-Tijani, who lived in the Maghreb in the 18th century, although it is also associated with al-Hajj Umar, who succeeded al-Tijani.

The Dioula minimize, even dissipate, the differences between the two historically contentious groups. One Dioula narrative of the founding of the two groups maintains that the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya were founded by Ahmad Tijani Qadiri, a name that is a conflation of the respective founders. The story suggests that one of his sons initiated the Qadiriyya, while the other started the Tijaniyya. Nevertheless, this is an intriguing but totally fictitious version of history.

The religion and culture of the Dioula is truly unique even among West African Muslims. Much potential remains to study even its most well-known members, such as al-Hajj Salim Suwari, the scholar who originated the most important pedagogical tradition among the Dioula and Samori Touré, the great jihadist and reformer (*mujadid*) of the late 19th century who fought French colonists. Notwithstanding, the Dioula are a fascinating people worthy of scholarly inquiry.

Stephen C. Finley

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DISEASE

As the birthplace of humankind, Africa has the longest history of addressing disease and its spread among the population. Africans were aware of the history of many diseases and catalogued their course in society. The ancient Egyptians (Kmts) were among the first Africans to study and treat disease.

First and foremost, the idea of disease (sickness, illness, disorder, etc.) in traditional African societies is most commonly associated with the

legacy of spirituality and the mind–body–spirit connection. In this worldview, disease is explained, in part, through natural circumstances, but always in terms signifying the primacy of the supernatural realm. Men and women in early Africa actively sought to explain the nature of disease, define its origin, and explain the disturbance manifested in the physical body and how it could be confronted. Many African societies have held this fundamental analysis of disease. Primarily, it involves the flow and awareness of god energy (which included the role of nature, orishas, ancestors, ashe, chi, etc.) and the limitations of the physical body.

Within the larger African medical system, the intention is to restore balance to the human mind–body–spirit. The elimination of disease is an important occupation to people because illness causes suffering, injury, and death among the populace. Specially trained healers, mainly women and men who have studied herbs and human psychology, are the front-line doctors in most societies. Diseases (even those suffered by plants and animals) not only affect the person, but the dysfunctional consequences of the illness also affect the family and the entire community. Since the HIV epidemic in many countries, healers have had to deal with the wasting disease with traditional medicines. There has been some evidence of success among some of the doctors in Ghana and Zimbabwe. However, it is an epidemic that has been attacked by African and Western medicines.

In most traditional African societies, the origins of disease are evident. The overarching focus comes from the Supreme Being (God), the ancestors, or individuals who manipulate the cosmic energy negatively against other people. Instilling negative energy into an individual may cause disease. In addition, disease is believed to appear if a person in community fails to adhere to admonitions against carefully conscribed sociospiritual activities (such as sexual abstinence during menses, eating certain animals/plants, and failing to honor the ancestors). There are some ethnic groups that believe that disease manifests itself through a form of spirit possession, which can involve the specter of the dearly departed. A more complex way that individuals can become sick is the loss of their soul through means other than spirit possession. Finally, many ethnic groups

believe that persons devoted to inverting the process of healing (sorcerers) can also induce disease. Africans consistently distinguish between those practitioners of traditional healing and those inverters of the right order of things.

Various African ethnic groups have developed, over time, a catalogue of ethnobotanical methods (instructions, recipes) to combat disease. There is a strong presence of indigenous African beliefs and practices regarding disease within the transplantation of African culture to the Americas. For example, the orisha Babalwaiye (Obalwaiye, Omulu) continues to be propitiated as the God that transforms disease. Another result of this African trait has been the spiritual systems of Santeria, Vodun, Umbanda, and Candomble—each with a class of traditional healers that trace their philosophical origins to the continent of Africa in the treatment of disease.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Sacrifice

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DIVINATION SYSTEMS

Although regarded by some people as unscientific, illogical, irrational, and therefore a superstitious and false cognitive process, divination remains a

reliable source of knowledge for millions of people in almost all the religions known to humankind. In all nations and cultures, from prehistoric time to our digital age, people of all types of education and religious convictions seek the wisdom of divination by consulting, at night or in broad daylight, people known as diviners, clairvoyants, shamans, psychics, mediums, or prophets. Despite a long-standing war waged by Christianity and Islam against "idolatry" and divination, today some Christians and Muslims still consult traditional diviners in Africa and elsewhere.

Far from being a meaningless hocus-pocus wrapped in illusory paraphernalia, divination plays a pivotal role in African spirituality and its underlying epistemology. Throughout the ages, people encounter in life questions and existential problems for which ordinary knowledge and ordinary prayers remain insufficient. In such a context, many turn to an extraordinary way of knowing available among diviners. This entry provides an overview of the role of divination in African society, describes the process, looks at divination among the Yoruba, and briefly discusses the underlying ethics.

Social Role

The notion of divination refers to the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell the future or discover the hidden causes of illness and other forms of affliction. It is also a potent means of insight in the decision-making process and a way of knowing the will of the Gods in people's lives by the aid of supernatural powers or a sophisticated interpretation of omens. As such, it pertains to the realm of prophecy, wisdom, and healing technique. In Africa, divination sessions are instances of consulting the Gods or the ancestors. These are not metaphysical constructs, but real living beings that interact with the living. As a means of communication with the village of the ancestors, divination reinforces the belief in the reality of the world of the spirits and the ancestors. Indeed, in African worldview, "the Dead are not dead."

Divination (*lubuko* in Luba religion) and ancestral veneration are the two fundamental pillars of African religious beliefs. The practice is as old as humanity. During the colonial era, divination was regarded with extreme suspicion as an



Ghana, Bolgatanga, Kassena diviner performs ritual. Before a Kassena hunt begins, the village diviner must be consulted. Using his traditional instruments of divination, a sacred forked stick that he drops repeatedly onto a stone divination board, he communicates with the ancestor and nature spirits on behalf of the hunter.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher/Getty Images.

irrational practice detrimental to its adherents. Under the influence of Christianity and Western Enlightenment and modern scientific worldview, divination got a sinister signification as a harmful superstitious ignorance. Diviners were perceived as charismatic charlatans exploiting a credulous and anxiety-ridden people.

Many Westerners regarded divination sessions as instances of arbitrary and idiosyncratic behavior by ignorant “witch-doctors.” Yet divination is found in every age and every country. It has survived all forms of attack and thrives today not only in remote villages, but also in major urban centers in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. It is, in part, divination that has made Yoruba religion, Santeria, and other forms of African religion popular in the West. Everywhere in Africa, divination

plays a pivotal role as a trusted means of decision making and a basic source of vital knowledge.

Divination systems stand as the means and the premise of knowing which underpin and validate all else. Divination even plays a major role in the enactment and validation of African legal systems. It is also used to legitimize some political regimes or even political actors. Its fundamental value stems from its holistic epistemology, its ability to combine both the natural and supranatural cognitive modes, and its power to heal both mind and body, and both the individual and the community. While in the West, Cartesian dualism led to the opposition between intuition and the analytical mode of knowing, African divination systems involve a combination of “logical-analytical” and “intuitive-synthetical” modes of thinking.

Typical Process

Although quite often diviners grasp the will of the gods and the ancestors while under spirit possession and in a state of trance, they also operate via a complex system of knowledge that requires several years of rigorous training. A divination system is a rigorous process deriving from a learned discipline based on an extensive body of knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be literally expressed during the interpretation of the oracular message. The diviner may utilize a fixed corpus, such as the Yoruba Ifa Odu verses, or a more diffuse body of esoteric knowledge. Some diviners operate self-explanatory mechanisms that reveal answers; other systems require the diviner to interpret cryptic metaphoric messages.

In other words, divining processes are diverse. However, in general, some type of device usually is employed, from a simple sliding object to the myriad symbolic items shaken in diviners' baskets (Dikumbo). Among the Baluba of Central Africa, for instance, the diviner (Kilumbu or Bwanavidye) communicates with the spirits by incantations, songs, percussion, dance, and trance. The answer of the ancestors or other spirits is known only through a laborious process by which the diviner interprets visual codes or a kinetic arrangement of items in a gourd or basket. During the consultation, the diviner articulates a narrative plot that leads the client to answer some specific questions. Then the diviner shakes the gourd and interprets the resulting configuration of items.

Items contained in the sacred gourd (mboko) include a wide assortment of natural and manufactured objects, cowrie shells, the carapaces of dried beetles, fruits, seeds, twigs, bird beaks, claws, chalk, composite bundles in antelope horns, human teeth, several miniature carved wooden human figures, and so on. This array of items constitutes the raw material that the diviner uses to diagnose a problem. To this effect, he shakes the gourd and then opens the lid. The objects or figures that remain standing in the gourd or come to the surface of the jumble of pieces are taken as a revelatory sign of the problem and then interpreted.

The process is repeated by shaking the gourd again and again until a satisfactory understanding of the problem has been reached. Items contained

in the gourds constitute a set of symbols that carry a secret meaning. It is believed that the meaning carried by the juxtaposition of various items in the gourd can be decoded and disclosed by the diviner only under the influence of spirit possession. Once the diagnosis of the problem has been accomplished, the diviner ends the session by issuing a series of recommendations to the client. These include sacrifices and a new type of behavior. The failure to follow these guidelines leads to the return of misfortune.

Among the Yoruba

The Ifa divination system of Yoruba religion is one of the divination forms that have been studied widely and more systematically by scholars. The structure of the Ifa divination suggests that African divination systems are first of all based on a fundamental cosmology. It is only by understanding the nature of the world and the structure of human nature that the diviner can predict future events or diagnose the cause of misfortunes that afflict an individual.

According to Ifa cosmology, the world is the theater of two pantheons of competing spiritual forces. These good and bad forces struggle for the control of the universe and humans as well. According to the Yoruba, there are 400 Orishas that are benevolent to humans and 200 ajogun that are malevolent. These 200 evil powers include the eight most infamous warlords: death (Iku), disease (Arun), paralysis (egba), curse (epe), loss (ofu), big trouble (oran), imprisonment (ewon), and "ese" (a general name for all other human afflictions). A successful life requires the art of living in harmony with these spiritual forces.

Ifa diviners predict events only by focusing on the idiosyncratic harmony or disharmony of the individual with the spiritual energies of the universe. Hence, the outcome of the divination process is predicated on the belief that the future is determined by the specific energy balance and current behavior of the individual. Although the orisha bless humans, whereas the ajogun try to destroy them, the Yoruba religion underscores the responsibility of the individual in his own happiness. It teaches that good character is the essence of religion (Iwa Lesin) and is also the best shield

against forces of evil. This is why the Ifa divination recommends not only sacrifices, but also a virtuous life to the afflicted.

The Ifa divination is practiced by the skilled priests known as *Babalawos*, a name that translates into “the father of secrets.” It is understood that Ifa divination was given to humanity by the Supreme God Orunmila in a body of wisdom gathered in 256 sacred odu or poems. Each odu is in reality a chapter containing from 600 to 800 poems. Ifa literature is thus an impressive volume of around 204,800 poems.

At the same time, diviners believe that when Orunmila departed Earth for Heaven, he left behind his spirit and wisdom in the form of the sacred “ikin” or treaded on palm nuts. Among the divination techniques used by the Babalawo, one consists of manipulating 16 palm nuts to know which odu he shall read to diagnose what the client is facing and to prescribe an appropriate remedy. The Babalawo also uses the process of elimination by posing astute questions to his patient.

Underlying Ethics

The diagnosis of the diviner is often followed by a plan for action that leads to healing and peace of mind. Divination provides that kind of knowledge that enables people to take control of their lives. As such, divination is a potent tool in humans’ quest for harmony and happiness.

It is worth emphasizing the ethical dimension of divination. Although abused by some rulers to validate their personal claim to power, divination messages are often based on a set of moral principles that foster social harmony, honesty, justice, and well-being. It is largely understood that sickness and “bad luck” are the result of a moral imbalance or an ethical disorder. Thus, often diviners recommend to their clients moral rectitude along with sacrifice offerings.

The sacred odu 249 of Ifa divination explicitly prohibits adultery. All over Africa, diviners prohibit killings, lies, wicked thoughts, poisonous talks, and various forms of evil deeds and strongly recommend a virtuous code of conduct. This is why, in African understanding, divination is a magnificent gift from the Gods and is celebrated as a sacred and holy activity, rather than the evil

tool of the devil. In others words, divination is not merely a healing technique or merely a way of accessing secret knowledge. It is essentially a body of wisdom that engages individuals on the spiritual path of holiness and humaneness.

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Yoruba

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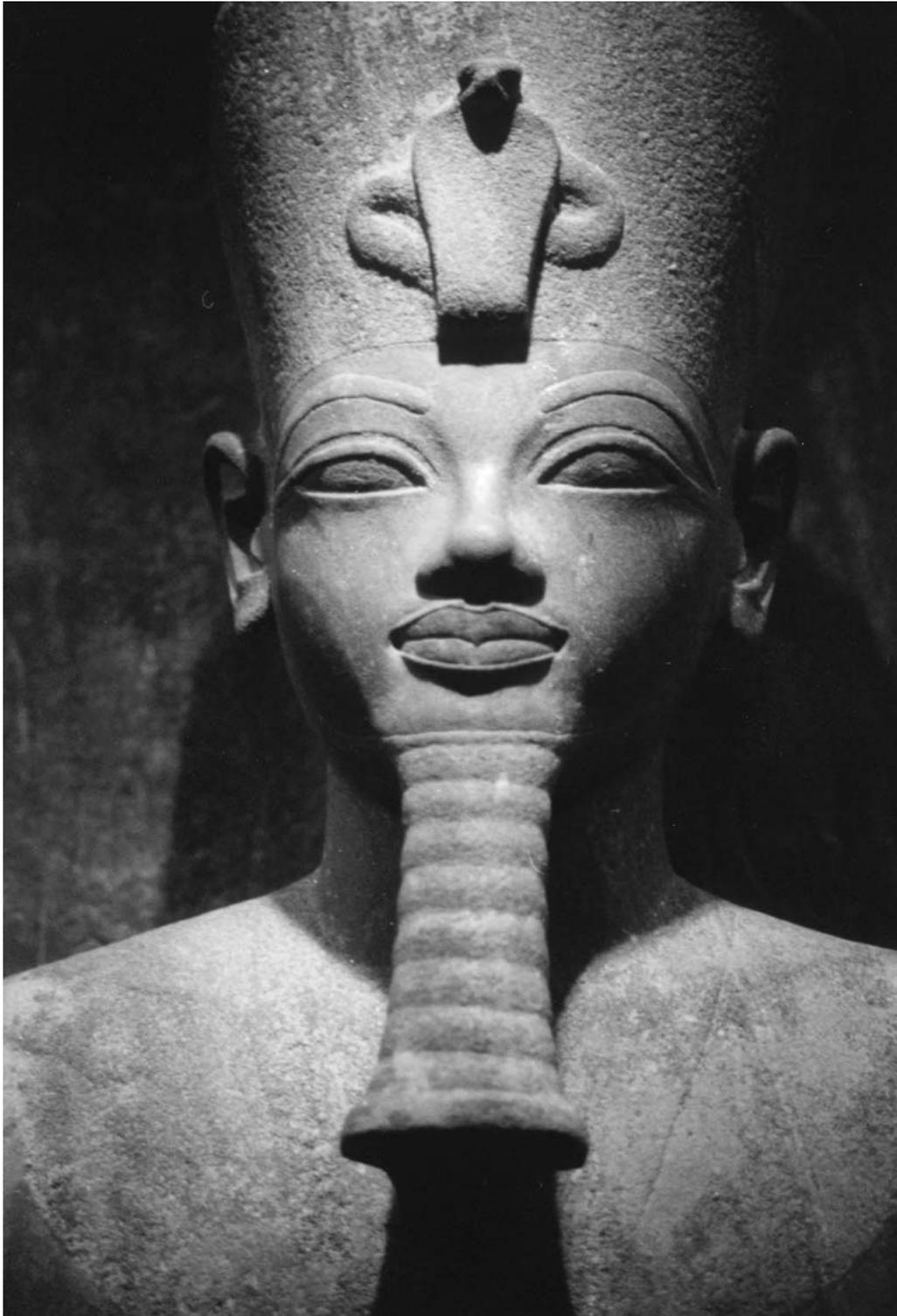
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DIVINITIES

The root of the word *divinity* is the Latin *divus*, which is closely related to the Greek word *dues*; it means “godlike.” The less common but acceptable usage of the word refers to the operation of transcendental powers in the world. In African cosmology, the belief in divinities—referred to as *orisa* (among the Yoruba), *abosom* (among the Akans), and *vudu* (among Ewe-Fon)—presupposes belief in the existence of supernatural beings or forces that control the affairs of the world. In the theocratic government of the universe, the divinities are held to be lower than the Supreme Being, but higher than ancestral spirits. This entry provides a basic description, discusses the relationship between the divinities and the Supreme Being, and offers a categorization.

Basic Description

The origin of the divinities is not definite because of the differing beliefs regarding their coming into being. Oral traditions from a number of African societies assert that the divinities are emanations or offspring of the Supreme Being. The Akans of Ghana say explicitly that the abosom are the children of Onyame. Among the Edo, Olokun is held to be the son of Osanobwa, whereas among the Yoruba, Orisa-Nla is said to be the offspring



The Divine Per-aa, Amenhotep III, in his majesty. The Per-aa was considered a divinity alongside other deities in ancient Egypt. The idea of the Divine Kingship comes from the Pharaonic Period in the Nile Valley.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

of Olodumare. Generally, divinities in Africa are believed to be beings that were brought into being distinctively with unique and supernatural destiny.

It is difficult to state the precise number of the divinities. Yoruba oral tradition puts the census of divinities at varying numbers from 201, 401, 600, to 1,700. This pluralism of divinities probably results from the fact of a plural society, but in this diversity of many divinities, there is unity under one Supreme Being.

The divinities may be male or female. For example, among the Yoruba, Orunmila and Sango are male, whereas Oya and Yemoja (Yemọnja) are female. Divinities are held to be responsible for all the good and evil that happen on Earth. Humankind, therefore, can receive the prosperity, good health, protection, wives and children, and all forms of good fortunes by offering regular sacrifices to the divinities. However, refusal to offer sacrifice or show gratitude may incur their wrath on oneself.

Each divinity has its own local name in the local language, which is descriptive either of the function allotted to the divinity or with the natural phenomena with which the divinity is associated. Divinities may well be described as “domesticated” spirits because they are a tutelary part of the community establishments.

They act as custodians of the people’s morality. In this capacity, they act as watchdogs for the Supreme Being and as checks against the excesses of human beings. They often represent instant justice and may be called on to vindicate the just. For example, *Ogun* is fierce, but not evil. He demands justice, fair play, and integrity. He is also protective of the poor and the dispossessed.

Relationship to the Supreme Being

The divinities are believed to share aspects of the divine nature and status of the Supreme Being. This implies that the divinities are not nebulous laws; they are specially brought into being to minister to the Supreme Being: Olodumare (Yoruba), Onyakopon (Akan, Fante), Mawu-Lisa (Ewe), and Chineke (Igbo). Divinities are of ethereal substance: They can permeate Heaven and Earth, the sacred and the profane. This is why the African divinities are perceived by devotees through the

senses and organically. As a result, artists can design the sculpture of some divinities.

The relationship between the divinities and the Supreme Being is patterned along the sociological order of the people. In many African societies—the Yoruba, Akans, Edo, Fon, and Ewe, among others—life follows a cultural pattern. The king or paramount chief is at the apex of the social pyramid, and below him are the common people. So God as the head is believed to have appointed the divinities as the executive of the Earthly theocratic society.

Because the divinities are brought forth by God, they owe their existence to Him because they have no absolute existence of their own. Their authority is therefore derived and delegated. Divinities are believed to be the ambassadors of the Supreme Being. They could also be referred to as Heads of Departments. Each has its own definite portfolios in the Supreme Beings’ monarchical government. They exercise great authority in the governing and operation of the world. They are also intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings, especially with reference to their particular function.

Orisa-nla is the arch-divinity among the Yoruba. He is believed to have been saddled with the responsibility of the creation of the solid Earth and the molding of human frames. He is referred to as *orisa mori-mori* (moulder of heads). To the Ewe of Volta Region of Ghana and Togo as well as Fon people of Benin Republic Mawu-Lisa is the arch-divinity. The arch-divinity of the Igbo-land is Ala, also called Ani. As the great mother goddess, she is the spirit of fertility and queen of the underworld. Sango is in charge of thunder, and Ogun is responsible for all activities connected with iron, warfare, and hunting. Orunmila is God’s deputy in matters of wisdom and knowledge. He is always consulted in matters of confusion or uncertainty. This same divinity is called *Fa* by the Ewe and Fon people of Dahomey. To them, *Fa* is the speech of Mawu in all matters affecting human destiny.

Some names represent the natural phenomena that are believed to be the manifestations of the Supreme Being. For example, among the Yoruba, *Jakuta* (thunder divinity) called *Hevie* by the Fon of Dahomey is an expression of the wrath of God, whereas among the Igbo *Ojukwu* the god of small pox represents the anger of God. *Oya* manifests in

strong winds, tornadoes, and lightning. She is also the initiator of feminine leadership.

Categories of Divinities

In some societies, especially those of the Yoruba and Bini where the gods are hierarchically arraigned in pantheon, there are basically three main classes of divinities. These are the primordial divinities, divinities associated with natural phenomena, and the deified ancestors.

Primordial divinities are divinities of Heaven who had been with God from the creation and participated in the work of creation. Among the Yoruba, Obatala or Orisa-nla is said to have come to the Earth to assist Olodumare in the creation of the Earth. Ogun helped in the construction of roads to Ife. Esu, also known as Elegbara, was forced down to the Earth to take over the responsibility of a midwife between evil and good forces. Osun was sent to represent the power and the sacredness of womanhood. When they got to Earth, they became energy and forces through which the will of Olodumare for humankind came into reality.

Other divinities came into being as a result of the personification of natural features. These include spirits associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, brooks, lakes, trees, and thick (dense) forests. Such places may be set apart as sacred. Mountain divinity among the Yoruba is Orisa-oke (the divinity of the mountains). Most of the river divinities in West Africa are principally feminine. Among the Yoruba, some of the river divinities are Osun, Yemoja, and Oya. Among the Edo people, Olokun, a masculine divinity, is the lord of the seas. Tano, a prominent divinity of Asante pantheon, is associated with River Tano. Bosompo is connected with the sea while Bosomtwe is linked with a lake.

Finally, there are deified personalities. Among Africans since the times of the ancient people of Kemet, some individuals who had lived on Earth, through the process of transition became divinities. The first human to be deified was Imhotep, the builder of the first pyramid. Indeed, the great philosopher of the 18th dynasty, Amenhotep, son of Hapu, was also deified. These individuals are deified because while they were alive they

manifested some measures of prowess in war, practice of medicine, or styles of rulership.

Some deified personalities include Oduduwa, who is regarded as the ancestor of the Yoruba. He is believed to have lived and ruled in Ilé-Ifè, the capital city of the Yoruba. Sango was the fourth Alaafin (king of Oyo). Sango is now believed to be in Heaven, from where he controls the thunder and lightning. In Dahomey, Gu, the god of iron and war, was a smith. He is now the patron of blacksmith. Among the Igbo, the thunder divinity is amadioha, and among the Edo, he is Jakuta. Among the Nupe, he is *soko-egba*, "the one who throws god's axe." Okomfo Anokye, the great priest of Asanteman, may be included in this pantheon.

Deji Ayegboyin and Charles Jegede

See also Orisha; Shango

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DOGON

The Dogon are a modern-day African people who live at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, alongside the cliffs of the Bandiagara escarpment, south of the Sahara desert, near Timbuktu, and not far distant from the Niger River in Mali, West Africa. Their group numbers approximately 100,000 members who reside in some 700 villages. Although the geographical origin of the Dogon people is not certain, by their own account they moved to their current location during the 14th or 15th century from a prior home along the Niger River



Binu is a totemic practice that has complex associations with the Dogon's sacred places used for ancestor worship, spirit communication and agricultural sacrifices.

Source: Martin Gray/Getty Images.

perhaps as a way of avoiding conversion to Islam. The Dogon are an agricultural people known for their artwork—especially carved wooden gate locks, wooden granary doors, and wooden masks.

The religious beliefs of the Dogon were first documented in studies conducted during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s by French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen. These studies resulted in a number of primary works, including a diary of Griaule's religious instruction by a Dogon priest titled *Dieu D'eau* or *Conversations With Ogotemmelé*, and a finished anthropological report on the Dogon religion called *Le Renard Pale* or *The Pale Fox*. There are no native written Dogon texts to use as reference for the religion because the Dogon rely on oral transmission rather than writing. This entry looks at the religious beliefs and

practice of the Dogon primarily through the works of Griaule and Dieterlen.

Organization and Ritual

According to Griaule and Dieterlen, there are three primary Dogon cults. The first is devoted to a supreme god named *Amma*, who is deemed to have created the universe. The second is primarily concerned with the first living celestial beings created by Amma, called the *Nommo*. The third is devoted to the eight Dogon ancestors from whom the members of the four Dogon groups are thought to be descended. Regardless of cult, all Dogon members commonly acknowledge first Amma, then the Nommo, then the revered ancestors. Religious beliefs and practices similar to those of the Dogon are also observed by neighboring tribes,



Dogon ancestral couple from the country of Mali. These ancestral figures are displayed during celebrations and ceremonies for the deceased.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

including the Bozo and the Bambara. Griaule and Dieterlen's studies are also reflective of minor opinions that were drawn from elders of these related groups.

The Dogon religion expresses itself outwardly through ritual observances that are seemingly quite ancient and that bear strong resemblance to classic religious traditions found in ancient Egypt, in Judaism, and in Buddhism. For example, the Dogon traditionally circumcise their young, wear skull caps and prayer shawls, and observe a Jubilee Year. Likewise, the Dogon observe cultural traditions that are distinctly reminiscent of ancient Egypt, including the practice of establishing districts and villages in pairs, one called *Upper* and the other called *Lower*. Griaule's Dogon cosmology is also couched in keywords whose pronunciations and meanings bear a strong resemblance to words and meanings found in the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic language. For example, the name of an important Dogon festival, called the *sigui*, may relate to the ancient Egyptian word *skhai*, meaning "to celebrate a festival." The Dogon myths are also illustrated with cosmological drawings that often take shapes that are similar to written Egyptian glyphs.

The religious rituals of the Dogon are one public expression of a much more complex underlying cosmological tradition that, according to Griaule and Dieterlen, pervades all aspects of Dogon life. Griaule perceives cosmological symbolism in each of the daily acts of Dogon life—for example, the method that the Dogon use when weaving a cloth or when plowing a field, the number of threads that hang from a fiber skirt, the number of years between ritual observances, or even the way that sound reverberates as it leaves the mouth of a Dogon person. These symbolic aspects of daily life support and reinforce what Griaule and Dieterlen see as an orally transmitted cosmological tradition founded on a kind of societal system of mnemonics.

The Granary

It is important to note that Griaule and Dieterlen's view of an esoteric Dogon cosmology based on an aligned structure called a *granary* and centered on the stars of Sirius has been specifically disputed by Belgian anthropologist Walter Van Beek and others, who studied the Dogon people several decades after

Griaule and reported finding no evidence of this secret cosmology. However, the system of cosmological structures and symbols documented by Griaule runs precisely parallel to a similar system of esoteric symbolism found in Buddhism, which has been exhaustively documented by Australian scholar Adrian Snodgrass. The Buddhist system is based on the matching architectural form of an aligned ritual structure called the *stupa* and so could be legitimately reflective of a closely held secret Dogon tradition such as the one described by Griaule.

Griaule's view is that the Dogon cosmological tradition begins with a world system or plan that is expressed symbolically in the architectural form of an aligned ritual structure called a *granary*. The classic form of the granary, as described by Griaule, is roughly pyramidal and includes a round base and a square, flat roof with an inscribed circle, four flat sides, and a 10-step staircase up the center of each side. Like the base plan of the Buddhist stupa, the plan of the granary begins with a circle divided into four equal parts by two intersecting lines (oriented north–south and east–west, respectively) that correspond to the four cardinal points of the Earth. These are said to symbolize the axis mundi. In the finished granary, these lines are supplanted by partitions, along with a depression or small cup, which is placed in the ground at their point of intersection at the center of the original circle. For the Dogon, the four segments of the circle symbolize the primordial elements of water, fire, wind, and Earth.

As Snodgrass also asserts with regard to the Buddhist stupa, Griaule states that the round base of the structure (which, along with its central cup, takes the same shape as the Egyptian sun glyph) symbolizes the sun, much as the smaller circle within the square roof symbolizes the moon. The mythological implication is that the granary structure, which falls between the sun and the moon, is meant to symbolize the Earth. The entire structure is conceptualized as a woman lying on her back, and so gives the overall impression of an impregnated womb. Griaule says that the Dogon associate the four faces of the granary with four important star groups whose risings govern the Dogon agricultural cycle. The Dogon associate the rise and tread of each of the 10 steps in the four staircases with different families and orders of the plant and animal kingdoms. The interior structure of the granary

defines eight separate chambers—four on the ground level and four on an upper level—one for each of the eight grains of Dogon agriculture. In accordance with a classic Egyptian pyramid, access to the granary is through a small doorway that is located two thirds of the way up its north side.

Insiders and Outsiders

Like many of the ancient religions it resembles, the Dogon religion as described by Griaule is an esoteric tradition characterized by both public and private elements. Consequently, the myths of Dogon cosmology exist in two primary forms—first, as public, almost fairytale-like myths known to most Dogon members; and, second, as a private, much more detailed body of myths, known primarily to the Dogon priests and trusted initiates of the Dogon religion. According to Griaule and Dieterlen, the purpose of the public or exoteric myths is to establish in general terms the major themes and symbols of the deeper mythological storyline. The private esoteric myths expand on the public myths and provide important clarifying details about the cosmology that are reserved for initiates and carefully shielded from public view.

Access to the deep knowledge of the Dogon tradition is theoretically open to any member of the group. In fact, according to Griaule, the Dogon priests are actually required to answer any orderly question truthfully—one whose content is appropriate to the initiated status of the person who asks it. However, if a person asks a question that is deemed to be out of order, the priest is required to remain silent or even to lie, if necessary, to protect the inner secrets of the religion. This feature of the religion, as reported by Griaule, accords with other esoteric traditions, such as that of the Maori of New Zealand, which are based on cosmological symbols that are similar to the Dogon. According to Genevieve Calame-Griaule, the daughter of Marcel Griaule and author of the *Dictionnaire Dogon*, the word *Dogon* means “to complete the words” and “to remain silent”—the two primary obligations incumbent on an initiate in the Dogon religion.

Anthropologist Marcel Griaule was prone to ask persistent and penetrating questions. As his knowledge of the Dogon tradition grew, those

questions began to intrude more and more on material that is traditionally reserved for initiates of the Dogon religion. This prompted an elder Dogon priest or *Hogon* named *Ogotemmeli* to seek permission from a Dogon council to instruct Griaule in the inner secrets of the Dogon religion. The diary, of the first 33 days of this instruction, is recorded in Griaule’s *Dieu D’eau* or *Conversations With Ogotemmeli*.

Creation Myths

Dogon cosmology, which in Griaule’s view forms the foundation of the Dogon religion, describes how Amma created the universe and matter and how she or he initiated the processes of biological reproduction on the Earth. The cosmology is couched in many of the archetypal themes and symbols of classic ancient mythology—the cosmogonic eggs, spiraling coils, clay pots, horned animals, and serpents that are commonly found in the myths of many of the most ancient cultures. Like these ancient cultures, the Dogon myths describe creation from water and define the four primordial elements of water, fire, wind, and Earth.

The Dogon creation myth begins with a primordial body called *Amma’s Egg*, a conelike structure that is said to have housed all of the potential seeds or signs of the future universe. According to the Dogon priests, some undefined impulse caused this egg to open, releasing a silent whirlwind that spun and scattered the seeds of matter in all directions and to all corners of the universe. The stars, the sun, and the planets were thrown out like pellets of clay. The Dogon conceive of the sun as a clay pot that has been raised to a high heat.

Amma’s efforts to create matter were founded on a primary component of matter called the *po*, from which all things are made. According to Dogon myth, all matter is formed by the continuous addition of like elements beginning with the *po*. One purpose of the esoteric Dogon myths, as outlined by Griaule, is to define the descending components of matter as they were created by *Amma*.

Amma’s work to create life began with a failed attempt at intercourse with the Earth, equated by the Dogon with incest or masturbation. This

abortive attempt created only a single being—the jackal, which became a Dogon symbol of the concept of disorder and of the difficulties of Amma. Later, Amma overcame the difficulty and was successful in fertilizing the Earth. The products of this successful conception were the twin Nummo.

Laird Scranton

See also Bamana; Cosmology

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DOGON RELIGION AND SCIENCE

What is known of indigenous Dogon scientific knowledge is based primarily on the studies of French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, which were conducted from 1931 until the death of Marcel Griaule in 1956. Griaule and Dieterlen described the

Dogon as careful observers of the material world around them and as a thoughtful people who have derived sophisticated explanations for the many manifestations of nature that are in evidence in their daily life. The Dogon have amassed a considerable body of correct knowledge pertaining to anatomy and human physiology, and to the relationships between and interactions among the various organs of the body. Commensurate with this knowledge, and supported by their significant skill with plants and herbs, they have also evolved an effective native pharmacology. This entry looks at that knowledge and its interconnection with Dogon religious belief.

Agriculture

The Dogon are farmers who demonstrate a facile understanding of agriculture, which is a key life skill that forms the foundation of their economy. This knowledge is evidenced in their many different methods of soil cultivation and in their careful plantings, many of which are commonly found in the difficult rocky settings dictated by their location along the steep cliffs of the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali. To bring these agriculture plots closer to the limited water supplies afforded by their desert environment, the Dogon commonly build man-made terraces supported by low stone walls. They have learned to cultivate a variety of grains, such as millet, sorghum, and rice, and also to grow onions, tomatoes, red peppers, and tobacco.

Like many African cultures, the Dogon are also known to be keen observers of the sky. They have named and tracked the movements of many of the stars, planets, and other bodies of the heavens, and they time their annual plantings and harvestings to the rising and setting of key star groups. Much of these astronomical events regulate the Dogon agricultural cycle. In fact, the agricultural cycle can be seen to govern the Dogon calendar, which begins midway through October, with the millet harvest.

The Dogon have evolved a highly developed arboriculture by which they cultivate a variety of trees and shrubberies. These provide much of the food they eat and many of the building materials that

have become essential for Dogon life. In addition, the Dogon have also developed a detailed system of zoology, with careful categorization of many of the families and orders of plants and animals with which the Dogon come into contact. This facility with zoology is consonant with their skill as sophisticated herders. The Dogon raise a variety of domesticated animals, including poultry, goats, sheep, and cattle, which are used, in part, for food and, in part, for sacrificial purposes.

The Dogon have also attained a broad understanding of other scientific fields such as geology and metallurgy. They have acquired a fine reputation as skilled metalworkers who produce many of the iron tools required to support their own agriculture. They are also accomplished wood carvers and artisans, whose masks, carved granary doors, and wooden gate locks have come to be coveted as precious objects of art.

Cosmology

Beyond all of these overt sciences and skills that are evident in everyday Dogon society, there is also a body of esoteric knowledge that bears a strong resemblance to science. This body of knowledge is contained in the myths of Dogon cosmology, as documented by Griaule and Dieterlen. This cosmology, which was characterized by Griaule as a closely held secret tradition, has been disputed by later researchers, including Belgian anthropologist Walter Van Beek, due to the inability of these researchers to confirm Griaule's findings in later studies. However, support for the likely coherence of Griaule's cosmology can be found in its many parallels to a distinctly similar esoteric cosmological system found in Buddhism.

Griaule's cosmology begins with a ritual structure called a *granary*, whose plan is said to evoke a complex system of cosmological symbols. This plan and its associated symbolism are a close match for the plan and symbolism of the Buddhist *stupa*—a ritual shrine found commonly across India and Asia. On the basis of these resemblances, Griaule's Dogon cosmology could reasonably be seen as reflective of a legitimate cosmological form.

The Granary Symbol

Likely mathematical symbolism is reflected in the plan and dimensions of the Dogon granary as reported in Griaule's cosmology. The classic plan of the granary resembles a wicker basket turned open side down. It features a round base 10 cubits in diameter that rises to a flat, square roof measuring 8 cubits per side. It features four flat sides oriented to the cardinal points of north, south, east, and west, as well as four 10-step staircases, one up the center of each side. The Dogon priests state that the structure provides examples of several key geometric shapes. It can also be shown that the circumference of the base of the granary (64 cubits, assuming a rounded value of 3.2 for Pi) equals the area of the square roof (64 square cubits).

Confirmation of the likely geometric symbolism of the Dogon granary structure is provided by the defined stages of construction of the stupa as outlined in Australian scholar Adrian Snodgrass' *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. These stages are predicated on an initiate's familiarity with rudimentary skills of geometry, including the ability to measure and plot a circle and bisect a line using two drawn arcs.

The architectural form of the base plan of the stupa as described by Snodgrass evokes an effective sun dial, complete with a central gnomon, which implies knowledge of the concept of time and provides the ability to track the length of a day. This same structural form—in conjunction with an oriented east–west line whose position moves daily relative to the position of the gnomon and in relation to the time of year—also provides an initiate with a reliable tool to track and measure apparent movements of the sun in relation to the Earth, along with an effective way to determine the precise days on which the solstices and equinoxes occur. With these tools in hand, an initiate would be capable of calculating the correct length of a year, the length of a month, and to establish the working concept of a season.

The plan of the granary also presupposes a familiarity on the part of a Dogon initiate with the concept of a unit of measure (in this case, a *cubit*) and of basic geographic orientation because the correct construction of the granary depends on the ability of an initiate to locate the four cardinal directions. Additional stellar symbolism that the Dogon assign to each of the four faces of the granary presumes a

basic knowledge of astronomy and the ability to track the risings and settings of familiar star groups. Likewise, the use of these star groups to control the agricultural cycle implies the establishment of at least a crude agricultural calendar tied to the planting and harvesting cycles.

Knowledge of the Stars and the Universe

One major curiosity of Griaule's cosmology lies with its suggestion of Dogon knowledge of subtle details of the star system of Sirius, beyond what might be reasonably observed with the naked eye. These details include an understanding that Sirius is a binary star system composed of a large, bright, sunlike star (Sirius A) and a much smaller, darker, dense, and heavy dwarf star (Sirius B). Griaule also reported that the Dogon are aware of the 50-year period of orbit of Sirius B around Sirius A—a value that the Dogon assign as the interval between ritual observances of an important festival called a *Sigui*. These attributes of the Sirius star system were confirmed by the modern scientific community in 1915—almost 40 years before they were reported by Griaule in connection with the Dogon. Based on that fact, Carl Sagan proposed that the Dogon most likely learned these astronomical facts from some modern visitor and later chose to incorporate them into the body of myth they reported to Griaule. Germaine Dieterlen disagreed with Sagan's interpretation and defended the indigenous nature of the Sirius information by producing a 400-year-old artifact that carried a depiction of the dual star system.

There are other speculative aspects of Dogon cosmology that give the impression of a deeper relationship between Dogon myth and actual science. Griaule says that the Dogon myths describe how a Dogon god named *Amma* created the universe and matter. The Dogon conceive of the unformed universe as a kind of primordial ball that contained all of the potential seeds or signs of the future universe. This ball is referred to as *Amma's egg*, and Dogon artistic renderings of it take the same cone-like shape as the event horizon of a black hole in science. Stephen Hawking describes a black hole as the astronomical body that most closely resembles what the unformed universe may have looked like. Likewise, Dogon

descriptions of the formation of the universe from this egg are distinctly reminiscent of the Big Bang Theory in science. According to Dogon myth, some undefined impulse caused this ball to open, releasing a whirlwind that spun and scattered its contents to all corners of the universe, ultimately forming all of the galaxies of stars and planets.

Knowledge of Matter

Dogon descriptions of the mythological structure of matter are similarly reminiscent of science. They begin with a primary unit of matter called the *po*, which the Dogon define in terms similar to an atom. The Dogon priests say that all matter is created by the continuous addition of like elements beginning with the *po*. Likewise, the *po* is defined as comprising smaller subcomponents called *sene seeds*, whose mythological descriptions sound much like the protons, neutrons, and electrons of modern science. According to Dogon belief, these *sene seeds* combine at the center of the *po* and then surround it by crossing in all directions to form a nest. A Dogon cosmological drawing of this nest takes a shape that is markedly similar to one of the typical electron orbital paths inscribed by an electron as it circles the nucleus of an atom.

Like modern quantum theory, the Dogon myths tell of the existence of more than 200 primordial particles—described as seeds or signs—that are said to exist as paired opposites. Like modern string theory, or torsion theory, these particles are said to be the product of the vibrations of primordial threads. According to Dogon myth, each thread passes through a series of seven vibrations inside a tiny egg. These vibrations are characterized as seven rays of a star of increasing length. The Dogon myths say that this last ray grows long enough to pierce the egg, an event that constitutes the end of the original egg and the initiation of a new egg. Together these eggs in series are said to form membranes, which the Dogon compare to the thin covering that surrounds the brain.

The Dogon alternately characterize these seven rays by the spiral that can be drawn to inscribe their endpoints. This spiral may be the correlate to a tiny vortex that is postulated to exist in modern torsion theory.

The Dogon myths also define a second thread of biological symbolism describing the formation of life from a fertilized egg, which can be seen to run parallel to actual biological science. The myths describe the hardening of an unfertilized egg that occurs at the moment of fertilization by a sperm and include descriptions of structures that resemble chromosomes and spindles and that seem to accurately describe key events that pertain to the division of a cell through the processes of meiosis and mitosis.

Laird Scranton

See also Agricultural Rites; Cosmology; Creation

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DREAMS

Dreams are one of the many ways communication occurs between humans and spirits, so many Africans look to dreams for guidance in everyday affairs. Direct appearances of ancestors in dreams reflect their power and wisdom. Those with ancestors of less wisdom or spiritual power receive guidance in more general symbolic dreams. There are individuals who specialize in interpreting such dreams, although they may not hold formal titles or be a priest or priestess. Much information on dreams exists as part of the rich oral tradition of Africa, but in parts of Muslim Africa, there are written sources on dreams.

Dreams are not just experienced by humans; deities dream as well. In the creation story of the

San, the deity Kaggen dreams, and what is dreamt appears as creation. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the first human, Musikavanhu, dreams about birds and animals; when he awakens, they are reality.

In ancient Egypt, dreams were held to communicate the will of the gods and clues to future events. The Chester Beatty Papyrus III, dating to 1300 BC or perhaps even earlier, describes several dreams and their interpretations. In addition, a scene on the stela in front of the Great Sphinx depict king Thutmose IV, who reigned from 1400–1390 BC, having a dream that legitimized his claim to the throne as does another stela erected at the Temple to Amen at Napata by Kushite pharaoh Tanutamani who reigned from 664–656. Beginning in 747 BC, individuals would sleep in temples so information would be revealed to them in dreams, which would then be interpreted by priests of the temple.

The Batonga of Zambia also consider dreams important and place emphasis on shifts of feeling, space, and time within the dream and opposites. To dream something pleasant and then a friend interrupts, but then goes away, and the dream continues indicates that the “friend” in the dream means to cheat you in some way. A pleasant dream with no change in feeling indicates misfortune. To dream inside of a dream is considered a teaching dream and is rare. It means information will be revealed that must be kept secret. Meanings given to common dream symbols include snakes as ancestral spirits, the color red as death, white as lucky, and the moon meaning the dream will come true and relates to money. Interestingly, among the ancient Egyptians, a dream about drinking warm beer was an omen that the person would undergo something bad. Among the Batonga, to dream of drinking beer is symbolic of witchcraft.

Not all cultures have elaborate dealings with dreams, but still regard them with importance. Among the Akamba, dreams are divided into two categories: good and bad. If the dream is bad, a smoldering ember is placed in a small half gourd filled with water that is accompanied by a prayer to not let the dream manifest. If the dream is good, the half gourd is filled with milk and water and accompanied by a request to the ancestors to send the good things in the dream as the liquid is poured on the ground.

According to Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa, to say “I dreamt” means “I flew” because there is something in the human that travels through time and can experience events before the physical body does. Both the Batonga and Zulu agree that if something is dreamed, it must be enacted. Once it is acted, the creative force of the soul that makes dreams recognizes this and brings you more dreams to guide you and make life more interesting. Africans spend a great deal of energy acting out dreams, which sometimes can have disastrous consequences, but Mutwa believes it is important to pay attention to them—those caused by indigestion aside—because they are a form of communication no matter how silly they may seem. One way to tell if a dream carries a significant message is that it is in brilliant color, occurs just before dawn, or recurs two or three times during the night. Also, rubbing the back of the head on awakening can help with dream recollection or effacing, as in the case of nightmares.

Denise Martin

See also Magic; Mediums

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DRUM, THE

The drum is the musical instrument most commonly associated with Africa. Drums comprise the membranophone family of musical instruments. Membranophones produce their sound by the vibration of a stretched membrane or skin. Drums can be traced to ancient Egyptian civilization and

were often depicted in Mdw Nṯr (hieroglyphics). Traditional African drums are typically made of wood, rope, twine, and a variety of animal skins (i.e., goat, cow, calf, and antelope). The perishable nature of the materials used to construct drums during antiquity inhibited their survival. The various shapes of African drums reflect their perspective categories: These include cylindrical and conical drums, barrels, hourglasses, waisted drums, goblet and footed drums, long drums, frame drums, friction drums, and kettledrums.

Cylindrical drums are straight sided, and conical drums have sloping sides. Both types of drums vary in size and proportion and can be either single or double headed. The conga and Ashiko drums are examples of cylindrical and conical drums. Barrel, hourglass, and waisted drums are variations of the cylindrical drum and can also be either single or double headed. The ends of these drums are usually the same size. The Djun-Djun (Jun-Jun) Guinea, West Africa, and the Donno (Doh-No) Ghana, West Africa, are popular examples of this drum. Goblet and footed drums are single-headed drums, which are made in a variety of sizes. Footed drums are distinct in that they usually have legs/feet that are carved from the wooden body of the drum. The Djembe drum (Jim-Bay) Guinea, West Africa, is a popular example of the Goblet drum family.

Long drums are all drums that are elongated. These drums are typically single headed and are of varying lengths of a carved-out tree trunk. Long drums also can be found in a variety of shapes and decoration. Frame drums are generally one or two animal skins stretched over a square or circular frame. The frame is usually shallow and contributes little to the resonance of the drum. The tambourine is a popular example of the frame drum. Friction drums are made in a variety of shapes and sizes. These drums produce sound by the vibration of the animal skin by the rubbing of one's fingers, a cloth, a cord, or a stick that pierces the animal skin of the drum. Kettledrums are made in a variety of sizes and are often played in pairs. These drums typically consist of a single animal skin stretched over a vessel or pot-shaped body.

African drums are generally played with the hands or a combination of the hands and a striker, such as drumsticks, mallets, or leather straps. Some African drums are played with the feet or a



Court drummers of the Timi of Ede. By varying the tension of the drum head, the drummers can alter the pitch of the beats to reproduce the tonal structure of spoken Yoruba in praises for the ruler or his guests. Yoruba. Ede, Southwestern Nigeria.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

combination of the hands and feet. Music is an integral part of every aspect of life among African people. Africans employ music in their everyday lives whether at work, play, or worship. In most instances where one finds African music, the drum is present. The role of the drum is evident because it is played at various spiritual ceremonies such as baby naming ceremonies, rites of passage, weddings, enstoolments, and funerals. Furthermore, the drum is prevalent in spiritual ceremonies that are designed to invoke the spirit of the ancestors, appease or appeal to the divinities, or worship god.

The combination of drumming, singing, and dancing is the major means by which many

African cultures worship or interact with the divine. These practices are prevalent throughout African culture. The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana, West Africa, provide two such examples. In the Yoruba Bembe and Akan Akom (spiritual ceremonies), drummers', singers', and dancers' collective invoke the spirit of the ancestors, various deities, or the creator through music, song, and dance. The use of the drum is also found in African religious ceremonies, which have persisted in the African Diaspora. The preceding includes the Rada and Petro drums, which are essential to the Vodou (Fon) spiritual system found in Haiti, the Santeria (Yoruba) and Palo (Congolese) spiritual systems

found in Cuba, and various denominations of Christianity practiced by American-born Africans in the United States.

Kefentse K. Chike

See also Ceremonies; Palo; Rada; Santeria; Vodou in Haiti

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DUALA

The Duala are a people from Cameroon who live along the coast of the country. They are related to the Sawa people and share customs and traditions with these coastal people as well. Although they have had an extensive contact with the European people, who came as slavers, missionaries, merchants, and soldiers, they have retained the memory of many of their ancient traditions. One can identify among the Duala, who have given their name to the largest city in the region, Douala, traits and characteristics that have influenced the entire nation of Cameroon. Bamboko, Bakweri, Isuwu, Malimba, Bakole, Wovea, and Mungo people are integrated into the Duala ethnicity, sharing common ancestors, kinship patterns, and language, although they have their own distinct varieties of the language. All of these people understand the Duala language. This entry looks at their history, culture, and religious practice.

History

The founder of the Duala people was a man named Mbedi who originated in the Bakota region of Gabon and the Republic of the Congo. By all accounts, he was very industrious, and his

sons, Ewale and Dibango, followed their father's adventurous nature and soon moved their families to a place called Pitti on the Dibamba River. However, the brothers soon argued over leadership and decided that each should go his own way. Accordingly, Dibango and his families moved to the southeast near the Sanaga River. Some headed upstream with Dibango, whereas others moved downstream with a relative named Elimbe. Ewale took his families near the mouth of the Dibabma River and northwest to the east bank of the Wouri River estuary. The people who followed Ewale became the Duala, and those who followed Dibango became known as the Malimba. Hence, they are all related peoples.

When the Portuguese traders reached the Wouri estuary in 1472, they met the Duala people whom they referred to as Ambos or Ambozi. They were a fishing and hunting people who had small farms in the interior. The Duala traders were rich with ivory, kola nuts, and peppers. The Portuguese provided guns, mirrors, shoes, and textiles.

After decades of trading with the Portuguese, the Duala observed an increasing demand that people be provided to the traders. This was the beginning of the slave trade along the coast. The Portuguese used Africans to grow foodstuffs on the islands of Sao Tome, Fernando Po, Annonbon, and Principe. Because chattel slavery was not a part of the Duala custom, they found the European customs contrary to their own moral code. In effect, among the Duala, people who had been held in servitude could only be sent between other Duala people. They were not to be traded to outsiders. Tremendous rifts occurred between the Duala and the Europeans over the slave trade.

One of the most destructive periods in Duala history occurred as a result of the European propping up of the puppet leader, Ndumb'a Lobe, who called himself King Bell. He was frequently beguiled with gifts and titles by the Europeans. Their fake adulation of King Bell caused him to cede land to the Europeans and to grant Europeans monopolies in certain trade objects. It was this condition that caused the 1814 revolt of Ngando Mpondo, better known as King Akwa, and his allies, King Ekwalla of the Deido and Kum'a Mbape of the Bonaberi.

Culture

Duala recognized three levels in their traditional society: Wonja, Wajili, and Wakomi. These groups corresponded to the following roles, respectively: land owners, artisans, and servants. Each class had its responsibility within Duala society and could be considered fully integrated into the Duala culture on the basis of their participation in the council of Elders or the societies of secrets that decide the most important collective issues.

Years of involvement with Europe have wiped out many of the values of the Duala people. For example, the Duala used to have a form of drum language for communication over long distances. The German occupiers who felt that the “secret” messages of the drummers created problems for their administration of the territory prohibited the use of the drums in communication.

Among the Duala, kinship may be from the mother or father, but inheritance is patrilineal. The father’s property is divided among his male heirs upon his death. Nevertheless, there were other aspects of the Duala society that survived colonization. For example, intermarriage between the different strata of society has continued, as well as polygamy among some rural Duala people.

Religious Practice

The Duala, like other African people, maintain a strong connection with their ancestors. They hold in esteem the founding ancestral spirits of the Duala people. They also believe that their ancestral spirits live in the ocean. In fact, it is believed that water spirits, *Miengu*, inhabit the sea and serve as mediators between humans and the divine. Indeed, the entire natural environment is full of spirits, including some that are harmful who live in the forest and the sea. Prayers, sacrifices, and offerings to the *Miengu* before fishing or traveling by water are not uncommon. Duala people also call on the *Miengu* for healing.

Annual traditional festivals are held to allow the people to remain connected or to reconnect with their ancestral beliefs and traditions. The greatest example of the maintenance of Duala culture and religion may be seen in the respect the people still have for the Ngondo Festival held in December. The Ndongo Festival is the time when

the ancestral rites are performed and the people demonstrate their piety through pirogue races, pageants, musical contests, and traditional wrestling performances. It was first held in 1949. Sacrifices and offerings are prepared for the *Miengu* by initiates one night. The next day, the gifts are effectively delivered to the spirits during a public ceremony on a beach, not far from Douala. One initiate will then dive under the water and return, after a rather prolonged stay under the water, with messages from the *Miengu* to the living regarding the year to come.

Other forms of the culture have evolved into modern expressions such as the music of Manu Dibango and others. Based on the traditional marriage of the guitar with object percussion and combining Makossa, a central African form of music, with Soul and Jazz, the popular entertainer and composer created “Soul Makossa,” a music with a strong flavor of traditional rhythms. One sees such convergence in the dance creation of Salle John, who took the Abele dances to another level of sophistication and execution for weddings and festive occasions.

Ama Mazama

See also Diola; Dioula

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DWAT

In ancient Egypt, it was believed that the *dwat* was the abode of light where the gods dwelled. The Egyptians had a consistent belief in life after death so much so that their inscriptions would

often end with "Life Forever." The idea of the *dwat* as a dwelling place for the deceased must have reached far back into ancient Egyptian antiquity. By the time of the New Kingdom, it was such an accepted part of the African idea that it was incorporated into the funerary rituals of the most important people.

The idea of life after death was complex, however. Some people thought that the deceased went to the stars in the sky, others believed that the deceased sat on tree branches and held communication with the birds, and still others thought that the deceased remained on the Earth where his bones were laid to rest.

However, many of the priests taught that the deceased was supposed to live in the *dwat*, a kingdom of light, the dwelling place of the deities, traveling around with the happy dead. To the Egyptians the deceased traveled the way of the glorified or justified dead only in the *dwat*. It is thought that the commoners also believed that the deceased went to the fields of *Earu*, where he could plough and reap the harvest. Obviously, it was not clear where the deceased went, and so the Egyptians had various conclusions about the *dwat* over their vast philosophical and religious history.

According to the ancient Egyptians, the human personality was connected after death somewhere in the *dwat*. This activity was not fully explained by the priests, but the general idea was that the person was not an individual, but rather an entity that consisted of three parts: the body, the soul, and the *ka*, which is sometimes called the double or the image. It is most important in the construction of the human because it is an independent spirit living within a person, one's double. Actually, the *ka* provides one with protection, health, and happiness, in the sense that it is the faithful companion of the person. Every person who is born also has a *ka*, a double. When the deity is shown holding a child, the *ka* is also being held. Thus, in the *dwat*, it appears that the deity looked after the deceased by taking charge of his *ka*.

Now when it comes to death, the *ka* was supposed to enter the *dwat* as the part of the human that continued living. One of the things the living had to do for the deceased is to preserve the body because without the body there could not be a *ka*. In fact, the *ka* could take possession of the body whenever it pleased if the body was intact. In most

instances, a statue of the person was close by the corpse in case the *ka* wanted to find the features of the person that may have been lost during life on Earth.

Thus, when a person died, the kept body was mummified, a tomb was built, and the corpse was protected with words, paintings, and artifacts that reflected the person's life. During the journey in the *dwat*, the deceased person's *ka* could remember and reflect on all the achievements of life. Entering the *dwat* brought both trepidation and joyous anticipation because the person wanted to ensure that the journey through the *dwat* would be one of ease and not one complicated by obstacles. The best way to ensure this easy transition was to work to make the good outweigh the bad in one's life.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Afterlife; Underworld

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DYOW INITIATIONS

All expressions of African religion rely on initiation. The dyow initiation of the Bamana (sometimes called *Bambara*) people follows a pattern found throughout the continent. Dyow initiation is a major part of being a Bamana. Situated presently in Mali, the Bamana are one of the most widespread ethnic groups in Western Africa. Two important regions, Kaarta and Segou, are formidable city-states that were established in the 17th century and have continued to influence the social, political, and economic direction of Mali and the rest of West Africa.

Bamana culture is quite complex. Although Islamic neighbors surround them, the tendency of the Bamana people is to advance their traditional culture over all others. Thus, the syncretism that one finds in the Bamana area is a result of the convergence of Islam with the traditions. Among

the traditions is the dyow. All religion of the Bamana is directly linked to the initiation societies.

A person who becomes an initiate moves through the six societies, much like six stages or levels, until he or she completes the ritualized form of maturity. One learns the essential elements of Bamana culture from the societies. These dyow societies teach the initiate moral and ethical behavior, social traditions, etiquette and common manners, festival days and their meaning, and the nature of divinity.

Nothing contributes to the quality of life in the Bamana community more than the dyow initiation because it centers the person in the middle of his own culture. By learning the importance of knowledge, sharing, and secrecy, the initiate can become a teacher of the system of life himself. Thus, this method of education might be called a challenge to all forms of ignorance, fear, and miseducation. Sorcery is challenged by the accurate and correct knowledge presented by the teachers of the initiate. One learns about the duality of humans, the necessity for unity and consistency in the production of food, and the realities of daily living, including the value of human relations.

The final dyow, called the kore, is the highest form of initiation. It is created to allow the initiate to regain that portion of his spirit that has been lost to the Supreme God in the process of reincarnation. One must work to reclaim all surplus spirit so as to make possible the continuation of one's path to maturity. If one is unable to regain your spirit for several lifetimes of reincarnation, then one's spirit will be completely absorbed by God and one will cease to exist.

Consider the fact that the goal of the dyow initiation is to teach the person how to take from God all the spirit that has accrued to God over the past reincarnations. The idea for the initiate is to live forever on the Earth. In this way, the initiates could be said to prepare for a life of eternal reincarnations.

The Bambara people are predominantly traditional, although there are some Muslims among them. Because of their strong cultural foundation, the Bamana also produce some of the most beautiful art in Africa. Their art forms are closely connected to their religious initiations.

The masks, sculptures, and headdresses display either stylized or realistic features and either weathered or encrusted patinas. Until quite recently, the function of Bambara pieces was considered secret; however, in the modern era, it is known that these art pieces are related to the different dyow societies.

For example, there are three major mask types. The first one is used by the N'tomo society and has a comb-like frame above the face. This mask is worn during festivals and is often covered with cowrie shells. A second type of mask is worn by the Komo society and has a spherical head, antelope horns on the top, and a huge mouth. Sometimes libations are poured over these Komo society masks. A third type of mask is usually seen with the Nama society and is represented by a carved bird's head. The fourth type of mask is used by the Kore society and is a stylized animal head used also in dancing.

In addition to these mask forms is the Chi-wara society headdress that is an abstract body of an antelope with two large horns. Usually the Bamana members of this society wear this mask as they dance in their fields during the time of sowing of the crops.

Bamana sculptures are primarily used during the annual ceremonies of the Guan society. During these ceremonies, members of the society bring up to seven ancestral figures from their sanctuaries, usually officiated by the elder members of the Guan society. They wash the sculptures, re-oil them, and then offer them sacrifices. This is the tradition of the Guan society, and in this tradition they reconnect to the ancestors.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Age Groups; Agricultural Rites; Rituals

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E

EARTH

Most traditional African societies regard the Earth as sacred. The implications of this philosophical idea are numerous. In fact, Africans take the Earth to be a major spirit—not just the carrier of all the other spirits, but a vital, living entity.

In the ancient narrative of creation told in the African Nile Valley, the Supreme Deity created Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture, and Nut and Geb, sky and Earth. Thus, Geb, the Earth, was at the very beginning. As a deity, Geb was considered one of the sacred elements of the universe. The Earth as a deity must be treated with respect and deference if the universe is to be held together.

One way to protect the human and natural order is to share in general devotion to the Earth as sacred. This is why the Earth is considered by some ethnic groups to be a female deity, a god mother, who is truly the mother god of all humanity. The Akan people of Ghana believe that the Earth is a deity, Asase Yaa, and is the goddess of fertility. One must walk softly on the Earth so as not to cause harm to its surface. The person who stomps and tramples on the Earth with no regard for its sacred nature brings shame on his or her community.

The Earth is responsible for giving birth to all humans who people it. No one can be born who does not come from the Earth. When a person dies, he or she also goes back to the Earth, who, as a deity, causes the rain to fall, the grass to grow, and the land to prosper. Everything that is seen by

humans is the result of a good relationship between the Earth and other deities.

The Akan accept the idea that the Earth is the principal source of life for all humans. Without the Earth to conceal, protect, and provide, the masses of people will not be happy. How can one find happiness in a society where there is disrespect for the ancestors? The Earth is the abode of the ancestors. It is here where one must find the convergence between the living and the Dead. According to Zulu oral traditions in southern Africa, a secret milk lake exists under the Earth to nourish the grass roots that make it possible for the cattle to have much to eat. Therefore, the Earth is the only source of food for animals and humans.

African people know that human flesh is also Earth and that it returns to Earth when a person dies. All living things are really the Earth, and the Earth is in all living things. Traditional African cultures often believe that anything that has connection with the Earth is sacred. Thus, fire that comes from wood that comes from the Earth is also sacred.

The Earth is not worshipped, and there are no priests or priestesses dedicated to an Earth temple in Africa. Yet humans are supposed to take care of the Earth, to ask her permission before digging to bury the Dead, and to seek her blessing that the child returns to Earth. Thursday is her day in the Akan language. Asase Yaa is the upholder of the truth, and one could swear on a part of the soil. Indeed, the idea of libation is where water or gin is poured on the Earth in the name of the

Supreme Deity, Mother God, and the ancestors find its strength and value in the fact that every act is one of beseeching blessings from the deities.

In conclusion, the Earth is viewed by Africans as a sacred space where humans express their joy at the living and reciprocal relationship between humans and the Earth as the Great Mother of life.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Blessing; Fertility

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EFIK

The Efik people live in the southeastern part of Nigeria and the western part of Cameroon. They number about 500,000. The traditional religion of the Efik people begins with the idea of Abasi, the Creator, as the Supreme Being. According to the oral traditions of the Efik, Abasi's wife, Atai, convinced him to permit two of their children, a female and a male, to settle on the Earth. They were told they could not reproduce because Abasi did not want humans to challenge his wisdom and authority. The children violated the rule that was set down by the Supreme Being.

Another narrative has Abasi creating two humans and then prohibiting them from living on the Earth. Atai persuaded him to allow them to live on the Earth. Abasi agreed on the condition that the settlers eat all of their meals with him. This meant that they could not grow or hunt for food. They were totally dependent on Abasi. They

were prohibited from procreation as well. Of course, the humans refused these conditions, and the woman planted food and the man joined her in the fields. Soon they had children, and then Abasi and his wife sent death to the Earth and abandoned humans to their own resources. Abasi became a distant creator God.

Because the Efik are a branch of the Ibibio people, they share some of the same values and traditions. The Efik migrated along the Cross River and founded the Calabar settlements of Creek Town and Duke Town in the 1600s, about the time the Europeans started coming in increasing numbers to the coasts. Actually, many of the Ibibio customs were soon distorted by the acceptance of the styles and cultures of the Europeans coming to the Nigerian coast and influencing the way the Efiks saw themselves. They became Christians, wore European clothes, and engaged in practices they discovered among the European traders, such as patriarchy.

Despite the presence of the European culture along the coast and its influence on the Efiks, many of them retained the powerful system of the Egbo society. As in other African communities, this society of secrets assisted the leaders in maintaining stability by insisting on initiation and education of the youth in the traditional manner. This meant that elders had to teach about the valor and honor of the ancestors, and the priests and kings had to insist on the Efik people recognizing the annual festivals in reverence to their ancestral spirits.

Thus, while undergoing transformation, the Efik still retain many aspects of the traditional religious expressions of the ancestors. One might say that the presence of European culture did not completely destroy the emphasis that the Efiks place on their past, although the 1884 signing of a treaty with the British by the Obong of Calabar precipitated much distortion in the religious unity of the people. Things did fall apart, to paraphrase the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe; when the Efik Monarch, the Obong, essentially delivered his people to the control of the British, he also unintentionally perhaps delivered them from many of their own traditions.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Kings

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EGUNGUN

The Egungun represents the collective spirits of the ancestors among the Yoruba in Nigeria. Like other African people, the Yoruba believe that when a person dies, he or she passes into the world of the ancestors. These ancestral spirits are within the Sasa stage of existence (i.e., the arena of the living, the unborn, and the ancestors) and can assist the community in carrying out its daily activities. Thus, according to the Yoruba, it is quite effective for the community to have the use and assistance of the ancestors in their ordinary lives. Because the living-dead, as they are sometimes called, watch over the society so long as they are remembered ritually, the Egungun must make an appearance on Earth to demonstrate this reality.

For the ancestors to be ritually remembered, they have to appear in the memory of the people. Once they are no longer in the memory, they cease to exist for the community. Therefore, the deceased might appear in a dream state or when someone is placed in a trance through music and dance. The ancestors can give advice, instructions, or rebukes to the living through the dreamer. The Egungun is the collective spirit of all the ancestors as they come to provide information about the conditions and situations confronting the society. One masked individual may be used to represent the entire spirit of the Egungun.

In this expression, the Egungun is a masked individual, always a man, who is an ancestor making a temporary reappearance among the living. Nothing of the person is visible with the Egungun mask. It covers the entire human body from the head to the feet, and there should be no visible elements of the individuality of the human wearing the mask. Should an unfortunate person wearing an Egungun mask reveal his identity, the person is supposed to be put to death because he would have shown himself to be an imposter of an ancestor.

Indeed, contact with an Egungun could also bring punishment and death, and the Egungun is always accompanied by those who have whips to drive onlookers away from the Egungun. In the past, if the garment of an Egungun touched a man, woman, or child, the wearer of the mask and everyone who was touched by the garment would be put to death. The Egungun ceremony and festival remains one of the most powerful, misunderstood mysteries of Africa.

The word *Egungun* is said to mean “skeleton.” In some respects, the Egungun performer is a man who has risen from the dead and disguises himself with a long elaborate robe of cloth and raffia with a carved wood mask, composed of antlers, skulls, and anything from contemporary society. A long train of fabric is used to cover the steps of the Egungun. In addition to the way the Egungun performer looks, he must also change his voice to a falsetto or low grumbling type voice so that no one can identify him. This illusion is maintained because the Egungun as an ancestral relative does not have the voice of someone living in the village. His voice is strange and unknown.

There is some belief among the Yoruba that the Egungun could carry away those troublesome neighbors or other disgruntled people in the society so that they do not disturb the peace of the community. One might say that the Egungun is a sort of bogey man who seeks to scare the people straight. One cannot laugh at the Egungun; one must be respectful, stay away from him, but be happy when Egungun does his work.

There is a 7-day annual feast for Egungun in June of each year, in which solemn appeals are made on behalf of the recently deceased. Egungun can also come out after funerals and parade the streets calling aloud the names of the Dead. A few days later, the Egungun goes to the house where the death occurred and informs the relatives that the Dead has arrived in the land of the Dead without incident. Food and drink, usually palm wine and rum, are placed out for the Egungun. Then the people of the house retire so they may not see the Egungun eating because to see the Egungun eating is to invite death. When the Egungun and those who accompany him are finished eating, they give out a loud groan to indicate that he is about to leave. The family members can then reenter.



Costume representing an ancestral Egungun spirit in the Republic of Benin. Egungun figures are common to the religious traditions of the Yoruba and Fon people.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

The Egungun aids in upholding the moral standards of the society by bringing the ideas of the past generations to the contemporary Yoruba. When the Odun (festival) Egungun is held and the masquerade begins under the direction of a family elder or Alagba, the society feels a strong bond with the ancestors because they realize that the Egungun will help them invoke the powers of their great ancestors through drumming and dance. The Yoruba teach that, in the traditional African religion, we are not individuals, but parts of a coherent, collective legacy that ties all the spirits together in one massive community.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Death; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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EKOI

The Ekoi people, also called Ejagham, are found in southeastern Nigeria; their territory straddles the border with Cameroon. Known for their mastery of the art of sculpture, the Ekoi have developed one of the most complex forms of group organization based on or, at least, expressed through their art form. There are seven clans that include all Ekoi, much like the seven abusua of the Akan of Ghana. However, whereas the Akan are matrilineal, the Ekoi are patrilineal, and this has implications for kinship links as well as ceremonial styles.

Ekoi clans represent kinship and initiation patterns that are reflected in the kind of sculptures worn during ceremonial occasions as expressions

of the ancestral clan. Indeed, just as in all African societies, the Ekoi clans are ancestral. However, the specialized emblem of clan membership through the use of particular sculptures underscores the Ekoi's religious kinship as one of blood relation. The fact that the people have an emblem of their common membership in a clan is not so unusual, but the fact that it is a sculpture, especially carved for the clan to recognize and solidify their commonality, is a form of sanctification of the clan relationship. This entry looks at their religion and the masks that are part of its rituals.

Religious Practices

The religious practice of the Ekoi is related to the general context of their existence and reflects their outlook on life. For example, the Ekoi are some of the best hunters in their area because of their constant monitoring of the conditions around them. They have historically been keen regarding the movement of animals, the nature of the forest, and the character of the weather. Their diviners and priests have made studies of the natural environment that guide them in determining the direction of the wind, the time of the rains, and how much and how long it will rain. This combination of skills, honed by time, tradition, and study of nature, has added to the tremendous respect that surrounding ethnic groups have for the Ekoi's ability to hunt, investigate, discover, and make sacrifice.

On special religious and ceremonial days, the Ekoi villages organized into the seven clans come together to celebrate with elaborately decorated wood-sculptured masks. Usually covered with the skins of animals, the powerful Ekoi mask is situated on a basket and worn on top of the head with a cowl covering the face of the wearer who dances the special dance of a particular ancestor or spirit. These masks are quite dynamic, and their visages are meant to represent vitality, power, courage, skill, character, discipline, and strength. The messages are clear to the observers who watch the dancers and discover in them philosophical and social commentaries. Among the most remarkable feature of the performances is the reinforcement of a highly ethical life based on the values handed

down from the first clan ancestor. Celebration of the ancestors with the powerful dances of the awesome masks is therefore a celebration of the people.

According to some authorities, the masks of the Ekoi are considered some of the most naturalistic in Africa. However, this statement has to be taken with caution because the fact that the sculptured masks of the Ekoi resemble human beings, however distorted, does not mean that they are naturalistic. Indeed, the masks of the Ekoi may be among the most abstract images in Africa precisely because they look so naturalistic. They are profoundly proverbial and philosophical. The Egbo society of secrets makes statues looking like humans with mobile parts. However, the masks of the Ekoi are important as well for the subtle philosophical messages they convey.

Ceremonial Masks

The appearance of the mask of the Sky-Father and the Earth-Mother is a good example of the philosophical nature of the Ekoi. This is a two-faced mask, often erroneously called a Janus headed mask, which goes back to the ancient Egyptian statues of Rahotep and Noferet. The Ekoi are representing two facets of the world, two ways of looking at the universe, and two expressions of life in their sculptured mask of two faces. They are not making a statement about equality and inequality, about good and evil. Rather, they are expressing what is a fact in the African's moral conception of the universe: Humans are better served in a world of balance.

It should be clearly understood, however, that the Ekoi are not concerned so much with the stark differences between the one and the other, but rather the fact that one cannot exist without the other. Good depends on evil just as night depends on day, but they always flow into each other so that human beings must always be in search of the best, the most beautiful of occasions, situations, and times, knowing that the possibility of more good exists with sacrifice and the proper ceremonies to the ancestors.

Some people have viewed the two-faced mask, particularly when one side is dark and the other side lighter in color, as making an aesthetic statement.

Others claim that the woman must have been white because the face of the woman is always white and the face of the man black. However, the fact that the male face of the Rahotep and Neferet mask is darker and the female face is white is not a statement of beauty or interracial coupling, but rather the traditional African way of representing in physical color the relative physical strength of the two individuals. The idea in the sculptor's mind was always to present the masks in such a way that anyone, including children, could understand the ideas being reconfirmed. No one had to strain to see "who was who" in the portrayal.

It is like the old practice in acting of elocution, before the microphone, when one had to "throw" his or her voice to make the words clear. If the ceremony called for a female, then the dancer could turn the mask to the female side, which was clearly seen by the children and others because of the lighter color. If a male was called for in the performance, the dancer would then bring that side of the mask into play. This was all done to teach and reconfirm the idea of Ekoi balance and harmony.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Rituals

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EKPO SECRET SOCIETY

Ekpo is the principal society for men in Ibibio towns in southeastern Nigeria and in Iyekorhiomwo. Iyekorhiomwo, which means literally "behind the Orhiomwo (Ossiomo) River," is located to the south and east of Benin City in Benin. Although it is not clear when the Ekpo society originated, it did exist before the colonial era. Ibibio elders say that there has been *Ekpo* as long as there have been ancestors. *Ekpo* in Ibibio language means

“ghost.” All ancestors are ghosts or spirits of those who once lived. Ancestors founded their villages and established a settled way of life for themselves and their descendants; consequently, kin groups similar to clans were formed. A general theme in traditional African philosophy is that living humans and ancestors are linked; therefore, the Ekpo society is designed to enforce the norms of the ancestors. This entry looks at the initiation ritual and its social function.

Initiation Rite

In traditional Africa, initiation into Ekpo was mandatory; therefore, all males were initiated. In postcolonial times, however, initiation is voluntary. Men may be initiated into many ranks. The first rank is the *Ekpo Ntok Eyen*, which means *Ekpo* for boys; the second rank is *Atat, Ekpo* for young adults; and the third rank is *Ekpo Nyoho*. A minimal expense is required for initiation into the first two ranks. All boys can be initiated into these ranks; however, most people aspire to initiate in *Ekpo Nyoho* because the acquisition of real political power can be achieved in this rank. Most wealthy men achieve membership in *Ekpo Nyoho* because the expense of this initiation is considerably more than the first two ranks. Other ranks include *Ayara, Iyun, Inan, Ekpoton, Anan, Eka Ekpo, Ete Ekpo, Amama Ekpo, and Inuen Ekpo*. The *Amama Ekpo* membership is the most powerful.

Initiation takes place in an area of the forest designated as the sacred forest, especially for initiation into particular ranks. The general initiation process of *Ekpo Ntok Eyen* includes being introduced to the *ikan* as a new member. Incantations, which are followed by libation, invite the *ikan* to drink and be beseeched to protect the new initiates. Secrets appropriate to the rank are revealed, which the initiates swear to never reveal to noninitiates. Also, they learn and master secret greetings. When they have completed this process, initiates can take part in *Ekpo* activities in the community. The same process is used for the *Atat, Ekpo* initiation.

Ekpo makes use of secret rituals, signs, symbols, and forms of knowledge to serve the community. On the one hand, withholding knowledge from noninitiates causes *Ekpo* to be called a secret

society; on the other hand, the existence of the society is not secret because the *Ekpo* society was designed to maintain the health and vitality of the community. In addition, there are festivals, dances, and songs associated with *Ekpo*. The most distinguishing feature is *Ekpo* masks. *Ekpo* members adorn themselves in masks, raffin capes, and other accouterments to impersonate the ancestors and other dead members of the *Ekpo* society.

Rituals are performed for occasions such as planting and harvesting seasons and funerals. Daniel A. Offiong describes the ritual process, known as *udat ekpo*, as the bringing of *ekpo* (ancestors) to the village from the home of the spirits (*obio ekpo*) to live in the world for a short while. The day of *ekpo*'s arrival in the village is a holiday and a cause for celebration. The ritual is inaugurated with various grades of *Ekpo*, beginning with *Ekpo Ntok Eyen*, who spend hours drumming, doing acrobatics, and making sacrifices in the sacred forest set aside for that particular grade of *ekpo*. After this, some *Ekpo* members mask themselves as ancestors. Then when they arrive in the village square, *ata esien*, more drumming and acrobatics take place. Because this ritual takes place immediately after planting season, a feast to celebrate a successful planting season, called *udia ndisa*, allows the women to cook special foods for their husbands and show appreciation for their good work during the planting season.

Social Function

Peace and harmony must be maintained while the different grades of *ekpo* are operating in this world, so there can be no quarreling or fighting. Violators are severely punished. When the visit of the *ekpo* is over, a public holiday is set aside for return of *ekpo* to *obio ekpo* (*nyono ekpo*) to their sacred forests.

Atat performed three major social functions. They provided the people with entertainment, news and information, and socialization. Robert Kwami says that an element of moral or other forms of education is evident in songs, “Whether dealing with masquerades or purely with entertainment. . . .” The following song text is used by *Ekpo*:

<i>Ekpo nyoho Obon Obobom</i>	Ekpo nyoho Chief of masqueraes
<i>Utun iniehe enyin amono okpo usun isan</i>	The worm has no eye yet is see the path
<i>Iso nte eka mkpa eyin Idem</i>	His face is like that of those going to the funeral of Idem's child
<i>Iso nete eka usoro ndo</i>	His face is like that of those going for a Wedding
<i>Ekpo time edem ke ufok akananwan</i>	Ekpo stay back from an old woman's house
<i>Akananwan iniehe eyin uduadekpo</i>	The old woman has no child to bar Ekpo's Way
<i>Ukite nana ado okpuho ama akem ndo eyin owo</i> <i>Look! The money was enough for the dowry</i>	
<i>Mben nno ekpo Ikot Abis</i>	But I gave it to the Ekpo of Ikot Abia
<i>Utun iniehe enyin amono okpo usun isan</i>	The worm has no eye yet is sees the path
<i>Ekpo nyoho Obon Obobom</i>	Rkpo nyoho Chief of masquerades
<i>Ekpo mi-o [three times]</i>	My Ekpo-o [three times]

This song depicts an old woman who accuses Ekpo of being responsible for her social condition. Ancestors are believed to control the fortunes/misfortunes of individuals and the community at large.

Ekpo regulated social, legal, political, and economic matters in traditional community life and continues to do so, but to a lesser degree. In Ibibio, Ekpo Ndem Isong, a group composed of elders and heads of extended families in the village are the rulers; they dispense customary law and justice. Ekpo assists Ekpo Ndem Isong by enforcing laws, preventing feuds, settling disputes and conflicts, and coordinating community projects.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Initiation; Rites of Passage; Societies of Secrets

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ELDERS

In traditional African societies, as well as embedded within the value systems in contemporary African communities worldwide, to live to an old age was and is considered a blessing. Eldership is, however, more than mere aging. The difference is important to understand. Being an elder is fundamentally different from just being old. In regard to African religion, the purpose and practice of eldership is found in the spiritual meaning of eldership.

In fact, in traditional life, elders were the undisputed repositories of both the spiritual essence and practice of the community. The Bantu-Congo, for instance, believed that human development was a process of spiritual evolution and cultural maturation. Accordingly, elders being those persons with decades of experiential learning and spiritual refinement were more spiritually evolved and culturally mature. This entry

looks at the role of elders in the Yoruba tradition and more generally.

Yoruba Tradition

In the Yoruba tradition, the distinction between an older person and an Elder reflects a significant shift in personal and collective responsibilities. Generally, it is the responsibility of adult men to protect and defend the community, whereas adult women's responsibility is to nurture and educate the community. Accordingly, adult men are often consumed with the purpose and task of obtaining and providing those resources that sustain and advance life for themselves and their families. Likewise, adult women's time and interests are devoted to securing and establishing an environment or area that is conducive to the growth and development of life for them and their families.

The symbol of eldership for the Yoruba is the Onile, which is represented by two iron figurine spikes (one male, one female) joined at the head with a chain. The Yoruba believe that the head is the site of the spiritual essence of the person. The Onile symbolizes the sacred bond shared between the male and female elders and the importance of "the couple." The emphasis on sexual attributes of the Onile is designed to convey the mystical power of procreation and the omnipotence of the Elders.

The importance of the complementary nature that exists between men and women is similarly reinforced by the Ogboni Society's unique gesture of placing the left (feminine) fist on top of the right (masculine) fist, with the thumbs concealed, in front of the stomach. This gesture represents both a sign of giving blessings as well as the recognition of the dominance of spiritual, sacred matters—and the primacy of the spiritual over the material.

When men enter the community of Elders, they take on the role of *Baba Agba*, which means "senior father" or, more correctly, "nurturing father." When women enter the community of Elders, they take on the role of *Iya Agba*, which means "senior mother" or "warrior mother." It is the *Iya Agba* who plays the primary role as the spiritual protectors of the community. With the status of Eldership, women are devoted to protecting and defending (warrior mother) the spiritual balance of the community, whereas men are dedicated to securing and establishing (nurturing

father) the spiritual harmony in the community. At the onset of Eldership, the balance and complementarities of the male and female principles are inviolate and always present.

Elder Roles

Elders are responsible for continually contemplating the good and the right. Because of their Eldership status, they are not—or should not be—driven by personal interests or individual rewards. They cannot be tempted or influenced by appeals to favoritism or personal desires. The status of Eldership places them above the needs of manipulating, of "getting over" or "what's in it for me personally?" Although male and female Elders have distinct responsibilities in traditional life, in general, as Elders, they share in the responsibility of correcting imbalances, maintaining peace, and revitalizing community life. Their singular goal was to guide and guarantee the cooperative good and collective advancement. The judgments and decisions of the Elders are always consistent with their community's cultural integrity and directed toward Truth and Justice.

Elders were and are the guardians of the culture, traditions, and history of the people. Integrity, generosity, wisdom, articulateness, subtlety, patience, tactfulness, gratefulness, and being listened to and respected by others are all qualities of an Elder. Understandably, with Eldership, one's status and value in the community rises. Although the primary work of the Elder was to advise, guide, and oversee the living in community, their fundamental value and purpose was in teaching the young what it means to be human.

The Elder knows the traditions, history, values, beliefs, and cultural laws that are inviolate. Accordingly, the experience and wisdom of the Elder is readily sought and freely shared with others. Elders are charged with the task of understanding both the material and spiritual requisites of life. In fact, to have Elders live with you, and for you to have available their daily guidance, is considered a great blessing and advantage. It is thought to be an honor to even be in the presence of an Elder. They serve as a link between the past and the present while guaranteeing that our way of life is extended into the future.

As Elders, both men and women devote themselves to the higher responsibility of utilizing the

collective spirit to guide and direct the permanent ascension of the community and to channel its vital life force (spirit). The utilization and understanding of the natural spiritual power of the community is, in fact, perceived as the “wisdom of Eldership.” This is an all-consuming task. To do this, Elders are generally not involved in the survival struggles of life. They devote themselves to the full-time pursuit of wisdom—the understanding and application of the high values and traditions of the community and the spiritual meaning of being human. In effect, the Elder’s “work” was and is to synthesize wisdom from long life experiences, to connect the visible (material) and invisible (spiritual) realms, and to formulate all into a legacy of the good life for future generations.

Wade W. Nobles

See also Ancestors; Death

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ELEDA

Eleda is a part of the Yoruba concept of the human being. Indeed, the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria contend that all humans who die live again after death. Of course, each human being has three aspects to existence: *emi*, the spirit; *ojiji*, the shadow; and *eleda*, the guardian soul.

The *emi* inhabits a person’s lungs and heart and lives by the wind and air that come through the nostrils. One cannot live at all without *emi*; it is essential to everything. If one cannot breathe, then

one cannot exist. So the Yoruba say that *emi* is important for working, walking, running, dancing, celebrating, hearing, making love, caring for children, and seeing.

Ojiji, the shadow, is always with the person. One does not escape the shadow, it goes everywhere the person goes, and it remains with the person throughout life on the Earth, as evidence that one is alive and not a ghost. So the *ojiji* is attached to an individual from the first time he or she appears in the world.

The last spirit of the person is the *eleda*, the guardian soul that protects and provides assistance to the person. When one thinks of the Yoruba conception of the human with the three aspects, one must see the *eleda* as that component that never dies.

According to the Yoruba, before a person dies, his *emi* appears to his or her relatives to announce that the person will die. It is believed that the person who senses the *emi* can tell when it comes because it feels cool, although the person dying may be in a distant place.

One of the more fascinating aspects of death and the three aspects of the person is the fact that people who die in middle age may have ghosts who live in distant places. Thus, a wife may not know that her husband is a mere ghost because he may have died in some other place and the person she actually sees is a ghost. However, when the time comes for the person to die again, he dies a second time and the *eleda* goes to heaven to the Supreme God, *Olorun*.

At this time, the person tells the Supreme Being what he did on the Earth. When the person’s soul is judged and he is found good, then his soul is sent to *Orun Rere*, the Good Heaven. If a soul is guilty of theft, witchcraft, murder, or cruelty, then the person will be sent to *Orun Buburu*, the Bad Heaven. This Bad Heaven is somewhere in the forest, where there are all sorts of magical and mystical beings as well as evil spirits.

Therefore, the aim of the person is to prevent the *eleda* from going into the Bad Heaven, which may be in the damp, deep caves in the forested mountains of the region. However, the *eleda*, that is, the good soul of the person who is respected, admired, and generous, will live for many generations.

Because it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors can survive as long as they are remembered by

the living, the *eleda* of the parents, grandparents, and great grandparents must always be protected by rituals. The only way that the living can receive the invisible power of the ancestors is to continue to perform special memorial ceremonies.

The *eleda* of the Yoruba is similar to the *idlozi*, spirit, of the Zulu philosophy that must be brought back, *ukubuisa*, to live among the people to help with daily problems and decisions. In this way, the Yoruba, as the Zulu, see the strength of community as ongoing so long as the rituals occur.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Olodumare; Yoruba

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ENIYAN

In the Ifa spiritual and ethical tradition, *eniyan* is a fundamental concept that speaks to the moral status and moral considerability of the human person. In fact, it is the hub and hinge on which Ifa moral anthropology turns. The word *eniyan* in the Yoruba language, the parent language of Ifa, literally means “chosen one(s)” and at the same time is the word for *human being*. At the heart of Ifa moral anthropology is the ethical teaching that humans are chosen by the Creator to bring good into the world and that this special status and task are the fundamental mission and meaning of human life. This concept is advanced in the *Odu Ifa* (78:1), the sacred text of Ifa, which reads, “Surely humans have been (divinely) chosen to bring good in the world.” This entry examines the meaning of this concept.

Who Is Chosen

This concept of “chosen” has profound significance in moral anthropology for both the conception and treatment of human beings. Moreover, it also carries with it a uniqueness, in that it presents the

highest level of humanism in its inclusion of all humans as chosen, rather than just those in its circle of believers and adherents, as is the case for virtually all other traditions who self-define as chosen, elect, or recipients of endowed status. Here the Ifa priests, the *babalawo*, do not claim special status for Ifa adherents, but provide a theological narrative in which all humans share equally in the divine endowment of chosenness. In addition to this unique inclusivity beyond religious relationship or covenant, the concept also is defined by its concept of all humans as chosen (*yán*) without distinction of race, class, gender or sex, ethnicity, or any other social or biological attribute.

As noted earlier, this status is a divine endowment or gift and thus carries with it all the transcendent and ultimate meaning and authority that accompany such divine benefactions. Thus, it places great emphasis on respect for the human being as the chosen of God. This status as the chosen of God parallels and is a companion concept in the Ifa tradition of humans as the *omo Olódùmarè* or *omo Oduduwa* or the offspring of the Great God or Creator. Thus, it presents an image of the God concept similar to the ancient Egyptian concept *senen netjer* (*snn ntr*), which literally means “image of God.”

In any case, it supports the concept of the inherent and inviolable worthiness of the human beings (i.e., the concept of dignity). In the Ifa tradition, as reflected in the *Odu Ifa*, there are numerous words and calls for respect of humans. Some of the words for these concerns are *olá*, *iyìn*, and *owo*, which may be used to indicate both inherent and socially achieved and recognized worthiness.

What Is Expected

The moral anthropology in which the concept of *eniyan* is rooted is expressed at length in the theological narrative found in *Odu* 78:1. In this *Odu* (chapter), it says that humans are chosen to bring good in the world (i.e., to make it good). But they are also to sustain and increase it. The theological narrative makes it clear that humans are chosen, not over and against each other, but with each other to bring good into the world. They are to do this for each and everyone’s benefit. Moreover, for humans to honor both the fundamental meaning and mission of their lives as chosen ones, they must

make sure they “bring about the good condition Olodumare has ordained for every human being.”

Here the status of “chosenness” requires working and struggling for and having a divinely ordained good condition (*ipò rere*). In other words, here a life of dignity is tied to a decent life, indeed a good life. For it is divinely ordained that every human being should enjoy a good life in a good world. So the chosen status carries with it not simply an endowment, but also an assignment; to both honor and fulfill this status and task, humans must create conditions that this status deserves and demands.

In the text, Orunmila, the sage, master teacher, and divine witness to creation, is asked to define this good condition (position) ordained by Olodumare for everyone. He replies that it is a good world (i.e., the condition conducive to a good life). Thus, he says that to achieve a good life for every human being, humans must achieve a good world. That good world is defined as having several fundamental features, including full knowledge of things; happiness everywhere; freedom from anxiety and fear of opponents, enemies, or hostile others; the end of antagonism with other beings or Earth (i.e., animals, reptiles, etc.); well-being and the end of fear of forces that threaten it; and freedom from poverty and misery.

How It Is Achieved

Having outlined the necessary conditions of a good world (*ayé rere*), Orunmila states also the requirements for achieving this world. In this teaching is reflected stress on human agency—the will and capacity to act and create the good world humans want and deserve to live and flourish in. These requirements first are summed up as three essentials: “wisdom, the compelling desire for good character and internal strength.” To be noted is the stress on wisdom and knowledge, an emphasis made again in the longer list of requirements. This reaffirms the central importance of knowledge in the Ifa tradition because as noted about the first criterion for a good world is full knowledge of things.

In the longer list of requirements for achieving the good world, Orunmila lists: “wisdom adequate to govern the world; sacrifice; character; the love of doing good, especially for those who need it most and for those who ask . . . and the eagerness and ongoing struggle to increase good in the

world and not let any good be lost.” It is important to note here that the Yoruba word “to govern” (*àkóso*), in its original meaning, suggests “a gathering of people together for good purposes.” Thus, the first requirement for achieving good in the world is posed as a moral wisdom for gathering the people together for good purposes, as indicated in other passages in the Odu Ifa. For example, in Odu 33:2, it says “Those whose turn it is to take responsibility for the world, they should do good for the world.” Elsewhere, it says that, to do this, one must “Speak truth, do just, be kind and do not do evil.” But again, it is important to note the emphasis placed on “full knowledge” of the world and self-conscious and committed struggle for good in the world and the strong sense of agency this requires to honor the identity and task of being “divinely chosen to bring good into the world.”

Maulana Karenga

See also Ifa; Yoruba

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ENNEAD

Ennead is the name given to a set of nine gods in Ancient Egypt. The Great Ennead of On, called by the Greeks Heliopolis, contained the following deities: Atum, Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Ausar, Auset, Set, and Nebhet. These nine gods participated in the Myth of Creation when the sun god emerged from the primeval waters of nun. In the Ennead, it is Atum, the almighty, who sets the act of creation on its course and establishes the foundation of the cosmic universe. Clearly the Myth of Creation is not based on

some notion of multiple gods who direct the creation. It is inescapable in that the Ennead is the work of Atum. All other energies, forces, spirits, and powers, celestial and terrestrial, are based on Atum's energy.

Nothing was so powerful in the mythology of the ancient Egyptians as the story of creation that stood at the beginning of their religious consciousness. Without the creation, all is lost and nothing is possible in terms of the moral and ethical lives of the people. They believed that the emergence of the sun god from the primeval waters of Nun to step on the hillock and bring into being all of the creatures, including deities, in the universe was the moment of magic.

The deities of the Great Ennead appear frequently in the literature of the Egyptians and were especially significant during the New Kingdom. It was thought that the First Occasion, that is, the moment of creation, occurred as a prototype for all subsequent creation. Thus, when Atum, of the On theological tradition, created Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture, the elements had been set in motion that would ultimately result in human society. In one sense, Shu and Tefnut may be called the children of Atum. Geb, Earth, and Nut, sky, may be called his grandchildren and Ausar, Auset, Set, and Nebhet, the great grandchildren of the deity, Atum.

Another way of grasping the importance of the Great Ennead is to say that when Geb and Nut gave birth to their offspring, who were terrestrial, unlike the celestial creations that preceded them, this marked the beginning of real time. This was time after the First Occasion that was now locked in mythology. Now with the arrival of Ausar, Auset, Set, and Nebhet, the Earth had found itself with citizens who would contain all human traits and characteristics. One could see, in almost every example of *The Book of the Dead*, some reference to some of the deities of the Great Ennead.

It might be said that the difference between the celestial components of the Great Ennead and the terrestrial components is one of personality. Whereas one is struck by the abstract nature of Shu and Tefnut, although materialized in the air and moisture, one sees in the terrestrial figures something of the fallibility of all humans. When Ausar is killed by his brother Set and Auset and her son Heru and her sister Nebhet went to find

the pieces of the body of Ausar, all of humanity was in search of its hero, its leader, and its god of the resurrection. This was the great drama acted out in the imagination of the ancient Egyptians on a daily basis. When Heru defeats Set, then humanity could rejoice because good had won the day over evil. The Great Ennead was the most complete dramatic myth told and retold in ancient Egypt.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Atum; Ausar; Auset; Maat; Tefnut

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EPA SOCIETY

The Yoruba of Nigeria recognize the ancestors in many ways. One structure that has been institutionalized for hundreds of years is the Epa celebration to honor the great ancestors of the Yoruba. The Epa Society is responsible for creating the masks and the occasion for the ancestral ceremony. The tradition centers on the creation of Epa helmet masks that are among the most elaborate among the Yoruba. They are monumental structures, some reaching to 5 feet and weighing 60 pounds. Because the Yoruba believe in the African philosophical system, they build the Epa out of a single block of wood from the Iroko tree.

These Epa masks are displayed on the heads of youthful athletic dancers who are able to handle the huge masks. Because the masks are huge objects used for dancing in honor of the ancestors, they must be treated with respect and honor. Epa masks are presented annually at the Epa festival. The masks are meant to help the people recall the impressive deeds of kings, soldiers, adventurers, hunters, and mothers who are praised for their great moral values and their

valor in creating positive environments for the living. The Epa masks show a man and a woman, normally a great soldier and a great queen or priestess, *iyalashé*, mother power.

Almost all festivals among West Africans have an ancestral character. The idea of celebration is to honor something that is important, and nothing is more authentic for the ethnic group than the celebration of the ancestors. Every major celebration is tied to the respect and honor that the living persons are supposed to give for the ancestors (*egungun*). How can a society be ordered, balanced, and productive without deference to those who have created the lineage?

Often the large Epa masks, usually two, are richly decorated with examples of the deeds done by the particular ancestors. Thus, a warrior's mask would have his weapons and other accoutrements that go with his profession. A mask of a princess would have all the representations of her power, examples of harvest of grain, fruits, and vegetables representing her spiritual potency. This is the way that the people are reminded of their greatness, their traditions, and their possibilities.

The awe-inspiring Epa masks are known throughout Yoruba. The *Iyalashe* mask represents all the women of Ekiti and is depicted with several royal images and figures dressed in high-crested African coiffures. There is also an image of the princess or queen with a shawl over her shoulders while the left hand is free to carry out the ritual practices. In some versions, the princess or mother is in the center of a circular platform and is surrounded by drummers, horn players, messengers, and others with their children. Each dancer wears the pot-like or helmet-like masks with honor. It is called the *ikoko* and refers to the power that is transmitted to the dancer from the ancestral world. The face (*igi*) of the mask is understood as the physical world. Therefore, the dancer is carrying the entire community on his head when he is dancing the dance of the *Iyalashe*. The same is said for the dancer for the male figure. Nothing escapes the most precise representations in the society. Epa is, in effect, the heart of Yoruba.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Rituals

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EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology deals with questions such as, “How did the universe come into existence?” “Where do human beings come from?” “Does God exist?” “Is there life after death?” “How should one live in order to join the village of the ancestors?” “What does it mean to be a good human being?” These types of questions stand at the core of African religious worldview and suggest that knowledge is an important component of religion.

Confronted with the thorniest questions of human destiny in the midst of a mysterious universe, Africans have developed since time immemorial a complex epistemology that enabled them to find satisfactory answers. These African ways of knowing are grounded in African religious traditions, especially in creation myths. Despite the idiosyncrasy of particular religious

traditions, the religious phenomenon as such is generally composed of a practical dimension, a theoretical dimension, and a sociological dimension. This entry looks at African epistemology as it relates to religion, the ways of knowing it and some major characteristics.

Religion as Knowledge

Any act of worship implies a specific knowledge of the object of worship, as well as the *modus operandi* useful for communicating with the world of the spirits and the ancestors. In other words, African traditional religions are made up of more than rituals and taboos. As creation myths indicate, African religion is, first of all, a body of knowledge about the world and the ultimate reality. The concept of epistemology refers to this body of knowledge and its methodology. African epistemology is a body of knowledge and wisdom and a collection of methodological principles that enabled the people of traditional Africa to formulate conceptions of a general order of existence, understand the world as a meaningful cosmos, and take up a position toward it. It is a general theory of human existence that enabled people to settle as harmoniously as possible the disputes that mar human relationships, build cities and farm the land, educate their children and build important social institutions, and, especially, articulate a type of religion that provided people with the ultimate meaning of life and ensured the stability of African societies for millennia. It is this knowledge that defines the African conception of God and the afterlife, as well as the proper mode of being religious in this world. This body of knowledge and wisdom constitutes what we refer to here as African epistemology.

The earliest written documents that shed light on African epistemology are found in Kemet, especially in the definition of the philosopher from the Antef inscription (12th dynasty, 2000–1768 BC), Instruction of Ptahhotep (25th century BC), the Instruction of Nebmare-Nakt (Papyrus Lansing, 12th century BC), the anonymous Instruction recorded on papyrus Chester Beatty IV (12th century BC), and the ethical teaching of Amenemope. These texts articulated that fundamental “African path to knowledge” we find expressed elsewhere, including in Zera Yacob’s “Hatata,” the current

Bwino epistemology of Bantu Philosophy, and the Ofamfa-Matemasie epistemology of the Akan, to name but a few examples.

In most parts of Africa, this epistemology is expressed in a variety of ways in oral traditions, especially proverbs, myths, folktales, folk songs, art, social institutions, traditional medicine, divination systems, family values, ethical principles, and the symbolic language of rituals.

It is worth noting that, in many creation myths, God is presented as the ultimate scientist who provided the early human communities with scientific knowledge and technology needed for farming, hunting, fishing, building houses, and organizing political and social institutions. Indeed, in Luba cosmology, the first couple is called “Kibumba-bumba” and “kyubaka-ubaka.” The first mother of humankind was endowed with the scientific knowledge of pottery (kubumba) while her husband received the science of architects and builders (Kubaka). Shakapanga (the creator) is praised as “Kafula moba” (the blacksmith who makes the sun). In African worldview, God is therefore viewed as the ultimate source of knowledge. But how do Africans access knowledge, and what is the specificity of African ways of knowing?

Ways of Knowing

For the sake of clarity, it may be argued that African epistemology comprises four basic ways of knowing, which can be grouped in three categories, the natural, the supernatural, and the paranormal path knowledge. First, there is a supernatural path of knowledge. Here, human beings gain knowledge through the help of some supernatural powers. This cognitive mode comprises Divination (Lubuko) and Revelation (message revealed in dreams and visions).

These two cognitive modes are characterized by the intervention of supernatural beings (i.e., spirits, ancestors, dead relatives, Gods and Goddesses) who impart knowledge to humans directly (case of dream or vision) or indirectly through mediums, diviners, animals, extraordinary life events, or natural phenomena that require a special kind of interpretation.

The second epistemological path is that of “Natural cognitive modes.” Here, knowledge is

gained by using natural faculties or abilities. This cognitive mode comprises “Intuition” conceived of as the work of human heart (Mucima; i.e., feeling and insight) and Reason, which consists of a natural investigation of reality through the natural power of human intellect and logical thought processes. Given that in Africa intuition and reason are not mutually exclusive, “African rationality” has its peculiarity.

Between these two poles of African epistemology (i.e., the natural and supernatural ways of knowing) stands a third category called extrasensory perception (ESP) or paranormal cognition, which includes such modes as clairvoyance and telepathy. But as the process of divination shows, African epistemology skillfully combines “logical-analytical” and “intuitive-synthetical” modes of thinking, whereas in the Western tradition these modes are rigidly separated.

Most important, it integrates religious ways of knowing and the scientific and rational process in a world where there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane and where ultimately religion is an ally of science, rather than its opposite. This brings us to the characteristics of African epistemology.

Major Characteristics

For the sake of clarity, it may be noted that African epistemology has eight major characteristics:

1. the principle of intellectual humility and nondogmatism;
2. cosmo-theandricity;
3. an ethical dimension with a focus on wisdom;
4. rejection of the notion of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake and art for art’s sake”;
5. a holistic perspective focused on the interconnectedness and balance of reality;
6. rejection of the compartmentalization of knowledge, an integration of various disciplines, and a rejection of the opposition between reason and other cognitive faculties;
7. rejection of the opposition between the sacred and the profane, and the opposition between religion and science or between knowledge and faith; and
8. rejection of the opposition between the individual and the community as cognitive agent.

Humility

An African approach to knowledge begins with a profound sense of epistemological humility. It is assumed that knowledge is accessible to all even though some can reach high levels of excellence through their hard labor.

Because the individual sees himself or herself as part of the community, knowledge was not approached from an individualistic perspective. This explains why many artists and scientists did not patent their inventions or sign their work. This sense of participation in a bigger epistemological community is well expressed in ancient Egypt, where Ptahhotep advised the lovers of wisdom to consult everybody and not only the famous figures:

Don’t be proud of your knowledge,
Consult the ignorant and the wise;
The limits of art are not reached,
No artist’s skills are perfect;
Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,
Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones.

A similar perspective is found in Ghana in the “Ananse allegory.” According to the Akan, in the beginning of the world, there was Ananse Kokrofu, the Great Spider, who wanted to keep wisdom for himself and hide it from everybody, but wisdom escaped from his hand and fell on the ground, thus becoming available to everybody. The legend goes as follows:

Ananse collected all the wisdom in the world and shut it up in a gourd, Then he began climbing the trunk of a tree so as to keep this precious gourd safe at the top. But he got into difficulties only half-away up, because he had tied the gourd to his front, and it hampered him in his climbing. His son Ntikuma, who was watching at the bottom, called up: “Father, if you really had all the wisdom in the world up there with you, you would have had the sense to tie that gourd on your back.” His father saw the truth of this and threw down the gourd in a temper. It broke on the ground, and the wisdom in it was scattered about. Men and women came and picked up what each of them could get and carry away.

Which explains why there is much wisdom in the world, but few persons have more than a little of it, and some persons have none at all.

This epistemology of humility, collective solidarity, and communal responsibility has other African characteristics.

A Holistic View

Every epistemology is shaped by the conception one has of the object of study. African ontology being that of the interconnectedness of all reality, epistemology here is grounded in a “holistic vision.” African epistemology is grounded in the fundamental belief that reality is one. The world is a web of relationships. Everything is interconnected. There is a fundamental connection between the living and the Dead, the visible and the invisible realm, the spiritual and the material sphere, the human and the divine realm, humanity and the natural world, and so on. In this worldview, to understand or to know is to grasp the relations of interconnectedness of all things. Thus, African epistemology rejects all forms of dichotomy or dualism.

The first dualism is that of the subject and object of study. Rather than separating himself from the object of study, the African communicates with that which he wishes to know. The African becomes tree with the tree, rock with the rock, water with water, and wind with the wind. Likewise, it is held that the best way to know is to use a variety of tools or human faculties and a variety of methods. Interdisciplinarity or “epistemological dialogue” stands at the core of African holistic approach. In African societies, the sage was never a man of one “wisdom” or one knowledge.

The sage was sage precisely because he was at once a psychologist, a teacher, a spiritual master, an artist, an architect, a thinker, and a good practitioner. The wise was a “whole person” because a person of a “holistic knowledge” and a “holistic approach to knowledge.” Hence, African epistemology is inseparable from an ethical requirement. The pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the pursuit of wisdom because, in an African understanding of things, a genuine knowledge necessarily involves wisdom. The unwise knower is referred to as a witch. The

purpose of knowledge is to enhance human flourishing and preserve and promote all other forms of life in the universe. This is why initiation was fundamental. It was critical to train human character so that people can handle knowledge for the benefit of humankind.

A person without knowledge wisdom is referred to as *Mufu unanga* (dead man walking). The act of knowing is a process of becoming humane. Where knowledge leads to violence, oppression, and destruction, Africans speak of witchcraft (*Butshi, buloji, kindoki*), rather than *Bwino* (knowledge wisdom).

Mutumbo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Cosmology; Divination

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ESU, ELEGBA

Esu or Elegba, short for Elegbara, is the divine messenger, trickster god of chance, principle of indeterminacy, and essence of fate among the Yorubas in West Africa and all those who possess him, by extension, all of humankind. He is arguably the most important and influential deity in the Yoruba pantheon because everybody, including the other gods, must acknowledge him.

Believed to be designated to apportion individual fate to humans by the Supreme Deity, Olodumare, myth stories abound about Esu or Elegba’s contradictory persona and characteristics and about how he gained his power over the other gods. In some versions of the Yoruba creation

myth, he has been linked to the chameleon through the elusive, unpredictable, and fateful/fatal power both seem to have. As his name, Elegbara, suggests, he is a problematic encounter difficult to fathom because no one knows for certain the outcome of his or her fate, which Esu manifests from moment to moment, hence the persistent attempt made through divination, ritual sacrifice, or prayer by the Yorubas to determine what fate (Esu) has in store. This entry looks at his origins and attributes and how he is represented and worshipped.

Origins

Although Esu is generally regarded as a supernatural entity, there are attempts, supported by various myths, to document his obviously anthropomorphic roots. In this regard, researchers and informants differ as to the exact place of origin in Nigeria. Some say a village in Badagry or Iworo in the vicinity of Lagos; others locate him on top of a mountain near Igbeti, close to River Niger. Other places suggested are Ofa-Ile, Ife-Wara, and Ketu. In the so-called *orixa* (orisha) cults in the New World (Voodoo, Candomble, Santeria), his most common name, Legba or Papa Legba, probably originated from his worship among the people of Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin. Other variations of Esu's name in the New World include Exu (Brazil) and Elegua (Cuba). There is also a female identity in Brazil—Pomba Gira.

Although Esu replicates the attributes of trickster figures found in world cultures, he is uniquely central to the Yoruba notion of man's relationship with God in terms of order and man's destiny on Earth. He has been erroneously identified with the Christian devil by Western missionaries and early ethnographers probably based on stories of him as *enfant terrible*; however, the deity embodies the complimentary forces of good and evil, which, in the Yoruba mind, coexist in every human.

Furthermore, parallels of the god have been made with the Greek Hermes in terms of both tricksters and messenger gods and their presence at crossroads and the market. This notion, as well as Catholic influences, account for the syncretic bind

that often expresses some of the literature about him and other gods in the New World black cultures. Esu's tricks seem to differ from Hermes in at least one significant respect—they are levied to force awareness and as warnings of human shortcomings or crimes; Hermes' are imposed for the fun of it.

Attributes

Various *oriki* or praise chants suggest Esu's elusiveness, stature, fateful/fatal complex, and trickster qualities—in short, all that evoke his inscrutable power and presence. For instance, of his physical and mysterious size:

Esu sleeps in the house
 But the house is too small for him
 Esu sleeps on the front yard
 But the yard is too constricting for him
 Esu sleeps in the palm-nut shell
 Now he has enough room to stretch at large.

His skin color is likened to that of the chameleon (*alawo agemo*), suggesting their art of camouflage and dissembling. In fact, the agemo (chameleon) phenomenon, an *ojiji firifiri*, a shadowy creature, now visible now invisible, is pertinent to Esu. Often hailed in chants as Esu Odara (the dissembler) by his devotees, they warn of his difficult encounter (*T'Esu Odara lo so soro*), that is, the balance of good and evil forces that he embodies, but that they (the devotees) or any human for that matter constantly seek to maintain. He is also the "child of the unmitigated curse," attesting to his fatal, satiric power of the Word (*ase*), suggested in references such as "Having thrown a stone yesterday/he kills a bird today" or, its reverse, "Having thrown a stone today/He kills a bird yesterday." Relating to the *ase* or impact of his fateful/fatal actions on mankind in the "drama of life," Esu's attributes can be extended to include master of peripetiae and satirist par excellence.

Esu's representations as fate sometimes present confusion with regard to other agencies of fate in Yoruba belief, such as Ori (the metaphysical

counterpart of the physical head) and Orunmila, oracle god of divination, both of whom are also worshiped as gods. For instance, both Ori, usually identified as the “ancestral guardian soul,” and Esu have parallel functions—as fate essences and as all-surpassing deities. An oriki seems to make the connection: “Esu!/A too bo bi ori,” which translates: “Esu! Worthy of worship like fate.” Also the word *iponri* (conflation of ipin-ori, which translates fate of head) seems to suggest one as the physical manifestation of the other. In the meta-physical world, the body with breath goes to receive its *ori*, which Esu then sanctions at the gate into the physical world.

With regard to Orunmila, *eleri ipin* (witness to the endowed fate), various stories from the Ifa divination corpus suggest his close association with Esu as inseparable friends. Through Olodumare, one endows and the other interprets. The head face on the divination tray, often suggested as the face of Esu, also supports the connection—the Ifa priest, the diviner, focuses on the head face, the fate essence, as he tries to interpret and resolve Orunmila’s fate configurations of the consulting client. All three (Olodumare, Orunmila, and Esu) form “important trinity” in the granting, and assisting humans achieve the destiny each has chosen in the metaphysical world.

Worship

Esu’s altar is distinctive in the Yoruba pantheon by the very fact of the elemental, interchangeable relationship the god seems to have with it—a mound of red laterite, *yangi*, which is also one of the many names used to celebrate him. This physical presence and ritual structure is commonly found at crossroads, his favorite location, at the threshold of a Yoruba household or compound, or at the entrance to a market. These locations, significantly, identify him as lord of the crossroads, controller of the market, and gatekeeper or toll-gate keeper (*Onibode*, *Adurogbona*). In this regard, he is associated, in some New World *orixa* cults, with Saint Peter, keeper of the keys at Heaven’s gate.

Dance wands, sculpted images of Esu carried by his devotees, display implements of fate such as

a vestment of cowries, symbol of both wealth and fate essence. Common offerings to the god include the temper-soothing palm oil and blood of animals such a dog, pig, or he-goat.

Femi Euba

See also Crossroads; Fon; Yoruba

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ETERNAL LIFE

From the most ancient times to the most contemporary, in Africa human beings have always believed in the idea of eternal life. Although there are slight differences in the models from east to west or north to south, the particular understanding of everlasting life occurs in almost all African societies, and the results of this belief can be seen

in the richly textured acceptance of the vital and active ancestral realm. This entry looks at the beginnings of the concept in Egypt and its presence elsewhere in Africa.

Egyptian Roots

The concept of eternal life—that is, living forever—originated with Africans in the Nile Valley and spread to other parts of the continent and the world. Actually, it was believed by the earliest Africans that death occurred when the life force left the body. However, all the ceremonies associated with the funerary care of the corpse ensured that the person would live forever because the various activities of the priests after the person had died, such as the opening of the mouth (*wep r*), sought to restore a person's connection to the *ka* that had left the body at death.

In addition, the ancient Africans believed that this restoration would lead to the physical attributes of the person being restored. This could be done, however, only if the *ba*'s attachment to the body was released. Therefore, the union of the *ka*, the life force that had left the body at death, and the *ba*, the personality, created an entity referred to in the literature as the *akh*, meaning the genuine or effective entity.

To have eternal life, *ankh neheb*, was to have a relatively normal existence in the sense that the eternal life was modeled on the journey of the sun. One's tomb represented this personal journey through the *Dwat*, the underworld, and the meeting with the mummified Ausar. Because the tomb was also the personalized *Dwat*, it was here that the bodily preservation existed that allowed the *ba* to return to the body during the night's journey, rising again to a new vitality in the morning.

The *Book of the Coming Forth by Day and Going Forth by Night* is a collection of formulas written to express the manner and rites of movement through the perils of eternal life. It is not a journey without difficulty, but the difficulties can be overcome if the rituals were used that would prevent one from a second death in the *Dwat*. What one wanted was to have eternal memory as a function also of eternal life.

In the tomb of the 18th dynasty monarch Paheri, regional ruler of Nekhen, it is written that

his life was happening again without his *ba* being kept from his divine corpse, but being reunited with the *akh* and therefore he should rise each day and return every evening. Indeed, it is said that a lamp will be lit for him every night until the sun emerged and lit his breast. It is only then that Paheri will be told, "Congratulations! You have entered into your house of the forever living!"

African Belief

The idea of life forever permeated the concepts of African people from the Nile Valley period, so much so that the divinity of the kingships was related to the same force. All living force, as Africans understood it, came from a divine power that shared this divinity with humans. Each human born into the world left the realm of the divine with a small amount of the divine material.

Thus, according to the Akan, human creativity affects the way the universe is constructed. There are two aspects to the creation of the universe: one from the supreme deity and the other from human beings; therefore, one is natural, whereas the other is social. It is the responsibility of each person to safeguard the environment for generations that will live afterward. Of course, the power that exists in humans comes from the fact that the Supreme Being, called Nyame or Nyankopon, confronted death and overcame death and therefore has eternal life that was shared with each human. Thus, Nyame is indestructible and cannot be burned; the Supreme Being, according to the Akan, is *hye anbye*, unburnable.

Inasmuch as all humans have part of the divine in them, that is, the *kra*, this part of the human will not perish because it is also indestructible. The expression in the Akan language says it all: *Nipa wu a, na omwuee*, meaning when the person dies the soul is not dead. Of course, there is a further understanding in Akan that the soul reincarnates when a child is born so that the person's *kra din* (or soul name) represents the day of the week that a particular divinity appears in the physical world as part of the eternal life.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Burial of the Dead; Death; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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EVIL

The concept of evil appears in most African societies. In the construction of African religion, the people have always recognized that all things were not good. However, there are some significant differences between the African concept and others. To demonstrate how evil operates in one particular society, this entry concentrates on the Yoruba culture of Nigeria.

Evil, among the Yoruba, is generally referred to as *ibi*, which is the negative dimension of life. Evil in its widest and all principal sense is the antithesis and reverse of *ire* (good). Nevertheless, *ire* and *ibi* are held to be so closely knit that good is believed to be of no special relevance without evil.

In Yoruba philosophy, *ire* (good) and *ibi* (evil) are held to be the two major forces that control the universe. This accounts for the saying *tibi tire la dale aye* ("the world is created with an admixture of good and evil"). This is best exemplified in the Yoruba understanding of conception and birth. The Yoruba people maintain that the fetus, which is held to be *ire* (the good side of conception), grows along with the placenta, which is held to be *ibi* (the evil aspect of conception). The labor period is always a period of travail, which represents another aspect of evil. The birth of the baby is *ire* (the good) from the evil of the travailing pain that the mother goes through during delivery. When the baby is eventually born, then *ire ti bori ibi* ("good has prevailed"). That is why the Yoruba believe that evil is in what is good and good is in evil (*ibi ninu ire, ire ninu ibi*).

This explains, in part, why to the Yoruba nothing is held to be good or bad. It is the consequence on the individual that determines whether something is good or evil. For example, the Yoruba philosopher states a truism that *aisan* (diseases) make

adahunse (herbalists) relevant to human existence, and litigations (*ejo*) make *agbejoro* (the advocates) relevant in the society.

What is said previously notwithstanding, the Yoruba prefer *ire* to *ibi*. They know that the manifestations of evil are observable in every facet of life, whether physical, moral, social, or spiritual. Evil is summed up in four parts: (a) *iku* (death), which is responsible for putting an end to human life; (b) *aarun* (disease), which is responsible for afflicting human beings with illness; (3) *egba*, which is the misfortune that brings paralysis to man; and (d) *ofo*, which is the loss that destroys or carries away human's property.

Most of the time, the Yoruba conceive of evil as a personified masculine being: He eats, sleeps, dances, and walks about, afflicting humans. The *odu Ogbe-rosun* says that evil walks about at night as it covers itself with the darkness of the night. That explains, in part, why people are warned to put off the light so that when evil is passing by it will not feel attracted to come into a house as a guest to perpetrate mischief.

The existence of evil does not pose any contradiction to the goodness of *Olodumare*. The Supreme Being is regarded as a being who does what she or he wants, but it is generally held that God does not tempt people with evil, neither does she or he perpetrate evil against her or his creation. The Yoruba trace the perpetration of evil in a society to two sources: namely, visible and invisible causes. The visible ones are the consequence of human action or inaction. These include murder, violence, oppression, victimization, stealing, and refusal to help those in need. Invisible sources have a spiritual origin. This is often linked to anti-wickedness divinities. In the Yoruba pantheon, *Esu* (although not the Devil of the Bible) is more associated with evil than any other god. Perhaps this explains why many people regard *Esu* as the instigator and main power behind all kinds of evil perpetrated by human beings. The witches are nothing more than aggrieved ancestors.

Yoruba religion exonerates God from the blame of evil and misfortune that befall human beings. The problem of evil is attributed to the concept of *ori* (head) and *akunleyan* (fate). It is held that whatever one asked for in front of *eleda* (creator) before one was born becomes one's *ayanmo* (one's

lot or destiny) in life. Therefore, whatever happens to one depends on one's choice of ori when one was making one's choice (*akunleyan*).

Deji Ayegboyin and Charles Jegede

See also Ancestors; Yoruba

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EWE

The Ewe people are found in three different countries in West Africa: Ghana, Togo, and Benin. This distribution over these three national territories resulted from the fragmentation of the African continent that took place during the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885.

The Ewe people are patrilineal. They are composed of several clans, defined in relation to a common male ancestor. Furthermore, branches of the clans or lineages also trace their ancestry back to a shared male ancestor. Each lineage is characterized by its own symbols and ancestral shrine, and it assumes collective ownership of property. Stools are particularly important because they are often carved with great care and provide a rich narrative about the clan in question. Furthermore, during rituals, the clan stool serves as the place to which ancestral spirits may be called. This entry looks at their historical background, deities, and rituals related to life passages.

Historical Narratives

According to Ewe oral tradition, their present-day location was not the original home of the Ewe. It is widely accepted that the Ewe migrated from a place called Kotu or Amedzowe, east of the Niger

River, and settled around 1500 in Notsie, a region of what is now Togoland. From Notsie, however, they had to escape in a quite dramatic fashion. Indeed, whereas King Adela Atogble of Notsie extended his hospitality to the Ewe newcomers and treated them with kindness, his successor, King Ago Akoli, was not so generous and welcoming. In fact, he was quite hostile toward them and treated them with much ruthlessness. One of the most terrible things that he is said to have done was to put to death all Ewe elderly men and women. This he allegedly did to deprive the Ewe people of the knowledge of their history.

The Ewe nonetheless managed to save one elderly man, Tegli, by hiding him in a secret place. It is eventually Tegli who conceived a clever plan that would allow his people to escape the tyranny of King Ago Akoli. From Notsie, the Ewe found their way to a town called Tsevi, in Togoland. There, they split into different groups and traveled separate paths. One of the subgroups became the Anlo Ewe of Ghana. Today, the Ewe commemorate and celebrate their heroic escape from Notsie every year during a festival known as *Hogbetstoto Za*.

Major Deities

The Ewe believe in an androgynous (i.e., both female and male) supreme God, whom they call Mawuga Kitikana, or simply Mawu. God created the world and everything in it. Mawu Kitikana's power is absolute, and its presence permeates all that is. Mawu is venerated through intermediary secondary divinities called *Trowo*. The *Trowo* are similar to the Vodun venerated by the Fon, to whom they are culturally related. Mawu is held to be the mother and father of all the *Trowo*. There are many *Trowo*, but some are obviously more important and, hence, more popular than others.

Among the main *Trowo*, one must certainly mention Afa, the divinity of divination. The Ewe Afa is the same as the Yoruba Ifa deity of divination and originated in Ilé-Ifè. Afa devotees must undergo a special initiation. Divination being the preferred epistemological mode among Ewe religious followers, Afa naturally plays a central role in Ewe life. Afa is consulted with the assistance of a diviner, who relies on a special chain with four concaves on each side.

This divining chain is referred to as *Agumaga*. *Agumaga* is thrown on a mat to establish communication with Afa. The manner in which the concaves turn as the chain falls will provide a preliminary answer to the question asked. The first sign that reveals itself as answer to the question is known as *kpoli*. Afa divination has 256 *kpoliwo*. Each sign is associated with particular plants, animals, stories, songs, food taboos, and so on. Follow-up questions may be asked for further details and clarification. At the end of the divination session, the diviner will share with the client what he or she might need to do to achieve his or her aim. This could mean making an offering or sacrifice to one of the deities.

Another quite important deity is Yewe, the older brother of Afa. Yewe is the god of thunder and lightning. The Yoruba serve him as Shango. Initiates to Yewe receive a new name at the end of the initiation process, their old name never to be spoken again. Any proven offender will be judged by Yewe priests and elders and sentenced to pay a heavy fine because uttering the old name of a Yewe initiate is considered highly offensive to Yewe and its devotees.

Other important divinities include Legba, the guardian of the spiritual world; Gu (or Egu), the god of iron, war, and hunting; and Nyigbla, the deity of the Sacred Forest. The Trowo are protective, healing forces acting on behalf of the living. During a ceremony organized to honor them, which will necessarily involve drumming and dancing, Trowo will mount their human spouse and use them to pass on certain messages to the community. They may render a verdict in the case of a conflict between humans or they may also heal the sick.

Key Rituals

The Ewe carve special spiritual figures related to the divinities. For example, earthen Legba statues are quite common, as are ritual objects covered with cowrie shells, among other things. Drums are also made for ceremonies, as well as costumes associated with particular divinities.

According to Ewe religious beliefs regarding death, a person's spirit (or *djoto*) will come back in the next child born into the lineage. Newborn males are circumcised and named on the seventh

day after being born, whereas newborn girls have their ears pierced and are also named on the seventh day after their birth. The Ewe believe that the spiritual and physical worlds mirror each other and are, therefore, very similar.

Funerals are extremely important because, according to Ewe religion, death is the most significant moment in a person's life. Funerals are commonly reported to be extravagant affairs involving more expenses and lavishness than any other ceremony. Drummers will drum and mourners will dance all night long, several nights in a row. Attending funerals; making a financial contribution toward the purchase of a coffin, burial clothes, and the hiring of dancers and drummers; as well as bringing food and drinks are non-negotiable social obligations. Funerals will typically involve many events over the course of 1 month.

Ama Mazama

See also Fon; Mawu-Lisa; Vodou in Benin; Yoruba

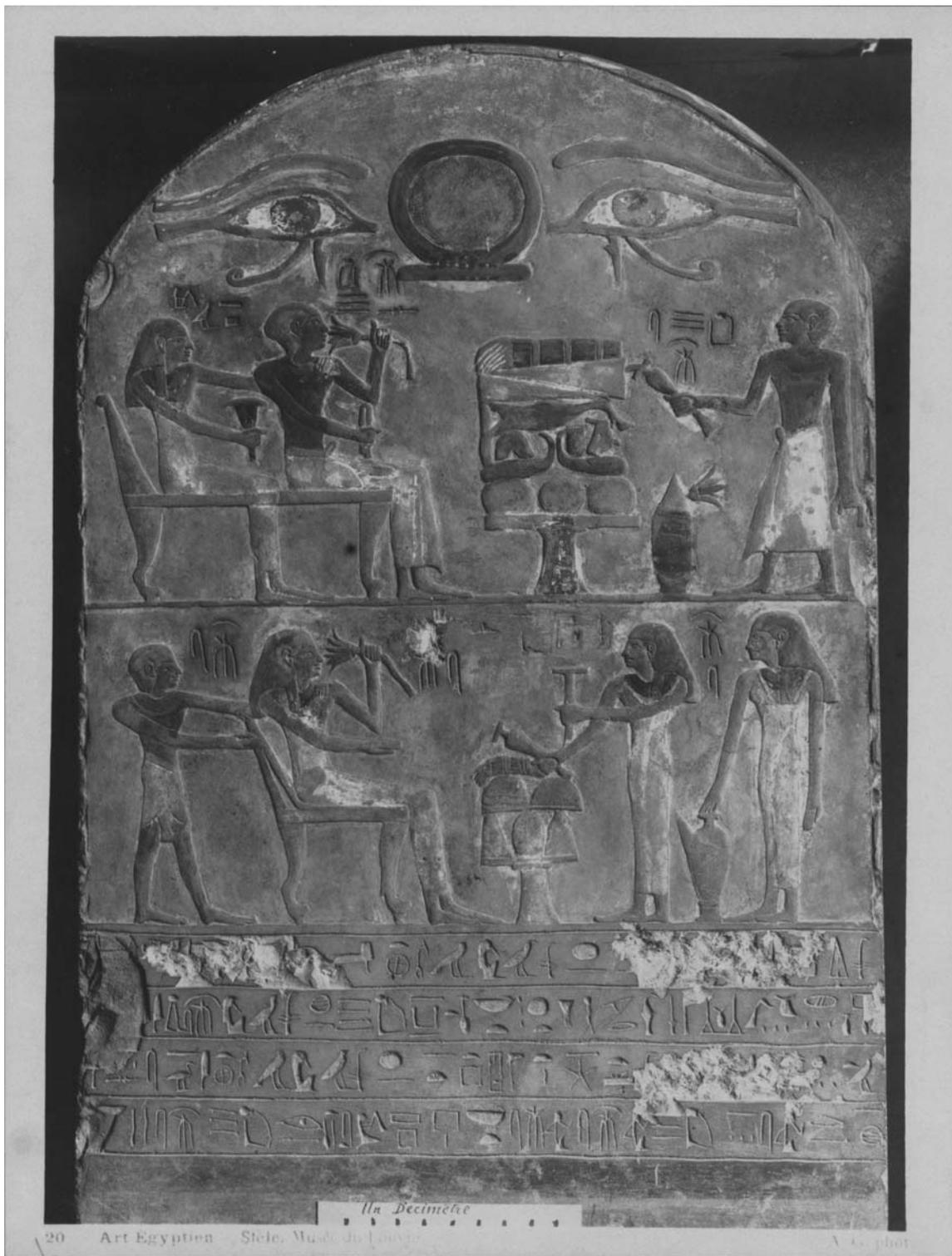
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EYE OF HORUS

The symbol of the Eye of Horus—that is, *wedjat*—was used for protection, healing, as well as mathematical and medicinal calculations in ancient Egypt. In fact, the Eye of Horus, or all-seeing eye, is one of the most recognized symbols of ancient Egypt. It was in use throughout the thousands of years of Egyptian civilization and continues to be used today.

According to Egyptian mythology, Horus/Heru loses his left eye in one of his struggles with Set for the right to rule Egypt and to avenge the death



Bas-relief and hieroglyphics on an arched stele two with eyes of Horus on top. The symbol of the Eye of Horus was used for protection, healing, and mathematical and medicinal calculations in ancient Egypt.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-04933.

of his father Ausar. The eye was restored by Hathor, and this restoration came to symbolize the process of making whole and healing. Some versions of the story indicate that Djehuty restored the eye. The restored eye was a symbol of the God of light and represented protection, strength, and perfection.

Another version of the myth states that it was the right eye of Heru, representative of the sun, that was torn out, again by Set, during one of their battles. Djehuty restored all of the eye except a small piece. This incomplete eye is the origin of the Horus-eye fractions. In this system, parts of the eye were assigned fractional equivalents ranging from $1/2$, $1/4$, $1/8$, $1/16$, $1/32$, to $1/64$. When added, these fractional equivalents total $63/64$, known in mathematical circles as the reciprocal 2^n series and a complementary fraction. The Horus eye fractions were used for measuring grains and medicines.

Celestially speaking, the right eye is symbolic of the sun, the day, and its power. The left eye also represents the waxing and waning properties of the moon—the Horus or light of the night. The eye is also the Pole star, the star that is closest to the celestial North Pole and an important factor in Egyptian celestial time keeping. The two winged eyes represent the two divisions of Heaven: north and south, and sun and moon. In this guise, the left eye is feminine and associated with Isis.

The iconography of ancient Egypt, found commonly on tomb and temple walls, would depict either the right or left eye. One eye is considered white and the other black. The two eyes together were often placed on the door recesses of tombs for protection against evil. The eye would also be drawn with arms carrying an ankh, papyrus staff (which means to flourish), or lighted candles. In the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, the wedjat eye appears with falcon wings, which are symbols of Heru. A sheet of papyrus shows the eye inside of a circle emerging from the horizon: a symbol of Ra-Horakhty or Ra in Horus.

Another popular icon of the wedjat appeared in the form of the amulet. The wedjat was the most common of the various amulets used by the Egyptians. The use of these amulets was universal and spans all time periods. The *Book of the Coming Forth by Day* instructs that the wedjat should be made of lapis-lazuli or *mak* stone,

whereas amulets were fashioned from gold, silver, granite, hematite, porcelain, wood, and so on. The wedjat was worn by Egyptians to bring them strength, vigor, protection, safety, and good health. In ritual, offerings were made to wedjat amulets at the summer solstice when the sun was most powerful. A corresponding amulet was placed on any body part after words of power, or hekau, were spoken. This ritual allowed the deceased to take his place on the boat of Ra.

The word *wedjat*, or Wadjyt, means sound and is the name of a cobra goddess or neter often depicted as rearing cobra. This image, the uraeus, was a symbol of kingship and worn on the top of the forehead. The Wadjyt was also depicted as a lionine form known as the Eye of Ra.

The Eye of Horus survived beyond ancient Egypt in various cultural, mystic, esoteric, and, more recently, neo-Egyptian traditions. The occupation of Egypt by France in the late 18th century sparked modern Western interest in all things Egyptian, which continues today in many esoteric traditions of the West that use the wedjat. The masonic symbol of the Eye of Providence, which appears on U.S. currency, is said to derive from the Eye of Horus, as does the Rx symbol used by the pharmaceutical industry.

Communities of African and African-descended people also identify with and use the wedjat in their sacred practices. At times, it is also considered a representation of the third eye, which is a part of the Hindu tradition. The evil eye is not part of the wedjat tradition, although some sources may link the two. The concept of the third eye does relate to the wedjat because wedjat represents the eye of the mind or the illuminated mind. Therefore, the wedjat is still popular as both a symbol and an amulet, either for protection or for its association with ancient Egyptian culture.

Denise Martin

See also Heka; Heru, Horus; Magic

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EZILI DANTÒ

Ezili Dantò is one of the personae of Ezili, the most important and revered female spirit or Lwa of the Vodou religious tradition in Haiti. Other major Ezili personae include Ezili Freda, Grann Ezili, Ezili Zye-Wouj, Ezili Mapyan, and Ezili Lemba. Ezili is known as the “Lwa of Love,” the symbol of cosmic fertility par excellence, mother of the universe, and the giver of children. It is Ezili, indeed, who is responsible for the continuous flow of life.

Ezili Dantò is the Petro manifestation of Ezili. Petro Lwa, which, according to many scholars, developed in Haiti (as opposed to being directly imported from West Africa, where Vodou originated), are characterized by their hot energy and short temper. Thus, although Ezili Freda (the Rada manifestation of Ezili) is generally generous and gracious, if not a bit frivolous and vain, Ezili Dantò, in contrast, can become enraged and threatening when displeased by one of her servants.

Ezili Dantò is commonly represented as a black woman/virgin, carrying on her left arm a black female infant dressed with pink clothes. On her right cheek, one may discern quite clearly two parallel vertical scars. Although some Vodou devotees attribute those facial marks to Ezili Dantò's African origins, others maintain that it was while fighting against the white colonists during the revolutionary war that Ezili Dantò's face was thus wounded. Also, sometimes, Ezili Dantò is represented with a chopped off nose, and this also is believed by many to be the result of a wound suffered in combat.

Ezili Dantò, it is said, is a quite independent woman, the mother of seven children, whom she raises by herself. Her children's fathers include the Lwa Ogu, her most frequently mentioned lover, but also Ti-Jan Petwo. Her color is turquoise blue and her day is Tuesday, the day of Petro Lwa. Her

favorite food is pork, while her favorite drink is crème de cacao, a dark brown cacao-based liquor. She is fond of money, clothing, but especially of dolls, and she enjoys receiving them as gifts.

Ama Mazama

See also Lwa; Petwo; Vodou in Haiti

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EZILI FREDA

Ezili's (also sometimes referred to as Erzulie) full name is Metrès (Mistress) Mambo Ezili Freda Dahomey. Each name makes reference to the different aspects of this Lwa of the Rada pantheon of Vodou in Haiti. She is by far the most popular female deity in Haiti, where she rules over love, romance, luxury, gambling luck, abundance, and refinement. Indeed, she is the symbol of love, femininity, and beauty. As a result of this close association of Ezili with womanhood, she is also perceived as the symbol of sexual fertility, the giver of children. It is to her that one appeals in conception and childbearing matters.

The colors that symbolize Ezili are pink and white. Traditionally, she is served on Thursday because this is her sacred day. She is depicted as a rich woman, and in order to serve her, one must present the most expensive and elegant gifts in attempts to gain her affections and endowments. Pink champagne, jewelry, flowers, cakes, fine cheeses, chocolates, and white doves have been known to gain her esteem. However, Ezili is

known to never be satisfied and to always want more of what she is given. If she is not appeased, then tears will surely ensue.

Being a member of the Rada family entitles Ezili to the title of Mambo. Alongside her beauty and exquisite taste, she is also powerful, and her presence alone is known to nullify negative *wanga* (witchcraft) and poisons.

Ezili is said to dislike women due to an overall jealousy of women and their relationship with men. She seldom touches them when in possession. When in another woman's presence, she merely salutes her with her pinkie fingers. In fact, she is known to cause problems between men and women. This is because she wants all men to herself and believes that she should have complete control over all of them. Her love for men and romance are both enduring and profound. When in the company of men, she is known to shower them with kisses and hugs. She even, quite often, requests their hand in marriage. Along with this marital bond to Ezili come abundant gifts and blessings for which she is known.

It is not only with male humans that Ezili Freda forges special bonds, but also with some of the Lwa because her often tumultuous relationship with the Lwa Ogou Feray, Danbala Wedo, and Agwe is well known.

She is conceptualized as a wealthy, upper class mulatress, that is, a light-skinned Creole/Kreyol

woman drenched in gold jewelry and wearing dresses made of silk and satin, as well as expensive perfumes. In Haiti, class membership is gained and/or illustrated linguistically, with French functioning as the socially and economically dominant language, a direct legacy of slavery and imperialism. For this reason, during Ezili's possession performances, she only speaks exaggerated French, which is seen as prestigious, and refuses to speak Haitian Creole.

Her symbol is a heart pierced with a knife, as rendered by her *vèvè* (ritual drawing). This is said to be a depiction of her everlasting loyalty to all things surrounding love and romance. Ezili clearly derives from the African Vodun Azili/Ezili of Benin. She also presents much resemblance with Oshun of the Yoruba pantheon.

LaAisha Murray

See also Fertility; Lwa; Rada; Vodou in Haiti

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F

Fa

Fa is the name of a deity among the Fon people of Benin and the Yoruba of Nigeria. Among the Yoruba, the name is often rendered Ifa. Fa is the far-reaching God of fate or destiny who can impact on the lives of all humans. According to the traditional teachers of African religion, the notion of Fa as the determiner of destiny is the central focus of the work done by this deity.

It is thought that individuals have their own personal Fa or God of destiny, and each person also has their own Legba. Legba is the only God who knows the alphabet of Mawu; to interpret your Fa, you have to know that writing of Mawu. Thus, among the Fon of Benin, Fa, Legba, and Mawu are connected. One cannot access the secrets of Fa without Legba, and Mawu, of course, rules over the universe.

The tale of the emergence of Fa, according to Yoruba legend, begins with a dying, hopeless humankind who had stopped sending sacrifices to their Gods, and therefore these Gods were hungry. In seeking to give humans something to live for, Eshu, another name for Legba, went to a palm tree where monkeys gave him 16 palm nuts. The monkeys instructed Eshu to travel around the world to hear 16 sayings in 16 places. After doing so, Eshu gave the knowledge he gained to humankind through the soothsaying Ifa (Fa).

According to oral history in Benin, the heart of the Benin nation was the Dahomey kingdom, which was established by a Yoruba princess around the 15th and 16th centuries. By the 18th

century, the Dahomey kingdom had emerged as one of the most powerful military states in West Africa, and it was a major player in the European triangular trade of the enslaved.

Before the Fa deity of divination was introduced, Fon diviners in Benin had historically relied on a method called Bo, which is the oracle of the ancestors. A diviner among the Fon is known as *bokonon*—the owner of Bo knowledge. With the arrival of Fa divination, the *bokonon* became a Fa priest who is usually consulted before important decisions are made. In the *bokonon*'s soothsaying ritual, palm nuts and a tray that symbolizes space and other divinatory accessories are used. The priest sprinkles powder on the tray and draws Fa signs with his or her fingertips.

In the 1930s, the Church of Fa was founded after this deity in Nigeria. This group has sought different ways to keep Africans connected to the indigenous religion. They refer to the Supreme Being as Olorun, as is the custom among the Yoruba. However, for them, the idea of Fa as the keeper of destiny is central to their outlook on life. Thus, Fa continues to this day as a major contributor to the religious life of the Fon and Yoruba peoples.

Ibram H. Rogers

See also Babalawo; Fon; Yoruba

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FAMILY

Family in Africa is characterized by persons, unborn, living, or deceased, who are related to each other or may become related to each other through direct blood and ancestral affinity. Members of the same family are related to a common ancestor in biological as well as sociospiritual terms. The African idea of family comprises all of the members from a particular lineage. This lineage might be, as was usual in most cultures, matrilineal or, as it is increasingly, patrilineal. A household may consist of several generations from the oldest member of the family to the youngest. Indeed, coresidence is not necessary, although proximity is usually required. From this perspective, it is possible for a family to have several locations or houses and the children of these several houses belong to the same family. In most cases, where polygamy exists, children live with their mothers. This entry looks at the role of the family and concepts related to kinship.

The Family's Role

The African family establishes a child's presence in the world and provides the child with identity, spiritual ancestry, and personhood. One does not have personhood without the collective family in the African sense. No one is alone, and no one is an individual island. Thus, the family acculturates the child to the position that he or she occupies in the human realm. Children in families are taught their lineages, responsibilities, values and customs, and obligations to the family. Many things are taboo, that is, they are considered deeply dysfunctional to the family if they are done by the children and this serves, therefore, as a prohibition for antifamily behavior.

According to most African scholars, one of the principal roles of the family is procreation. Because it is believed by many Africans that life continues after death and that reincarnation occurs in human form, it is important to maintain the procreative function of the family as a way of maintaining the presence of the ancestors in the land of the living. Once ritual has played its course in the remembrance of the ancestors and

there are no more children or grandchildren to ritualize the ancestors, they can only live by returning to Earth in a human form. Thus, the continuity is ensured because the ancestors return not in an animal form, but in the form of a child who is born to the same lineage. Often the African elder's only worry appears to be, "Who shall ritualize me when I am deceased if I have no children." Therefore, men and women believe that having many children is one of the best ways to ensure continuity so that the circle of humanity, especially in the family, is not broken.

The African family is also the center of spirituality and economic production. By increasing the productive capacity of the family, often with the expansion of the members of the family through plural marriage or through adoption into the family, economic stability is maintained. Because marriage is how members are traditionally added to families, the significance placed on marriage in Africa relates to the spiritual continuity of the group. It is rare to find matrifocal families in Africa where a mother and her children exist outside of a relationship with a man.

Kinship Concepts

The most popular family type may be called *consanguineal*. Yet this term is often referred to in the West as the "extended" family, where the idea of the nuclear family is seen as standard. Use of the term *extended* has become problematic. Thus, consanguineal families consisting of a mother and her children living with a man or a blood-related family member, which might be the husband's brother, is the norm in Africa. This condition can occur if the husband dies and leaves the wife with children. Such a family does not become matrifocal because the responsibility of the husband's brother is to maintain the deceased wife or wives and children.

Several types of kinship descriptions exist in Africa. Among Africans, some groups will have no two relatives sharing the same kinship term, although they may be equal distance in generation from the ancestor. This is rare. However, the most common description appears to be one that allows a distinction between sex and generation. In traditional societies, Africans did not utilize the

“Eskimo terminology” for kinship derived from the work of Western anthropologists for the so-called nuclear family. Because Africans do not have the concept of a nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and child, it would have been inconceivable for the African sages to arrive at this type of kinship structure.

The Western family assumes only one mother and one father, whereas the African family considers several mothers and several fathers. The Western family speaks of a son and a daughter as children of the same parents, whereas the African family sees the son and daughter of a particular family as the son and daughter of the larger family. The Western family speaks of a brother and a sister, whereas the African family accepts all siblings of the same age group who are related to the same ancestor as brothers and sisters. Thus, the idea of first cousin, second cousin, or third cousin does not exist because these are only brothers and sisters.

One finds variations in all societies because human beings have become quite mobile. Thus, to speak of the African family as if it were static would be a mistake. Nevertheless, there remain some core principles that seem to dictate the way that Africans view family. The family centers on group continuity and economic production, male–female complementarity where there is strict gender role responsibilities, the practice of procreation as a matter of spiritual and community life, acceptance of children of the same generation as sons and daughters, and a haven for identity, nurturing, customs, and traditions.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Children; Marriage; Procreation

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FAMILY RITES

Every African family is involved in one way or another in the rituals that sustain the community. In fact, without the accompanying rituals, a society cannot last long. This entry examines several rituals of ordinary African life.

Birth

The human cycle of birth, growing up, marriage, and death is marked all the way with religious observances in Africa. Birth is a time of huge rejoicing. In many cultures, there is a period of waiting before the celebrations begin, making sure first that the baby is healthy and strong enough to survive. The Akamba of West Africa wait 3 days before slaughtering a goat, at which point the child is named. The Gikuyu in Kenya have a period of 4 to 5 days of seclusion for both mother and child, where only close relatives can visit.

Naming

Because almost all African names have a clear meaning, naming a child has huge significance. The name chosen may be influenced by circumstances of the birth—if it rained, the child’s name will reflect that. The child’s features may prompt the name to come from an ancestor or recently deceased member of the family. The name will be given some time after the birth. The Akamba choose a name on the third day, whereas the Wolof in coastal Senegal choose a name 1 week after birth.

Puberty

The move from childhood to adulthood in traditional societies is carefully marked and charted. Most ceremonies involve an element of withdrawal. Boys or girls are taken away from the community for a period of instruction. The Akamba and the Massai in East Africa are just two groups where circumcision of the boys is the central rite of passage.

Marriage

Marriage is another sacred rite of passage, but one involving all the community. Traditionally, a man

or woman will marry someone known and approved by both families. If the man is married already, then his first wife or wives will be consulted. Traditionally, polygamy was not encouraged unless the man was rich enough to support his wives in a decent fashion. Taking a girlfriend in addition to having several wives was frowned upon by the community.

The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and Krio in Sierra Leone have a prewedding ceremony, in which the intended bride is kept hidden when her fiancé comes to see her. He calls for her, and her family keeps producing different women, who are often old. The fiancé spots the mistake each time and each time calls for his intended. Eventually, she is produced with much excitement.

Death

There are a variety of different customs associated with death. Many of them are concerned with the transition of the soul and laying the soul of the dead person finally to rest. Considerable thought is devoted to burial places. Some bury their dead underneath the compound or house. For others, it is important to remove the body to a burial ground some distance away.

M. Tillotson

See also Birth; Death; Marriage; Puberty

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FANG

Living primarily in the African countries of Gabon, Guinea, and Cameroon, the Fang ethnic group is a Bantu-speaking people whose religious traditions, although monotheistic in form, are deeply rooted in the honoring and veneration of the ancestors. The Fang people often keep the bones and skulls of their ancestors because they

believe that these skeletal remnants still hold power—power that is viewed as sacred and influential in the issues faced by the people in daily life.

Additionally, the wooden sculptures, masks, and carvings created by the Fang and often sold as exotic art are actually artifacts that are created to be the guardians of the ancestors' remains. They ultimately act as an intermediary between the people and the ancestors whose protection they guarantee. These ancestors are believed to exercise as much or more power in their spiritual form as they might have in their natural lives, particularly if they died a "good" death and lived honorable lives. Although the Fang do not believe that the masks and sculptures have power themselves per se, nonetheless they do use the masks as both a marker for the ancestors that they honor and as a form of social control, a symbolic reminder of the power of their ancestors.

The Fang believe that everyone has a body and a soul and it is the soul that gives life to the body. Whereas the body dies, the soul does not, but lives on. Ancestors are spiritual guides and are highly influential in the lives of future generations. In many cases, they are prayed to and given offerings to secure their blessings. They also set the moral standard for the Fang community, and it is believed that the ancestors can communicate to their descendents through dreams and visions. Although the ancestors who are honored can be both male and female, male ancestors are more likely to be revered because of the patrilineal structure of Fang society.

By the early 20th century, the Fang had instituted secret committees within their communities. The *Ngil*, a judiciary organization, is the most prominent of those societies within the Fang and is responsible for battling witchcraft, including performing exorcisms of evil spirits and exploring the possibility of demonic possessions in individuals in the community. The *Ngil* is also responsible for the initiation of young boys and is a form of law enforcement in the community. Because it is believed that the ancestors are often reincarnated in their descendents, the spirits of the ancestors are major role players in the rites of passage of the boys.

The Fang believe in the supreme God, *Mebere*, who is viewed as the creator of the known world. *Mebere* not only blew life into Earth, but also is

the creator of the first ancestor, *Zambe* or *Sekume*, who was fashioned from clay and whose form was first as a lizard. Mebere placed this lizard in the waters for 8 days; on the final day, the lizard gratefully emerged from the water as a man.

The Fang also believe that Mebere was one god with three different aspects: Nzame, Mbere, and Nkwa. These three parts consulted with one another during the creation process and particularly in the creation of the first man. It was the Mbere and Nkwa parts of the god that suggested that there be a chief of the Earth; whereas the elephant, the monkey, and the leopard were all considered, this first creation was named Fam and was given three things from each part of his god. He received strength from Nzame, leadership from Mbere, and beauty from Nkwa. Unfortunately, Fam became arrogant and attempted to usurp the authority of his god. Mebere could not tolerate this and destroyed the Earth with the exception of Fam, who had been promised to never experience death.

Mbere then desired to create a chief of the Earth that would be reflective of the god's own image and therefore created the new man known as Zambe or Sekume. This new creation became the first ancestor of the Fang. Mbere created a woman whom he called Mbongwe from a tree. Fam, now with no dominion and forced to live below the Earth, is believed to still find his way to the surface of Earth to harm the descendents of Zambe/Sekume. The Fang also believed that Zambe, the first ancestor, was the creator of the races.

There are multiple variations to the story of creation within the Fang religion. Another version of the creation belief in the Fang religion has Mebere alone in the universe except for a mythical spider. The spider was suspended by a thread above the sea. Later, the spider came down from the sky releasing its egg sac, which housed both the souls of men and termites. The spider then dropped the termites into the water and the termites descended to the ocean floor, pulling the Earth below the water to the surface and allowing space for animals and humanity.

Tracey Michael Lewis

See also Ancestors; Earth; God

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FARO

Faro, according to the Mande people of ancient Mali, is commonly referenced as the god of restoration and fertility. In this respect, he is similar to the deity Ausar in ancient Kemet, who was also called the god of restoration, resurrection, and fertility. The Bamana, also called Bambara, like other Mande communities, honor Faro as the great light and creator god. In the Mande creation story, he symbolizes the restoring organizer of the universe. The role that Faro plays in the Mande creation story is widely shared among Mande-speaking communities (e.g., the Bozo, Bambara, Kurumba, Samogo, and Dogon), thus solidifying his significance in many Mande communities. The importance of Faro is illustrated in the Mande creation story.

According to the Mande creation story, God successfully created twin varieties of the eleusine seed, known as the egg of the world. God proceeded to create six more seeds and combined with this group of eight seeds the four elements and the cardinal points to mark out the organization of the world and its expansion. In accordance with the narrative, each egg contained one male and one female. These were to be the prototype of the future human. One of the males, Pemba, seeking to dominate creation emerged prematurely before full development was complete, tearing a piece of his placenta in the process. He descended through empty space, and the piece of his placenta became the Earth. However, it was dry, barren, and infertile.

After realizing this, Pemba returned to the heavens and attempted to return to his place in the placenta. However, God had restructured the remaining part of his placenta into the sun. Pemba stole eight male seeds from God's clavicle and returned to Earth sowing them in the piece of placenta that had become Earth. In the field, only

one of the eleusine seeds grew, whereas the others died from water deprivation. Due to Pemba's theft and his incestuous act, the Earth became impure and the eleusine seed turned red, the color it bears today.

To restore harmony in the universe and purify the Earth, Faro was sacrificed in heaven; his body was cut into 60 pieces that were scattered throughout space. The fragments of his body descended onto Earth-producing trees, a symbolic representation of vegetal restoration. The Almighty God brought Faro back to life in heaven and gave him human shape and sent him down to Earth on an ark made of his celestial placenta. Faro's ark rested on the mountain called Kouroula, which lies between Kri and Kri Koro. This area was then given the name of Mande, which the inhabitants translate as "son of the person" (ma) or, more explicitly, "son of the mannogo," the person being Faro whose first bodily form was that of a Silurian fish.

It is commonly believed among Mande people that Faro serves as a redeemer and organizer of the universe who is enthroned in the seventh heaven and sends rain that brings fertility. In addition, Faro symbolizes revitalization and replenishment of the universe. Consistent with the oral tradition, Faro bestowed on humans their conscience, order, purity, and sense of responsibility.

Justin Gammage

See also God; Mende

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FATIMAN, CÉCILE

Cécile Fatiman was a Mambo or Vodou priestess who with Dutty Boukman led a Vodou ceremony that is generally recognized as the spark that

started the Haitian Revolution. The ceremony is reported to have taken place on August 14, 1791, in a thickly wooded area near a Lenormand plantation known as Bois Caïman (Alligator Wood).

Cécile Fatiman was the daughter of an African woman and a Corsican prince. She was sold into slavery with her mother in Saint Domingue. Her mother also had two sons who disappeared after being sold into slavery. A mulatto with green eyes and long black silky hair, Fatiman became the wife of Louis Michel Pierrot, who led a black battalion at Vertières—the site of the final and decisive battle of the Haitian Revolution. Louis Michel Pierrot would later become, for a brief period, the president of Haiti. Cécile Fatiman lived in Cap-Français, later Cap-Haitien, until the age of 112, reportedly in full possession of her mental abilities.

Information about Cécile Fatiman and the Bois Caïman ceremony comes from the accounts of Antoine Delmas written in 1793 and later published in *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (1814). Specific information about Cécile Fatiman comes from her grandson General Pierre Benoit Rameau. General Rameau is a Haitian national hero who took part in the resistance against U.S. intervention in Haiti in 1915. He fought in the North along side Rosalvo Bobo.

During the Bois Caïman ceremony, Cecile Fatiman was the officiating Mambo who invoked the Vodou deity, or *Lwa*, Ezili Dantò. It is reported that a black pig was sacrificed, thus marking the ceremony as a Petwo rite of Vodou. The Petwo rite, or *Nanchon*, is believed to be a uniquely Haitian manifestation of the Vodou religion. For example, relatively to the *Rada*, or *Ginen Nanchon*, the Petwo Nanchon cannot trace its origins solely to Dahomey. Its origins are rather in the African struggle against slavery, and it is closely associated with the Haitian Revolution, as well as other Haitian uprisings against oppression, such as the Cacos in 1915 or the overthrow of Baby Doc in 1986.

According to Moreau de Saint-Méry, the Petwo Nanchon was introduced in 1768 by a powerful houngan by the name of Don Petro in Petit-Goave. He introduced a dance called the Danse à Don Pédre, whose rhythm was so powerful and electrifying that it was forbidden. His impact was

so profound that his name was used to refer to a group of Africans who today worship Lwa bearing his name. Indeed, many of the Rada Loas have a Petro counterpart, as if their images were reflected in a mirror, thus inverting their personalities to match that of the Petwo Nanchon. The Petwo Lwa have earned a reputation of being aggressive and violent, whereas the Rada counterparts are said to be gentle. These distinctions, however, are not absolute because the Rada Loas can be quite vindictive when offended, whereas the Petwo Lwa can be quite protective and generous.

Garvey F. Lundy

See also Bois Caiman; Boukman; Ezili Dantò; Mambo; Petwo; Vodou and the Haitian Revolution

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FERTILITY

Fertility is of the utmost importance to African people in general and thus occupies a central place in African religion. This is the case because fertility refers to the perpetuation and regeneration of life, a matter of great significance for African people. Indeed, the latter believe in a life force that permeates all that is—human beings, animals, plants, minerals, objects, and phenomena. That shared life force, which is responsible for the world's ontological unity, ultimately derives from God, the Supreme Being, and is therefore sacred. It is human beings' incumbent and sacred duty, as well as best interest, to appreciate and protect the harmonious flow of life, and this, in the end, is obviously predicated on the occurrence of fertility. This entry looks at the role

of fertility in society, its relationship to the gods and the ancestors, and related ritual expressions.

Social Importance

Fertility, as Africans understand it, given the common spiritual essence of all that exists, includes not only human fertility, but also animal and land fertility. Fertility manifests itself primarily through the birth of many children, the birth of many domesticated and game animals, the growing of medicinal plants, and the flourishing of generous crops. Many children born to a family mean that its lineage will continue and expand, whereas the names of the parents and other relatives will be spoken after they have made their transition to the ancestral realm, thus preventing them from being forgotten and from dying socially. Rituals will be conducted on their behalf, ensuring that they remain properly connected with the world of the living.

In contrast, a large thriving cattle herd and plentiful crops and healing plants most obviously mean prosperity and peace for the living. Likewise, the presence of numerous animals in the forest will assure hunters of successful and generous hunts, that is, adequate feeding for all.

For fertility to occur, the union of the male and the female is indispensable. In the case of human beings and most other animals, it goes without saying that only through the sexual encounter of males and females of the same species can young ones be born, thus maintaining and regenerating life. However, in the case of land fertility, the same principle of sexual complementarity applies. Indeed, African people commonly associate the sky with the male creative power, whereas the Earth stands for the female creative power. In that context, the sky, while releasing rain (i.e., life-bringing and sustaining water), fertilizes the earth, thus allowing plants to grow and life in general to thrive.

Rain, in the African spiritual and religious context, acts as cosmic sperm or fertilizer. The same observation could be made about water in general, whose intimate relationship with creation and fertility has often been stressed in African religion from ancient times. In Kemet (ancient Egypt), for example, at the beginning stood the primeval waters, Nun, from which arose Ra, the supreme deity. From Ra's eyes came the tears that were to give birth to

women and men. Similarly, the Ankh, the symbol of life in ancient Egypt, was often used as a sign for water during rituals. Streams of libations were represented by ankhs on some of the temples' walls.

The Gods and Ancestors

Fertility, the maintenance of life, always requires sexual fusion as far as Africans are concerned. Thus, for many African people, and quite consistently, the Supreme Being, ultimately responsible for the creation of the world, is androgynous (i.e., both male and female). NanaBuluku, the supreme deity of the Fon, or Amma, the supreme deity of the Dogon, are but two examples of such primordial androgyny. Furthermore, Mawu-Lisa, the dual divinity created by NanaBuluku, displays both male and female attributes. Also, in the Dogon tradition, the primordial egg that contained the world was divided into two twin placentas: Each placenta contained a pair of twin Nommo, from which human beings came.

One of the striking similarities of the Nommo was sexual completeness because they were each endowed with the spiritual principles of both female and male at the same time. Similarly, it is not uncommon for many of the African divinities most closely connected with fertility to display the same characteristic of sexual completeness. Danbala-Wedo, the vodu snake giver of children of the Vodu tradition of both Haiti and Benin, for example, never appears without its female counterpart, the vodu Ayida-Wedo.

On Earth, the coming together of the male and female, during sexual encounters, is interpreted as the necessary reenactment of the original divine androgyny to which the world owes its existence in the first place and without which life would not be present. It is easy to understand why, within the African worldview, homosexuality is incomprehensible and highly reprehensible because it violates the ultimate order of things and inescapably means infertility (i.e., the end of life).

All over Africa, the ancestors are intimately involved with the occurrence of human, animal, and land fertility. There are a number of reasons for this. Given the primary role of the ancestors as guardians of the social order of the world of the living, such involvement is not surprising. Within

the African worldview, a harmonious state of affairs requires the continuation of life, and it is incumbent on the ancestors to bestow fertility on the living. The ancestors are directly responsible for sending children to married couples.

In fact, the ancestors have a vested interest in human procreation because children ensure the continuation of the family line and the veneration of the ancestors. Indeed, it is those children who, through appropriate acts of ritualized commemoration, will keep members of the family's lineage alive for many generations. Also, it is those children sent by the ancestors who allow the latter to reincarnate and come back into the world of the living.

Ritual and Art

Unsurprisingly, rituals to ensure fertility abound in Africa. Rituals marking the beginning of a new agricultural season (e.g., asking the ancestors for sufficient rain) are quite common. The great prestige of rainmakers, as privileged intermediaries between the living and God, to cause rain to fall or stop (if too much rain has already fallen), is attested throughout Africa. Some African royal figures, such as the Queen of Luvedu, owe much of their prestige to their rain-making abilities, which they received from the ancestors.

Thus, offerings and sacrifices are presented to the ancestors before and after harvesting. In some African societies, for instance, the first fruit of the harvest is offered to the ancestors, and only afterward are human beings able to eat. Similarly, offerings and sacrifices will be made to the ancestors, as well as other spiritual entities, to secure the coming of numerous children. When a couple has difficulty conceiving, the ancestors are immediately suspected of having closed a woman's womb or cursed a man with impotency as a form of severe punishment for engaging in actions deemed disrespectful or neglectful by the ancestors.

Divination and appropriate rituals will be performed as an attempt to help restore the compromised harmony. The rituals in question will commonly involve animal sacrifice because African people ordinarily believe that the act of spilling blood on the Earth reinforces one's life force. If everything has been done correctly, a successful pregnancy should follow shortly.

Common in Africa is the sacred analogy between the woman's womb and a clay pot. Women are often depicted as potters, re-creating life through their molding of clay, the stuff of life. Thus, the clay pot metaphorically establishes the African woman as mother and creator. Among the Bemba people of Central Africa, for example, a critical moment of female initiation involves the making of a clay pot. In other parts of Africa, women guard jealously and proudly their clay pots as symbols of their womanhood and motherhood.

Given that women are most valued and appreciated as child-bearers, some precautionary measures are taken to protect them as such. Thus, in some African societies, women must avoid places, such as the forest, which could be dangerous to them. Also, some foods, which are believed to have an adverse effect on fertility, must be avoided by women. Among the Kasai of Central Africa, for example, women must not eat chicken meat or eggs. Food taboos are also observed during pregnancy. Thus, and to cite one example among many, a pregnant Lele woman (from Central Africa) will avoid eating fish because the latter is believed to interfere negatively with the outcome of the pregnancy. So great is the African concern for fertility that there is, in the end, hardly any area of the existence that is not informed by this constant preoccupation with the thriving and perpetuation of life.

Ama Mazama

See also Ancestors; Blessing; Children; Family; Procreation

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FETISH

The word *fetish* comes from the Portuguese substantive *feitício*, which comes from the Latin noun *facticius*, meaning an artificial or manufactured object. However, the sense in Portuguese was not so much artificial as artful, and in 15th-century Portugal, the term was applied to religious objects such as relics and rosaries of saints. Consequently, Portuguese explorers of West Africa extended the term *feitício* to functionally similar indigenous "charms and idols."

In the early 17th century, the word entered the English language from Portuguese; at the same time, the Portuguese word *fetissero* became in English fetisher or medicine person. In the meantime, the French had borrowed the Portuguese term, which became *fétiche*. It is this French form that gave rise to the current English spelling *fetish* and the less common spelling *fetich*, defined as an object regarded as having magical or spiritual powers and worshiped.

The meaning of the word *fetish* has extended in modern times to something regarded with great, sometimes excessive, admiration and reverence. It is this connotation that the English phrase "Make a fetish of something or someone" carries today. One would say of people who admire their cars so much that they always clean and/or wash them that they "make a fetish of their cars." Likewise, people who love or revere their work so much and spend too much time doing it are said to "make a fetish of their work." This entry looks at the role of fetishes in Africa, renewed respect for the religions that employ them, and a discussion of whether the term applies to gods as well as objects.

Fetishes in Africa

Regardless of whether it is deemed excessive, the word *reverence* (i.e., "great respect and admiration mixed with love") has a positive connotation. Hence, out of a concept that was originally pejorative came a laudable idea. It is this positive connotation that the term *Fetish* (spelled with an uppercase "F") carries today in French-speaking African countries such as Benin Republic and Togo Republic.

Indeed, when Benin people pronounce the phrase *Fétiche Sakpata*, they mean, with equal reverence, the divinity or Vodun Sakpata, also known among the Fon people as Ayivodun. Likewise, when they say of someone that the person is an adept of Fétiche Xêviosso or Xêbiosso (invariably spelled Heviosso or Hebiosso), also known as Jivodun, they mean that person is Xêviosso, an adept or a follower of the divinity or Vodun Xêviosso. There is another derivative of the French word *Fétiche*, that is, *Féticheur*, which enjoys similar respect. As a matter of fact, when Benin people refer to a person as Grand Chef Féticheur (a high priest of a Fetish) or Grande Féticheuse (a high priestess of a Fetish), they are thus referring with great admiration, sometimes mixed with fear, to a Hounnon, Houngan, Houngbonon, or Hounnongan. All of these words mean paramount chief of Vodun in Fongbe, the language of the Fon people of Benin Republic. The Grands Féticheurs or the Hounnongan are by a ricochet, powerful medicine people, a power of curing all sorts of diseases and/or solving different problems facing human beings, that is actually embedded in them by the Vodun or Fetishes they oversee.

Actually, former Benin President Nicéphore Soglo undauntedly reasserted the value of the African traditional religion and boosted its image in the country, making the Vodun religion a fully recognized national religion on an equal footing as the two major foreign religions practiced in the country as well—Christianity and Islam. The Vodun has regained vitality, and the words *Fétiche* (Fetish) and *Féticheur* (Fetisher) have gained much more respect and are no longer used scornfully.

Upon President Soglo's initiative and leadership, a 5-day symposium of various leaders of the Vodun religion was held in Cotonou, from May 28 through June 1, 1991. The purpose of the symposium was to restore the significance of the Vodun and establish a legal recognition for this traditional religion, which is significant in the everyday lives of Benin people and other people of African ancestry worldwide. Following this historic symposium, a great International Vodun Festival was organized and held in Benin in 1993.

This festival, known as "Ouidah 92," has brought together people of African ancestry from all over the world, particularly from the continents of Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean Islands. Subsequently, January 10 was officially made a National Vodun Holiday, which has been observed in the country every year since 1993.

Renewed Respect

These different events restored the Vodun religion back to its rightful place amid world religions and helped the words *Vodun* and *Fetish* take on more positive connotations in Benin Republic and elsewhere. When the late Pope John Paul II visited Benin in 1993, he met with and paid homage to two Supreme dignitaries of the Vodun religion in Benin, Venerable Sossa Guédéhoungué, president of the Official National Council of the Vodun, and Daagbo Agbessi Hounon Houna, Supreme Chief of the Vodun in Ouidah. The Pope's meeting with the Vodun dignitaries was an indication that the Church could no longer ignore the existence and significance of the Vodun and continue to vilify the traditional religion. Hence, Benin people, neighboring Togolese, and other Francophone Africans use the words *Fetish* and *Vodun* interchangeably today, although the use of the authentic African word *Vodun* is rapidly taking over and must be strongly encouraged.

Conversely, the two derivatives of the word *Fetish* (i.e., fetishism and fetishist) have yet to gain comparable consideration and respect. When Benin people say that a person practices *le fétichisme* or that the person is *unlune fétichiste* they say it with a certain disdain and usually in comparison to foreign monotheistic religions, to mean that the person is not a Christian or a Muslim. As a matter of fact, fetishism is still used today in many parts of the world to mean charms, sorcery, magic, occultism, or animism. Appropriate terms for the derogatory words *fetishism* and *fetishist* would be Vodun religion and follower of the Vodun religion, respectively.

In view of the positive connotation that the word *Fetish* has now taken as described above, one may list African Vodun as African Fetishes. A selected list of Vodun or Fetishes is found in Table 1.

Table 1 List of Vodun Fetishes

Ada Tangni	Dji	Lissa
Agbé/Tovodun	Duduwa	Loko
Aguê	Gbadu	Mahu
Aizan	Goro	Mahu-Lissa
Aklobè	Gu	Mamiwata
Akovodun	Hènnuvodun	Nâ
Avlékété	Hohovi	Naawo
Azé	Hu	Na-Kinnessi
Dan	Jo	Sakpata
Dan Ajaguna	Ke	Sinji Aglosumato
Dan Toxosu/ Tohossou	Kinnessi Koku	Sogbo Xéviosso
Dan Ayido Huêdo	Kpôvodun	Yalodé
Dè	Lègba	

Fetishes or Gods?

African deities, divinities, or gods are innumerable, and the Dahomean, Nigerian, and Haitian pantheons are particularly vast. The attributions, roles, and importance of these divinities in society vary considerably as well. Known as the *Vodun* among the Fon people of Benin Republic (former Dahomey), *Orisha/Ocha* among the Nago and the Yoruba ethnic groups of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Benin Republic, *Tron* among the Ewe people of the Republic of Ghana and Togo Republic, and *Loa* or *Lwa* among the Haitians of the Caribbean Islands, these African divinities were erroneously called *fetishes* by the European invaders. As a result, the Vodun religion was cynically referred to as *fetishism*, and the *Vodunsi*, the adept or initiated follower of the Vodun religion, was called *fetishist* by Westerners.

Today, ironically, African experts and scholars of the Vodun religion use the term *Fetish* to refer to African divinities or gods. Throughout his acclaimed book, *Le Fa, une géomancie divinatoire du golfe du Bénin: Pratique et technique*, Rémy T. Hounwanou, a veritable Bokonon (an exceptional *Fá* diviner), has written *Fétiches ou dieux* (Fetishes or gods) in referring to African deities/Vodun, *Tohossou*, *Yalodé*, *Lissa*, *Loko*, and so on. In the same vein, when Beninese historian and author Jean Pliya wrote his novella and titled it *L'arbre fétiche*, he was referring to a divine tree, a sacred tree, a tree god, so to speak.

It was a huge sacred baobab tree in the city of Ouidah. In African traditional religion, many trees are Fetish trees (not artificial or manufactured objects), including the baobab and iroko trees. Actually, one of the most sacred trees in Cotonou, the economic capital city of Benin Republic, is an iroko tree known as *Azaaloko*, at the foot of which important Vodun rituals are performed by the Hounnon or Hounnongan (High Priests of Vodun).

All in all, Vodun practitioners do worship Vodun or Fetishes (but not mere images), although just as in Christianity and most other major religions, sacred symbolic representations are made of the divine forces and spiritual manifestations of God. In looking at the symbolic representations of African deities/Fetishes, Westerners or any outsiders may see man-made artificial objects, but Vodun initiates and devotees see gods revealing themselves to humans through the spirits thus represented. Today, in using the word *Fetish*, outsiders and insiders have two diametrically opposed realities in mind. Molefi Kete Asante aptly pronounced that it is in the soul of Africans to seize and redirect language toward liberating ideas and thought.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Amulet; Blessing

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FIRE

Fire is one of four basic elements in the universe, the others being air, Earth, and water. In many African cosmologies, fire represents the first element

because, accordingly, it represents the state in which the world/Earth originated—“a burning planet.” Thus, fire is central to how African people understand the structure and order of the universe. More specifically, the universe is conceptualized as a spiritual force providing for the sustenance of human existence in both physical and spiritual realities. Therefore, fire is an aspect of all African spiritual systems connected via some spiritual essence, suggesting a harmonious relationship between humans and natural phenomena.

This notion of fire as the first element is most prominent in the Dagara cosmology, where fire is believed to exist in everything as well as everything being in need of it because fire collided with water, which gave birth to life on Earth. Ancient Kemetic thought and practice also privilege the element of fire above the others, as conceptualized in the sun god Ra—the creator of everything. Egyptians came to worship Ra for providing and sustaining the life of the people. In turn, fire came to symbolize the sun on the Earth. As representative of the African cosmology, this dictated how their existence was viewed—consistent with balancing nature of Maat—possessing both positive and negative characteristics and consequences.

Fire can sustain life as well as cause much destruction, similar to the Dogon understanding of the oppositional character of the universe: All things in nature are believed to possess a spiritual force that brings either prosperity or hardship.

The element of fire is also representative of particular personalities and cultures. A “fire person” is believed to possess high levels of vision and passion and is active. Additionally, because fire is seen as the doorway to the world of the ancestors, one possessing this characteristic is able to interpret dreams and lives in the future and is often misunderstood. However, a person possessing the negative aspects of fire is filled with restlessness, resulting in eventual death. In many African societies, the culture of fire is believed to be one of destruction.

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See also Ancestors; Fertility

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FLAG AND FLAG PLANTING

The flag is especially significant in the African spiritual system because it symbolizes the connections among human beings and so helps to connect human beings to each other to form communities. It is a marker of remembrance and love. It connects and unites into one community all humans of a particular familial, spiritual, social, political, or even military group: those past (the ancestors), those living (who are in this dimension of time), and those who are yet to come (the unborn). The flag may also connect the members of a community to divinity because, as the divine symbol of a particular community (a family, a clan, a nation), it may also recall and represent a founding ancestor, although it may also represent an animal or an object that equally may embody the principles, vital forces, or soul of the community in question.

The fundamental understandings that instruct flag planting are the interrelation of all beings and things in the cosmos and, as a consequence, the critical importance of humans maintaining their connections with these forces, especially the Creator, their ancestors, with the living and the unborn and with the environment in which they live.

Today, flags are regularly planted in special rituals and ceremonies held within an African spiritual community (e.g., in Vodun, in the Orisha tradition, and, indeed, all over the African spiritual world). Flags are considered symbolic, especially to particular social and religious groups, and may even be held as sacred by some. This entry describes the flag and its use and recalls its long history in Africa.

Description and Use

Flags, standards, ensigns, pennants, and streamers are not always one and the same thing. Strictly speaking, a flag is a piece of cloth that is flown attached to a pole. Its color and/or the representation

on it of an animal, a place or an idea, or any combination of these may signify that it represents a particular group of people who have a special relationship to what is depicted. Sometimes one or more long, thin pieces of cloth are attached to the flagpole, mostly below the flag. These are called *streamers*. If flown on their own (without a flag), they may be referred to as *pennants* and may carry an emblem.

Many African families and clans, sometimes occupying entire communities and even districts, take their family names from the ancestral person or the sacred animal or object represented and recalled in the emblem and displayed on the flag. The members of a particular group do not eat their representative animal or a particular part of it. If the representative thing is an object, then it must be avoided. Each of these representative animals and objects is taboo to those it represents. The penalty for not respecting this rule may be illness or some other form of punishment to someone, not necessarily the one who made the infraction, but one related to him or her. The practices of species protection, without borders, and of environmentalism in general that were instructed by this worldview are of tremendous importance.

Evidence from the earliest times (e.g., the Narmer Palette) suggests that at first the actual object or body of the animal thus sacred to and representative of the group was placed atop a long pole and carried aloft to represent the group, either permanently at institutions and/or on ceremonial occasions. Whatever the facts, over time, the visual image of the person, animal, or object came to be artistically represented, often stylized, on a piece of cloth, which was then placed at one end of a long pole and flown as a flag or standard to represent the group.

Historical Record

In Kemet (ancient Egypt), these flags, standards, ensigns, pennants, or streamers were flown just outside of buildings that housed representative institutions of the group: the family home, the tomb of a leading ancestor, the shrine of the family, clan, district, and state, or the residence of the *nsw: nesu* or Pharaoh. On ceremonial occasions (e.g., at the *heb sed* or rejuvenation and jubilee ceremony of a *nsw*), the standard or

pennants, as well as the shrines, of all the divisions or sections of the greater entity represented by their coming together, were taken to the location of the ceremony. Thus flown together in one place, the flags represented a great demonstration of unity and strength.

When it was decided to write the language of Kemet, the inventors of the *nTr: Medew Netjer* (hieroglyphs) chose the flag—*nTr: netjer* (singular); *nTrw: netjeru* (plural)—as the symbol that in the written language would also represent ideas of divinity and the divine. The significance accorded the flag by the inventors of the Medew Netjer demonstrated the special importance the *Kmt(y)w: Kemetyu* (the people of Kemet) attached to this object. The sign of the flag is always written first in words containing the sounds it represents irrespective of whether these sounds were pronounced first. This change in the written order of the signs, in general called transposition, indicates that the idea, things, or beings represented by the flag are of the greatest importance, even sacred, and must therefore be shown to be so.

Another type of standard evolved as a wooden framework attached to a long pole and supported an emblematic animal or thing, often a religious object. The inventors of the Medew Netjer deployed the picture of a standard, especially those used for carrying religious symbols, to represent the idea of “religious standard” and related ideas such as the names of particular divinities. The word for *standard* in the Medew Netjer is *iAt: iat*. The fact that there is the term *iAt sryt*, which translates as “military standard,” indicates that different military forces of Kemet and/or parts of that country’s army and navy were identified by standards peculiar to them.

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See also Ancestors; Family

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FON

The Fon people of present-day Benin are the people of the Dahomey Kingdom, often referred to by Europeans as Dahomeans. Their customs and history have been well documented over the past few centuries by the many people who visited their land, as well as the Fon's own oral historians. In addition to their great historical legacy, the Fon are well known for their urban organization, the history of their warrior women, and their religion of Vodun. This entry looks at their historical background as well as their religious beliefs and practices.

Origins of the Fon

Dahomey was a well-organized kingdom that coalesced in the 16th century, during which time it was established as a monarchy by King Tacoodonu, who conquered Abomey in the early part of the 17th century. Historical accounts tell us of the King of the Fon who gained control of Abomey and took the throne by killing Da, the king of Abomey. He murdered Da by slicing his stomach open and burying him in the foundation of his new palace. Hence, he named his new kingdom Dahomey, which literally translates as "Da's belly."

Tacoodonu was followed by a succession of male monarchs who expanded the territory of Dahomey that eventually led to the coast. The Fon eventually extended their kingdom from the interior to the coast by conquering Allada and creating a direct trade route. In 1738, the Yoruba of the Oyo Kingdom captured Abomey and enforced a tribute on its King. The King of the Fon developed diplomatic relationships with the Ashanti, and in 1827, the Fon monarch was freed from its tribute to Oyo. The last ruler of the Dahomean dynasty was Glele, who is well described in European history books as a fair humanitarian.

The King of Dahomey maintained strict control over trade in his kingdom and was meticulous about information that was revealed to foreigners. European visitors that entered Dahomey were treated as prisoners until given a pass to return to Whydah by the king. Europeans relayed accounts of some of the Fon's customs

that were often exaggerated. The kingdom of Dahomey was well organized and boasted of a huge population. It was composed of smaller city-states that varied only in slight differences of speech and names of deities.

Dahomey geographically consisted of Abomey and its immediate surrounding area, with Abomey as the capital. It was in Allada that monarchy dynasties were passed down and where the Fon's royalty was crowned. Whydah served as the port city of Dahomey and was a major entity in the trade route that was established into the interior of the region. European contact came at the end of the 17th century, and Dahomey was finally conquered by the French in 1892 during the time when the rest of Africa was being attacked by European powers established during the Berlin Conference of the late 19th century.

Fon Cosmology

Like Fon society, the Fon universe is extremely organized. The universe is informed by four different cosmological elements, which manifest themselves in a hierarchical manner that is reflective of the overlap that exists in social and religious life of Fon society. *Vodun* is the term that is all encompassing of the four elements of Fon spirituality: worship of public gods, worship of personal or private gods, ancestral reverence, and *gbo* (magic or charms). The word originated with the original inhabitants of Abomey.

When asked about the origins of the universe, the typical Fon person will refer to Nana Buluku, the deity who is the Supreme Being. Nana Buluku bore two children, Mawu and Lisa. According to the Fon, after God created the universe, she removed herself from the dealings of men. Because of this, humans have to resort to appeasing lesser gods and goddesses for favors. Together, Mawu-Lisa represents the pantheon of sky deities. Mawu, who is the moon, has female attributes and represents that the element of "coolness" in Fon culture. Lisa, the sun, has male attributes and is symbolic of the fiery elements. By collective name, the two deities represent a collective of lesser gods and goddesses that make up the sky pantheon. According to Fon belief, Mawu was given the task of creating the world with the assistance of Legba, the trickster, and Aido Hwedo, the snake.

The Fon also subscribe to a historical record, the Book of Fa or the “system of writing of the Creator,” which, much like the Book of Ifa, is used for divination. Fa is the deity of destiny/fate, but Legba supersedes Fa, so by appeasing Legba, one can ultimately change the course of one’s destiny or fate. In the Fon worldview, all individuals have a specific life path and particular destiny. However, much like the everyday affairs, one can win the influence of the deities through special ritual and sacrifices or favors.

Great and Lesser Gods

Although the Fon attribute creation to a singular deity, due to the distant nature of Nana Buluku, lesser deities must be invoked for the daily favors of man. There are three pantheons of public gods: Mawu-Lisa, Xevioso, and Sagbata. Pantheons are collectives or “families” of gods and goddesses. Each is organized in a hierarchal manner based on age and specialization of tasks. As mentioned previously, Mawu-Lisa represents the gods and goddesses whose domain is the sky. Xevioso is the pantheon of deities that reign thunder and the sea, as well as other meteorological elements of nature. Sagbata is the pantheon of deities of that reign over Earth and small pox.

The Creator gave deities specific powers over all aspects of the universe except for creation. The gods cannot add to the Universe or take away from it, which is reflective of the basic laws of metaphysics. Each “family” is headed by its oldest known ancestor. Other deities are given rank in order of importance to Fon life and in order of the deities’ order of birth among others in accordance with Fon cosmogony. Also, deities are restricted to the powers that they have been given and cannot extend their powers into other realms. For instance, the goddess of fertility cannot give influence over those who are seeking favor over their crops.

Ancestral Reverence

Like most other ethnic groups in Africa, the Fon have strong ties with their ancestors. Within Fon society, individual families, entire villages, and the ruling class observe strict ancestral reverent practices. Through appropriate worship, Fon

people acquire security in the physical/material world because they receive protection and guidance from the spiritual world. There is an interdependent relationship that exists between individuals in the physical community and those in the spiritual community. Living individuals need ancestors for spiritual protection, and ancestors need their living descendants to keep their memory and spirit alive through ritual. Also, if people wish to be remembered after their transition into the world for the deceased by their descendents, they must first afford the same respect to their ancestors.

To achieve official “ancestral” status, the Fon believe that the soul must pass over three rivers and climb up a mountain to reach the valley of his or her ancestors. Upon arrival, the newly arrived spirit sits at the feet of his or her elders on a low stool in the lowest position among the group because he or she is the youngest. The soul cannot enter this realm until living descendants have carried out all of the necessary rituals and ceremonies. Ancestral shrines, known as *dexoxos*, are located in all compounds. It is here that particular rituals and sacrifices are carried out to create *ashe*, or life force. Funerals can be expensive especially if the newly deceased is of royal lineage.

Magic and Charms

The word *magic* has generally carried derogatory and misleading connotations associated with its use, especially as it relates to traditional African spirituality. Several terms include *gris gris*, *ju ju*, or *obeah*. The Fon terminology for the variations of supernatural powers that cure, heal, or harm is referred to as *gbo*. According to the Fon, all of the gods need *gbo* to cure. The Fon narrative tells us that Legba is the first being to make *gbo*, giving him the power to cure or cause disorder. He then passes the knowledge of this power on to Awe, who is the first man to know about *gbo*.

Many of the other gods and goddesses also possess power over *gbo*. However, Legba knows more *gbo* than any other being both spirit or human, which is one of the reasons that individuals in the material world pay tribute to Legba before all other gods. Also important to *gbo* are the *aziza*, which are beings associated specifically with

medicinal gbo associated with leaves and herbs. There are different classifications of gbo, which is created from organic materials collected from treats, rocks, and animal and human remains. It is the public and personal gods who then relay knowledge about how to transmit power into the gbo.

Shantrelle P. Lewis

See also Mawu-Lisa; Nana Buluku; Vodou in Benin

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FOOD

Food has historically served as an integral component of African spirituality. Whether associated with African Diasporic rituals, funerals, or traditional ancestor veneration, the spiritual use of food has been a uniting practice of Africans worldwide. This entry's examination of food and its use, therefore, provides an insight into the fundamental structure of African traditional spiritual beliefs, as well as evidence of the unity of Africans worldwide.

Cultural Unity

As has been written, specific foods, such as okra, and food preparation practices provide evidence of African influence in virtually all world cuisines. Archaeologists have used food to document ancient African agricultural practices as well as the trade of these food stuffs among ethnic groups showing inter-African influence dating back thousands of years. Foods like akee, a pear-shaped fruit, may have originated in West Africa, but are now eaten not only throughout the African continent, but also in the Caribbean and other parts of the Diaspora.

Likewise, the naming of foods in the Diaspora also indicates an African cultural legacy. Gumbo as an okra-based stew popular in the Gulf Coast of the United States shares its root word with the Brazilian term for okra, *quiabo*, both of which are African in origin. Food in Brazilian spiritual houses, or *terreiros*, still relies on African preparation styles and

recipes. For example, the Yoruba deity Oyá still enjoys the bean fritters or acarajé in Brazilian Candomblé, which she began eating in Nigeria as akará. Ogun, the Yoruba deity of iron and patron of blacksmiths, enjoys beans and rice in Africa, as well as in North and South America. Beyond providing this evidence of African cultural unity, food also provides information on traditional African spiritual beliefs.

Ritual Practice

Food is a critical component in many African traditional ritual practices. These practices, and those based on them, have found their way via the migrations of Africans to all parts of the world. Food in this use becomes a tool to manipulate energy by which the believer's desires are fulfilled. For example, in North America, to catch a murderer, the believer will quickly place an egg in the victim's hand so that the murderer will not be able to escape the area. Likewise, the preparation of cleansing baths used to cleanse a believer of negative energy in other African populations often includes food ingredients such as crushed egg shell, milk, and coconut. Traditionally, kola nuts are not only exchanged as a sign of friendship, but are also used as divining tools and as offerings to ancestral and other spirits.

Some foods are reserved for their ritual use and are seldom, if ever, consumed outside of their ritualized contexts; such foods include dog, traditionally offered to Ogun, and ram, which is usually presented to Shango, the god of thunder and lightning. Other foods, including cornmeal and grits, can be used to determine the age of a particular deity. For instance, the fact that Oshun, a Nigerian riverine goddess, enjoys corn that was not brought into Africa until around 1500 AD supports the belief that she is the youngest of the Yoruba's spiritual pantheon.

The Living and the Dead

Food also evidences the symbiotic relationship between the living and the Dead in African cosmology. Africans have often celebrated important transitional phases in the lives of community members such as births, rites of passage, and the like with communal feasting. Perhaps the most common of these periods is the passing of a loved



An offering bowl in the form of a mother and child with supporting figures. Bowls such as this were used by Yoruba chiefs to present kola nuts to important guests. Traditionally, kola nuts were not only exchanged as a sign of friendship, but were also used as divining tools and as offerings to ancestral and other spirits.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

one. During the period of family mourning, it is customary for friends and relatives of the deceased to bring gifts of food to the home of the closest living relatives. Additionally, following the funeral ceremony, a community feast is held, during which attendees discuss the living in the fondest of terms. These practices, fairly common in the United States, are directly related to the funerary practices of other Diasporic communities.

This celebration of the loved one's existence is often carried over beyond the immediate period of their passing in North America, as well as in the entire Diaspora. Many Africans, as is commonly written, continue to practice ancestor veneration. Part of the honoring practice is to offer food to the Dead. Although Africans certainly understand that the person is no longer flesh, they do believe that offering food is critical to the strength of those on the other side.

This use of food may be understood as a token of exchange in which the living offers the Dead energy with which the Dead becomes more able to offer support and guidance to the living. Therefore, the relationship between the living and the Dead can be understood as highly reciprocal. If the living fail to meet their obligations to the deceased, including failure to provide them with food, the Dead may withhold their assistance with worldly matters.

Material and Spiritual

The exchange of material food with the spiritual realm provides insight into the fundamental structure of African traditional beliefs. The offering of food stuffs to spiritual entities makes sense in a paradigm in which the believer sees both the material and spiritual inextricably intertwined into one singular existence. Both of these realms, the material and the spiritual, are dependent on one another, and the offering of material food to ancestors and other spirits is indicative and symbolic of the relationship between the material and spiritual planes.

When leaving food for ancestral spirits, the living often offer those foods most enjoyed before the person died. However, the offering of food to other spirits requires knowledge of the requirements of the particular spirit being served. When working with higher spirits, such as the Vodun Iwa, Yoruba orisha, and/or Akan abosom, among others, the living offer food

according to the likes, desires, and taboos of the associated spirit. Additionally, the spirit may, according to the living's particular need(s), require more or less than is commonly offered.

Food preparation is also dependent on the spirit to which the substance is being offered. For example, in Haitian Vodou, a chicken offered to Legba is killed by twisting its neck, whereas when offering chicken to Loco, the throat must be cut and the bird bled. But just as the offering of food exposes the African belief of reciprocal giving, the sharing of the meal among the believers following the ritual furthers the notion that the physical and spiritual attendees are aligned in pursuit of the requested act. Although the food offered to the deities is sometimes shared, it is important to note that there are occasions, especially those associated with cleansing rituals, where the food stuffs must be properly disposed of because they have absorbed the negative energy from the believers.

Ritual Stories

Food stuffs are also present within the ritual stories associated with African spirituality and are instructive tools symbolizing complex ideas and concepts. In one such story, Ogun, the god of iron, technology, and patron of blacksmiths, isolates himself in a forest. Because the people depended on his abilities and gifts for most of their daily lives, the community soon fell into chaos. They beseeched the great Ogun to return, only to be ignored by the orisha. Only the orisha of sensuality and female empowerment, Oshun, was able to lure Ogun from his haven. She spread her honey on his lips, and the tempted Ogun followed her out of the forest. Honey, in this story, has been said to be a metaphor for Oshun's sexuality, and the story instructs believers about using their own particular talents for the good of the community.

Food continues to unite Africans, both autochthonous and Diasporic, living and dead; spirit and flesh; it continues to be used as ritual catalyst, divining tool, and socializing instrument for many Africans the world over.

Table 1 lists some popular African deities and the foods most commonly associated with them. Because specific beliefs and practices vary from region to region, this list is by no means comprehensive or

Table 1 Popular Deities and Associated Foods

<i>Spiritual Tradition</i>	<i>Food</i>
Akan	
Nana Asuo Botopre	Raw Rice, Sugar Cubes, Fanta Orange Soda, Fried Fish, Fried Plantain, White Yams, Fowl, Bananas
Nana Kumi	Guinea Fowl, Schnapps, Tiger Nuts, White Yams, Turkey
Nana Densua Yao	Duck, Rice, Liquor, Fruit
Nana Adade Kofi	Raw Rice, Gin, Palm Wine Candy, Cookies, Cake, Honey, Fanta Orange Soda, Fruity Wine, Nana Esi Ketewaa Sugar Cane, Yams, Eggs
Nana Tegare	Kola Nuts, Beer, Schnapps, Rum, Tiger Nuts
Nana Asuo Gyebi	Peanuts, Green Bananas, White Rice, Grits, Corned Beef
Yoruba	
Ogun	Peppers, Onions Garlic, Red Palm Oil, Beans, Dog
Obatala	Igbin (Snails), Coconuts, Milk, Honey, Shea Butter, Rice, Bread, Cookies
Sango	Red Apples, Red Palm Oil, Peppers, Bitter Kola Nut, Spicy Foods, Ram
Yemonja	Grapes, Melons (especially watermelon), Squash, Candy, Cakes, Palm Oil, Kola Nuts, Sheep, Guinea Fowl, Hens, Pigeons, Fish, Palm Wine, Grits
Oya	Eggplant, Rum, Beer, Wine, Plums, Red or Purple Grapes, Hen, Female Goat
Oshun	Honey, Wine, Beer, Rum, Gin, Hens, Guinea Fowl, Quail, Goats, Candies, Cakes, Kola Nuts, Red Palm Oil, Coconuts, Corn
Esu	Chili Peppers, Peppercorns, Jalepenos, Rum, Gin, Beer, Pigeon, Rooster, Male Goat
Vodun	
Legba	Rooster, Dog
Gede	Chickens, Goats
Zaka	Yams, Goats, Chicken
Erzulie	French Wine, Candies, Cookies, Cake
Agwe	Ram, Imported Wine and Champagne, Rice and Beans, Cornmeal, Chicken

entirely reflective of what are complex and fluid ritual practices present throughout the African World.

Tiffany D. Pogue

See also Offering; Rituals

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FULA (FULBE)

The Fula (Fulbe) are a large ethnic and linguistic group found throughout West Africa, but principally in the Sahel from Sudan to Senegal. They are often referred to by different names according to other proximate ethnic and linguistic groups. For example, in Senegal, the Wolof speakers often

refer to the Fulbe as Peul. Yet in Nigeria, the Hausa call them Fulani, and the Mandinka in Guinea and Sierra Leone give them the name Malinke.

Among the major Fulbe social groups are Fulbe Jaawambe (powerful), Fulbe Ladde (nomadic herders), and Fulbe wuro (urban). Other Fulbe groups consist of those in Southern Darfur in Sudan and those in Northern Darfur in the same country. They are pastoral or semipastoral, meaning that they may migrate after the harvest. Those living in Northern Darfur tend to be more inclined to become teachers and intellectuals. They have a strong tradition of mastering the Koran and practicing a strict discipline of Islam. Most of the politicians and professional among the Fulbe in Darfur tend to be from the Northern area.

The Fulbe groups, due to their economical and geographic changes, speak Fulfulde or Arabic. Although some can recall portions of the era of religious passion (late 19th century), religion was never as intense or as high a priority among the Fulbe as some other groups that had adopted Islam.

They believe they descend from Úkba, who was a soldier knowledgeable in the Arabic culture and a devout follower of Islam. According to oral traditions, some of the Fulbe group maintains that Ukba intermarried with African women from several ethnic groups and that the resulting children became the Fulbe. This story is probably based on the fact that, during the expansions of the Arabic culture in Africa from the 7th to the 14th centuries, many African women had children for Arab soldiers.

There is no evidence, however, that Ukba ever went to some parts of Africa where the Fulbe are found. It is possible that the Fulbe could have migrated to those parts, but Ukba may well be a mythical figure that is derived from the fact that many African people accepted Islam as a religion and one of the ways to explain this acceptance was to claim that the father of the people was a soldier who knew the Arabic culture very well. Although some people see them as nomadic people, it is not exactly the case for all of the Fulbe because now they are resident in numerous countries, including Central African Republic, Chad, Senegal, and the Sudan.

Although it is difficult for anyone to say what the original ethnic religion of the people was, it

must be accepted that the women who were said to have married Ukba came from some other ethnic groups (they were not Arabs) and hence from some religious tradition before they met Ukba. They were not without religion; they were without Islam, and the names of the groups from which they came have been lost.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Fula (Fulbe)

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FUNERAL

The funeral, along with birth and marriage, is a major life ceremony in many African cultures because it encompasses the full transmission of life. The numerous rituals associated with the preparation and placement of the body, mourning, securing the destiny of the deceased, establishing a new relationship with the deceased, and restoring of communal relationships reflect an affirmation of the continuity of life. There are variations in funeral rites according to the age, marital status, and community standing of the deceased. The most elaborate funerals are held for wise, prominent elders. Funerals for those who are younger, unmarried, or childless are less intricate. Although not considered funerals, there are specific rites for children who have died because they are considered spirits who did not wish to stay in this world.

Ideas About Death

Generally speaking, there are several fundamentals to African funerals, although ethnic and aesthetic traditions differ. The first is that the spirit of the deceased person must be sent away without animosity from the earthly community. Africans acknowledge that the person no longer exists in Earthly form and must leave. Prayers said at death

such as “Now we must stop thinking . . . about you, we bury you” . . . and “Oh! Father leave us, here is your stool” demonstrate this. However, the prayers continue, “We must stop thinking about you, give us everything that is good,” indicating that the living also need the protection and guidance from the newly departed.

Among the Yoruba, the part of the funeral called “Entering into a covenant with the deceased” includes a symbolic “slaying of the victim,” in which split kola nuts, provisions, and condiments are placed with the body. This is the time to say farewell and stress to the deceased that he or she is no longer an Earthly being and now must care for the family as a spirit. The deceased is not to harass anyone or engage in malicious or evil activities. Establishing that the death was indeed natural is an important rite in some funeral rituals. Among the Ndebele, the day after a person is buried, the son returns to make sure the grave is undisturbed. If it has not been disturbed, the usual funeral rituals continue. If it has, however, a diviner is consulted to determine the next steps.

Funeral Practices

Rituals for sending away the deceased address the handling of the body. In some cultures, the body is shaven, washed, and wrapped in clothing. In the past, the body could be wrapped in animal skins or even covered with bird feathers. The Ancient Egyptians are noted for their elaborate preparation of the body of the deceased. However, the Swazi are known to squeeze the fluids out of the body to slow decay. Among certain groups of Yoruba, clothing is put on the deceased backward so its soul can find its way back to the Earth to be reborn.

Among the Ndebele, if the head of the homestead dies, his body is passed through a hole in the wall, but not the door. This shows he is still part of the community. The body can be buried within the family compound, behind it, or where the person was born. Common taboos associated with burials are that it is best to avoid a funeral processional and that the body cannot be buried in cultivated land. The Dogon observe this taboo by burying their dead in caves high in the surrounding cliffs. They say that if a body is buried in the fields, the crops will not grow.

Burial Rites

The deceased are sent away with provisions to both sustain them on their journey to the world of ancestors and spirits and while in it. It is common for an animal to be sacrificed at the death of a person. Referred to as “the beast to accompany the deceased” among the Ndebele or “the fare fowl” among the Yoruba, this sacrifice provides food and abundance to the deceased while making the road to the afterlife easy. For Ndebele men, it is an ox, for women, a goat. This meat is ritually prepared without salt and consumed by the family. Medicine to protect and sustain the family is prepared from the bones. Personal goods are also included with the body to assist the soul on its journey. Among the Yoruba, these are the clothes, fowls, and animals presented by members of the family according to status.

The rituals designed to send away the spirit of the deceased also address the needs of the living. Funerals are a time of intense public grieving. In many cultures, it is the only time when it is socially permissible for men to cry or to openly express sadness and frustration. Public grieving is expressed not only by crying, but through music, songs, and dance. There are musicians who play specific rhythms and melodies that facilitate the release of pent-up emotions and mourners enact articulate dance step to express grief. In some communities, a group of women are charged with the responsibility of weeping and wailing for the deceased because the dead have a right to their share of tears.

A New Relationship

Another rudiment of the African funeral is the establishment of a new relationship with the deceased. The rituals that mark the beginning of this relationship can occur 3 days, 40 days, 3 months, or 1 year after the burial and main funeral activities. The Yoruba ritual, called “bringing the spirit of the deceased into the house,” is performed several days after the person dies. It is held at night with no lights. A shrine is constructed in a corner of the dwelling that will serve as a place of communion between the descendents and the departed. Here descendents can speak with the departed; make offerings, covenants, and agreements; and conduct family business.

On the 40th day after burial, the spirit of the deceased is “created” in the form of an egúngún. This “spirit of the deceased” appears in the community as a human dressed in a robe and symbolizes the temporary reappearance of the deceased on Earth. Three months after burial, the Ndebele gather for a ceremony named “to wash the hoes.” A special beer is brewed and used to literally wash the tools used in the burial of the deceased. A special medicine is prepared and distributed to the family.

One year after the death, and only if the deceased was married, a ceremony “calling back the soul of the departed to his own people” is held. At this time, any restrictions that were imposed because of the death, such as widows not being able to marry, are now lifted and life returns to normal.

Affirming Life

The last characteristic of African funerals is that they affirm life. Throughout the funeral process, references are made to strengthening the

life of the deceased, the family, and the community. However, it is most pronounced in the rituals that include festive music, singing, dancing, feasting, and merrymaking. The Yoruba egúngún festival, which occurs at least once a year, contains such activities. The final ceremony for the deceased among the Ndebele is a festive time with singing and dancing.

Denise Martin

See also Ancestors; Burial of the Dead; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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GA

The Ga are a small ethnic group comprising a population of nearly 700,000 people in the south of the modern country of Ghana. There are six states of the Ga people: Accra, Nuvia, La, Osu, Teshi, and Tema. The original Ga kingdom of Nkran gives the city of Accra its name. In the early part of the 16th century, the Ga Mantse, the title of the kings, extended the kingdom around the present site of the city of Accra.

Homowo refers to “hooting at hunger.” This means that hunger cannot rule the people; in other words, hunger has no victims among the Ga because they laugh and hoot at hunger. This festival remembers a massive famine that nearly wiped out the people in the 17th century. Since that time, the Ga have come to realize how fortunate they were to survive as a coherent and intact social group. They celebrate Homowo each year to commemorate their survival and their victory over hunger.

The Ga Mantse oversees the Homowo Festival, but all the while he never speaks directly to anyone in public. Much like the Akan, the Ga people have a linguist who speaks for the Ga Mantse. This spokesperson, the Otsame, carries a decorated staff that identifies him as the person who speaks for the king. Indeed, the staff has a coat of arms that shows a deer standing on the back of an elephant that symbolizes the fact that the small can exercise power over the large.

The Ga express the same general characteristics found in other African societies. They refer to

other humans as brothers and sisters and are taught to welcome strangers into their homes. Among the Ga, respect for the elderly is at the heart of the cultural customs. This is why the use of proverbs that originated with the ancestors is a major part of the Ga tradition. They love poetry, oral performance, and oratory. The Ga say that one day there was a massive exodus of people from the sea to the land and they looked like ants, thus the name *gaga*, and the Ga believe that they represent these people.

The Ga believe that all things have spirits. They say that the Almighty Deity, Nyomo, created all spirits and placed them in humans, trees, mountains, and rivers. When the spirits want to communicate with humans, they enlist the services of priests, priestesses, and oracles that are referred to as Dzema Wagin. The high priests of the religion are called *wulomo*, and they are chosen to demonstrate care and service to the ancestors and the people. The *wulomo* practice herbal medicine, ritual ceremonies to maintain balance in the society, and serve as consultants to the Ga Mantse.

The Ga are famous for funerals. They are skilled craft persons who make coffins according to the desires and needs of the families. Their belief is that when a person dies, he or she moves to another realm and should take his or her favorite objects with him or her to the new realm. Thus, if one is a pilot, he might want to have a coffin that is an airplane. A taxi driver may want to be buried in a taxi. A person could have a personality trait highlighted, such as

wearing white shoes or loving red dresses. In that case, the Ga coffin maker would create a coffin that looked like a white shoe or one that looked like a red dress.

The Ga accept the idea that there is life after death and the spirit (i.e., *Susuma*) lives on when the person dies. The rituals performed by the family and the priests throughout the year are done to ensure that the ancestors are revered in the afterlife.

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See also Dinka; Yoruba

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GAMO RELIGION

The Gamo people of southwestern Ethiopia are an ancient people who have maintained much of their traditional way of life. Their society is based on caste systems, with a rigid structure that correlates to the various traditional occupations. The religious system is based on the social structure that separates citizens who are farmers and weavers from those who are ironsmiths, leather workers, and stone carvers.

The Gamo believe in the role of the ancestors in the survival of their community. Thus, all castes are created to ensure that the ancestors' wills are carried out. Membership in a specific caste system is ascribed from birth. People are born into a caste, and there is no movement between groups. Social mobility does not exist. Once you have been born into a caste, you remain in that particular caste. Furthermore, each caste remains locked into its caste in terms of marriage; this means that each one is endogamous, in that people do not marry outside the caste.

The Gamo believe that the farmers and weavers, who are called *mala*, are the highest

occupations, and that the potters, the *mana*, the ironsmiths, and leather workers, the *degala*, are of a lesser caste because the farmers and weavers work with the materials that are essential for food and clothing. They believe that the growing of crops is a sacred occupation and that the weaving of clothes is also sacred and therefore fundamental to the society. In contrast, those who use materials such as iron, stone, or leather are considered less pure than farmers and weavers. Although the society is organized around these castes, the individuals born into them have come to believe that their particular caste is their destiny.

Because the artisans, as opposed to the farmers and weavers, are not full citizens of the Gamo society, they do not have political rights and can never be elected to leadership positions. Yet they are considered significant for the society and have taken their caste as normal, natural, and destined. The artisans have a language of their own that cannot be understood by other members of the Gamo society. The society also restricts the communication between the artisans and the farmers because of ideas of impurity and pollution. The Gamo people have a deeply held belief that if any of the taboos against farmer and artisan communication are broken, then severe punishment would be inflicted on the land. They sought to maintain a balance in the society where the ancestors would not interfere with the reproduction of children or the fertility of the land because of some taboo brought about by caste violations.

The religion of the Gamo is embedded in the philosophy of ancestor respect that has been handed down for many generations. Inasmuch as ancestors are living members of the society, they help to maintain order, harmony, and balance by ensuring that the requirements for good behavior, *woga*, are followed. Some behaviors are prohibited and must be carefully avoided. Such *goma*, prohibited behaviors, may have a disastrous effect on the society. A person who violates the cultural or moral rules of the society will cause untold suffering on the collective. Thus, it is to the advantage of everyone that *goma* are prevented.

The head of the village is called the *chima*, or elder, and when the village, *kebele*, is prosperous, it means that the people have followed the

prescriptions laid down by the ancestors and they are pleased. Men who are the social mediators for the population perform sacrifices in the *tsosa'ketsa*, the spirit house, which is always built on land purified for that purpose. When the ancestors are not pleased because of a violation, then the *chima* must enter the spirit house and make sacrifices of animals to mend the rift to create the climate that appeases the ancestors in the name of the people. Holiness or purity means that only someone of the *mala* caste can perform this ritual. Only in individual-, not group- or village-, level situations can the *degala* perform circumcision and individual healing rites.

Women who are possessed, *ayana*, can be expected to create opportunities for special ceremonies of harmony for the society. Nevertheless, among the *Gamo*, in a rare display of social, political, and economic separation of farmers and artisans into distinct groups, the society's burial places, location of houses, material artifacts, and cultural forms, such as music and dance, are also separate.

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See also Shilluk

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GÈLÈDÈ

One of the largest annual festivals among the Yoruba people of Nigeria is the Gèlèdè festival. It involves several aspects of the Yoruba culture and suggests the importance of the ancestors in the religion. Indeed, Gèlèdè establishes annually the significances of the women elders of the community, female ancestors, and the feminine spirit. They are collectively called “Our Mothers.”

Probably beginning in the 16th century, this festival highlights the importance of the matriarchy in African life. The fact that the Gèlèdè honors and celebrates women is a remarkable attribute of culture that demonstrates the relationship the society has to women elders.

The Yoruba prepare for the Gèlèdè festival by creating elaborate masks that are in actuality headdresses that are composed of two parts, a lower construction and a second upper construction. One part of the headdress represents the face of a woman, and the second part, the upper part, is a superstructure of a strong design. Thus, the people see the cool reserved qualities that are favored in women in the lower part of the mask and the contrasting vitality and dynamism of the upper part of the headdress. The mask, of course, is worn on top of the head. When the dancers perform the Gèlèdè dance, they are really displaying the powers and energies of the great elder mothers who are the beginning of the nation, the makers of the community, and the protectors of the spirits of the children.

The headdresses may have symbols of snakes and birds on them to represent the nocturnal powers of women who might send signs of evil or danger, as well as the cool powers of discipline and control. The first representation is seen in the presence of the bird on the headdress. The second representation (i.e., the coolness and control) is depicted by the presence of a snake. In fact, when the artists carve the wood so that the snake coils around the front of the headdress, it means that the snake sees everything, although you may think it is asleep. This is the story of the great elder mothers who watch over the community; they see all and they know all, and the commemoration of their



Oro Efe masks emerge from the sacred forest to sing traditional prayer songs that invoke divine blessings on the Gèlèdè festival. The masks feature layers of carved wooden animals that tell of the hierarchical order of the world and the natural laws of power and social position.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher.

power and energy is recognition that they cannot be escaped.

Whenever the Gèlèdè festival is planned, men are used in the celebration as dancers, indicating that the power of “our mothers” has overcome all obstacles. On the preceding night, it is common for the people to have male masks and dancers to go through the market place to scare the people. On the following day, the Gèlèdè festival is a rebirth, celebration, and practice of honoring the mothers in ways that substantiate the people’s belief in reproduction, fertility, and the continuation of the society by virtue of the spirit and power of women.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Yoruba

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GINEN

Ginen (also referred to as Guinée or La Guinée) is that aspect of the Vodou religion that establishes a direct link between Haitian Vodou devotees and

their African ancestral land. During the days of slavery, the name *Ginen/Guinée* became a generic term used to refer to West Africa as a whole. Within the Vodou worldview, however, Ginen is representative of a most sacred location because it sustains the holistic worldview in which precise relationships and interactions take place within the supernatural realm and between the natural and the supernatural. This entry looks at the linkage between Africa and Haiti from this perspective.

African Heritage

The primary and official religion of Haiti, Vodou, has its roots firmly grounded in the former African Kingdom of Dahomey, known today as the Republic of Benin. However, Vodou in Haiti also benefited, although to a lesser degree, from religious contributions made by Africans from other various Central and West African ethnic groups, particularly those situated in the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), and present-day Nigeria. As the European slave trade dispersed Africans to various parts of the Americas, the initiators and original devotees to Vodou were those who ended up in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was then known).

The word *Vodou* is etymologically traceable to the term *Vodun*, which, in the Fon language spoken in the Republic of Benin, as well as parts of Togo in West Africa, and refers to the hundreds of immortal spirits and deities that the Fon people believe in, communicate with, and build personal relationships with. The religious similarities between Benin and Haiti are thus striking and undeniable. In Haiti, Vodou spirits are commonly called *Lwa* and are further categorized into three primary groups or pantheons: Rada, Petro, and Congo. Rada is the designation for spirits of Africans abducted from Arada, on the coast of Benin, whereas Congo Lwa originated, as their name indicates, in the Congo region. Petro alludes to those Vodou who were added later in Haiti, largely of deceased leaders in the Americas. Vodou, or Lwa, were created by God, the Supreme Being, and are placed under its ultimate authority. Their primary role is to assist the living, as the Vodou God, like almost everywhere else in Africa, has withdrawn from

the world of the living, and abstains from direct involvement in human affairs. Human beings call on the Lwa whenever there is a need for it. They maintain close and dynamic relationships with them through numerous and frequent rituals and prayers. Ginen and, more specifically, Vilokan, a mythological city located in Ginen, is the place of residence of the Lwa. When called on, the Lwa temporarily leave Vilokan in Ginen to enter the world of the living and communicate directly with them.

The Afterlife

Also, like Africans in Benin and elsewhere, Africans in Haiti believe that the soul contains two parts—the *gwobonanj* (also sometimes written *gros bon ange*) and the *tibonanj* (also sometimes written *ti bon ange*). The *gwobonanj* is the life force associated with God and is therefore eternal. At the time of death, the *gwobonanj* leaves the body and travels to Ginen, which is the general residence of the ancestral spirits. There, the *gwobonanj* of the newly deceased person has the capacity to unite with other ancestral spirits and Lwa. This will occur, although only if appropriate death rituals are conducted. In that respect, the Desounen ritual is of the utmost importance because it allows the *gwobonanj* to join Ginen. If the death ritual is not fully accomplished, the *gwobonanj* could become trapped on Earth, seeking revenge, and thus bringing misfortune to surviving family members. Assuming that all death rituals have been performed satisfactorily, the *gwobonanj* will complete a deification process and may become a family Lwa.

Although there is no consensus as to the exact location of Ginen, whether it is located deep into the Earth, under the sea, or in a river, what is clear, however, is that it is presided over by the powerful Lwa Gede, the Lwa of Death. Beyond a locale, therefore, Ginen is also closely associated with one of the beloved Lwa in Vodou, referring to the spirit force that emanates from Ginen. Like the several Lwa who exist in Vodou, Gede, through Ginen, has a special role, which is to eternally connect the Vodou worshipper to his or her ancestral and religious roots and to ensure rest, immortality, and deification in the afterlife.

As a conclusion, it may be said that Ginen reinforces and identifies Vodou as an African-based religion and philosophy and complements the concept of a sacrosanct structure that confirms the interconnectedness between diverse spirits and diverse powers. Also spelled Voodoo, Vaudou, or Vodun, Vodou is thus a religion of power, creation, and enigma, and it acknowledges a worldview that embraces philosophy, medicine, justice, ritual, healing, and other rich sets of belief. About 6,000 to 10,000 years old and with a membership of up to 60 million, Vodou continues to thrive to different degrees in the Caribbean, Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Columbia, Mexico, and many other countries in Latin America. Its attributes are evident in practices labeled variously as Obeah, Santeria, Regla de Ocha, Umbada, Lukumi, Candomble, La Regla Lucum, or Orisha, and it relies on systems and media that are common to native African religions, including drumming, chanting, singing, dancing, animal sacrifice, and spirit possession.

Philip U. Effiong

See also Vodou in Haiti

Further Readings

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GOD

Tell me what kind of God you worship and I will tell you who you are! Such a maxim means that the notion of God impacts the perception of the nature of the African people because religion plays a crucial role in people's identity. Misconceptions abound on the African vision of God. The question regarding the African vision of God arises as a problem in the context of globalization, especially the encounter with modernity, the encounter between Africa and the outside world—namely, the West with its secularism, atheism, and Christianity, and the Arab world and Islam. This encounter occurred in a context of unequal power relationships. Dominated militarily, politically, and economically, Africa came to be dominated also culturally, epistemologically, and, most important, religiously. Its languages were demoted to meaningless dialects, its healers to witch doctors, its religion to fetishism, and its spiritual beings to idols.

In this context, several questions arose that have puzzled outside observers of African traditional religion. Do Africans have an adequate knowledge of God? Is the African God the same as the God of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism? Is the African God a true God? Is he a personal being, an impersonal spirit, a sort of creative energy, or an abstract idea? Is the African God a loving God or a malevolent trickster? Is African traditional religion pantheistic, polytheistic, monotheistic, or henotheistic? Is the “chief god” indifferent to or actively involved in human affairs? Do Africans communicate with God or only with the ancestors and spirits? For Africans, especially those steeped in traditional culture, the reality of God is grounded in the reality of people's religious experience, and God is as real as the existence of the world or the African people. It is well established among scholars that an African cannot be understood apart from the categories of *homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus*. In John Mbiti's memorable expression, “Africans are notoriously religious.” This religiosity begins with the belief in a world beyond the physical and mundane existence on Earth, the belief in a spiritual order of ancestors, gods, and goddesses. Thus, the concept of God stands at the heart of

African cosmology and the conception of life. But what is meant by God in Africa? This entry begins by contrasting the perspectives of Westerners and Africans on African religion. Then, after a discussion of whether the African God is knowable, it describes several attributes of God and asserts the usefulness of the African vision in today's world.

The Outsider's View

Theologians and scholars of world religions have grouped religions in three major categories. Two of them are those that believe in no God (Theravada Buddhism and Jainism) and those that believe in one single God (monotheism: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The majority of world religions, African traditional religion included, are viewed as polytheistic. This third category refers to religions that believe in many gods, which are often regarded as idols or false gods by the monotheistic religions.

What this simplified typology indicates is that African traditional religion and Africans' vision of the nature of God have been defined overwhelmingly by outsiders. Almost five centuries of colonial and Eurocentric scholarship have sanctified concepts and paradigms that have largely contributed to the distortion of the African vision of God. Categories forged or promoted by Émile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Evans-Pritchard, Edward Burnett Tylor, and many others led to the definition of African traditional religion as animism, fetishism, magic, witchcraft, polytheism, shamanism, idolatry, paganism, primitive religion, and ancestor worship. Needless to say, these epistemological constructs have no existence in the lexicon of most African languages. They are clearly invented by outsiders for the benefit of an outside consciousness. What these 10 "epistemological plagues" have generated is the sense of meaninglessness. The African God has been defined first as a fictitious idol manufactured by the imagination of an ignorant primitive mind addicted to superstitious absurdity. Later, he was viewed as a demon, and, finally, more liberal scholars settled on "Deus Otiosus."

But whatever the case, this distorted view of God led to the perception of all forms of African traditional religion as essentially a religion of error, horror, and terror. Most important, despite

all the rhetoric about postcolonialism, colonial categories still govern the understanding of African vision of God among many people and scholars. As the American Academy of Religion observed in 1993, in its "Spotlight on Teaching African Religions in American Universities," within the field of religious studies, African religion still remains a residual category, variously characterized as traditional, primal, primitive, oral, and nonliterate. African religions are defined as antithetical to world religions and are viewed as less complex, less reflective, less theoretical, and, most important, less moral and less spiritual.

Likewise, as recently as 1998, Robert B. Fisher observed that African religion continues to be excluded from "world religions." Rather, it is viewed as a primal religion devoid of divine revelation, philosophic speculations, high spirituality, and decent ethical standards. In a postcolonial world that still divides civilization and spirituality between East and West, African religion remains a noncategory. This means that a better understanding of the African vision of God requires a Herculean effort to overcome the misunderstanding disseminated by almost five centuries of Western and Westernized scholarship and the scientific prestige of its colonial library. The process of the decolonization of knowledge that gained pace after World War II has raised an increasing awareness of the pitfalls of anthropological and missionary studies of African traditional religion, and, in both Africa and the West, an increasing effort toward a better understanding of the African vision of God is underway.

African Assessments

Most African Christian theologians now acknowledge that African traditional religion is not merely a *praeparatio evangelica* for conversion to Christianity, but rather a proper locus of God's revelation to African ancestors and therefore a sufficient means of salvation or meaning for the African people. According to this line of thought, God not only tolerated the religion of African ancestors, but was active in its creation. Ancestors are to be respected as the normal divinely given means for salvation, put by God in his will for the salvation of all the peoples, for God truly has spoken to our ancestors in that sense expressed in

the letter to Hebrews. African traditional religion contains “not only the seeds but also the fruit” of the word of God.

Thus, Christian theologians now regard the African ancestral religious heritage as the result of God’s activity, rather than a merely “man-made superstition.” African traditional religion has been defined by the Ecumenical Association of African theologians as one of the indispensable sources (*locus theologicus*) for the articulation of an authentically African Christian theology. This growing respect for African traditional religions does not mean that the African conception of God can merely be reduced to Christian or Islamic categories. It simply means that traditional religions constitute a valid spiritual experience whose vision of God is awe-inspiring, love-sustaining, and a foundation for justice, equality, and human dignity.

This vision of God has been articulated in countless comparative studies accumulated by scholars over the last two centuries. But an accurate vision of ancestral theology can be gleaned from the numerous creation myths, from the wisdom of African proverbs and from the insight provided by African languages, religious songs, art and music, prayers, names of God, names of the African people, royal investiture speeches, religious taboos, and various customs. But before analyzing the African understanding of the nature of God, it is worth addressing first the question of God’s existence and whether the knowledge of God is accessible to mortals.

Can God Be Known?

The answer to that question depends on the nature of God. Both monotheism and polytheism are foreign concepts that cannot fully render the richness of the African vision of God. In Africa, God is rather conceived of in terms of a family. More specifically, the African vision of God is cosmotheandric. There is Vidye Mukulu translated as the Great Spirit, Supreme Being, or High God. Then there are various spirits, especially spirits of nature, dwelling in sacred waters, sacred mountains, and so on. Finally, the ancestors are people who were famous for their virtues and goodness and who become divine after death. The spirits and ancestors are regarded as lesser gods because they are created by Vidye Mukulu,

they depend on him, and they often act on his behalf. The question of whether humans can know God is therefore raised with regard to the Supreme Being (Vidye Mukulu, Shakapanga).

One of the most striking aspects of African traditional religions is the absence of dogmatic definitions of God and, most important, the absence of sculpture or icons representing the Supreme Being. In most rituals, even prayers and sacrifices are often offered to the ancestors and the spirits. God is even called “the unknown” (by the Massai People), “the God of the Unknown” (by the Lunda people), “the Unexplainable” (by the Ngombe people), and “the Marvel of the marvels” (by the Bakongo people). Numerous proverbs also point to the mysterious nature of God. A Luba proverb warns whiners that God is not “our brother”: “Vidye ukuha bibidi I mwanenu?” (God cannot give you twice, he is not your brother).

This fact led many outsiders to conclude that Africans lack the knowledge of the Supreme Being. However, such a conclusion stems from a superficial perception of African religions. From time immemorial, atheism has not yielded support in African imagination. Contemplating the majesty of mountains such as Kilimanjaro and Nyiragongo and mighty rivers (Nile, Congo, and Niger), the beauty of the blue sky and the majesty of the stars, and experiencing the power of various spirits and interacting with the Dead through dreams, visions, or mediumship, Africans have firmly regarded the existence of God as a self-evident truth.

The difficulty of translating the unlimited God into a limited human language, however, has raised the question of whether mortals can acquire an accurate knowledge of God. Some religions claim to have received a clear revelation from God and thus to possess a clear, accurate, and unimpeachable knowledge of the Supreme Being. Yet even in these monotheistic religions, mystics and theologians have constantly warned against idolatry (i.e., man’s penchant to create God in his own image). Thus, apophatic theology reminds those who busy themselves in defining God that silence may be the best speech about God because every human discourse merely reflects the limited knowledge of their authors.

Such wisdom was well perceived by those African elders and artists who abstained from carving sculptures of the High God. Such gesture was a

product of a long and sophisticated theological reflection that understood well that, although humans speak of God in anthropological and even anthropomorphic terms, ultimately God transcends all the categories of human understanding and language. A Luba proverb reminds people that “no one can put his hand in another person’s heart even when sharing the same bed” (*munda mwamukwenu kemwelwa kuboko nansha mulele butanda bumo*). This notion that every human heart is a mystery is even truer for God. No human can fully grasp God’s heart. In other words, although humans can describe God’s action toward humans, and some of God’s manifestations, God is unknowable.

Thus, God is praised as the “unknown,” the mysterious one, as a Kikongo saying puts it explicitly: *Ku tombi Nzambi ko, kadi ka kena ye nitu ko* (Don’t look for God, He does not have a body). The Baluba and other people liken God to the wind or to the word of the mouth. A traditional Twa hymn conveying the vision of many Africans explicitly states that it is impossible to make an image of God:

In the beginning was God
 Today is God,
 Tomorrow will be God
 Who can make an image of God?
 He has no body
 He is as a word which comes out of your mouth
 That word! It is no more,
 It is past, and still it lives!
 So is God.

What is expressed in this metaphorical language is the fact that African traditional religion is fully aware of the transcendence of God. God is conceived of as the one who is at once close to humans and yet utterly other and mysterious. It is this awareness of the limitation of human knowledge of God that explains, in part, the amazingly tolerant nature of African traditional religion and the absence of excommunications and persecution of heretics in the religious history of Africa. By relativizing human knowledge of God, Africans allowed for various religious expressions and

claims; however, in a world of strong belief in “spirit possessions,” people did not totally deny the possibility of knowing God. What is rejected is the absolutization of one’s knowledge of God. Thus, praise songs, invocations, creation myths, and other forms of expression for a litany of the qualities of God can help believers grasp the African vision of the nature of God and his attributes.

God’s Attributes

God as “Adro-Adroa”

One of the fundamental questions of African theology is that of the relationship between God and humans. The abundant literature produced by Mircea Eliade and some influential anthropologists, theologians, and sociologists of religion has popularized the mythical hypothesis of an African “Deus Otiosus,” claiming that for African peoples God is “too remote” and virtually excluded from human affairs. The African God, they claim, is a lazy, indifferent, and absentee God who, after creation, withdrew far away and no longer intervenes in human affairs, neither to accept prayers nor to come to the rescue of those who invoke him.

Thus, it is assumed that African traditional religion lacks the sense of providence, that Africans worship a useless God. This view is not supported only by Westerners. Some African scholars too have made ambiguous statements, which lent credibility to a hypothesis that is nothing else than a colonial invention aimed at finding evidence for the superiority of the religion of the conquerors. Assertions of this kind are misleading, and the notion that Africans conceive God as “Deus otiosus” is false. Even authors who promoted the Deus Otiosus mythology acknowledge that the Igbo may make their sacrifices to various deities, but they envision a high God who ends up getting their message. Moreover, the Igbo and many other people appeal to the “High God” in their distress, believing that he is not completely separated from the affairs of men and that He is still the great father, the source of all good, who intervenes in favor of the living.

Africans, like many other people, consider God to be at once “near” and “far away.” In the poetic Lugbara expression, the African God is “Adro-Adroa.” The Lugbara people speak of God as

being near to people (Adro) and at the same time “far away” (Adroa). This same notion is found among the Baluba, who express the transcendence and immanence of God in a beautiful proverb: *Vidye kadi kula, umwite ukwitaba, umulonde bukwidila* (God is not far away, if you call him he will answer you, but if you try to walk you will never meet him).

What is critical here is that God is not merely Adroa, but also Adro. Because he comes close to humans in his benevolence, God is knowable to some degree and has qualities that can be described as mother, father, judge, and so on. Chief among these is the notion of creator.

God as “Sha-Bantu-ne-Bintu”

There are in Africa more than 2,000 creation myths. Indeed, the most fundamental African attribute of God is summarized in the Mashi expression, *Ishe w’abantu n’ebintu*. God is the father (Ishe) of human beings (abantu) and things (ebintu) because God is the universal creator, the source of the existence of the whole universe and every single creature. The Baluba use a similar expression: *Sha Bantu ne Bintu*. The father of all things and all human beings is first of all the Supreme Creator, the Supreme source of all life. As many Western and African scholars have pointed out, in African traditional religion, there is only one Creator. In some myths, God creates directly the whole world. In some others, he creates the spirits and delegates to them the mission to create the world on his behalf.

Thus, the Baluba call God *Shakapanga, Wa bumbile ngulu ne minonga* (Father of the creation, he created mountains and rivers). In many creation myths, God is spoken of as the Molder or the Potter who created the first human couple (male and female) by using clay. The Shilluk believe that God used clay of different colors in making men, which explains the difference in human skin pigmentation. The Dogon explain racial differences by the fact that Amma, who created all human beings, used the light of the moon for the skin of Europeans and the sun for Africans.

Thus, contrary to an ingrained prejudice against the so-called tribal religion, Africa has the conception of a universal creator, which led to an ethic that values the dignity of every human being and not

merely that of the members of one’s clan or ethnic group. This notion of “morality without borders” found its best expression in that legendary sense of African hospitality and solitariness (Ujamaa).

It should be noted that the African notion of a Creator God has its peculiarity. Among the Yoruba, God is called the “Father of Laughter.” No wonder African people are well known for their fondness of laughter. As we clarify in the conclusion of this entry, the notion of a Laughing God is extremely valuable for a better understanding of the healing and liberation power of African traditional religion.

God as Mother

It is worth noting some critical facts here. First, there is the inclusive nature of most African languages. In Kiluba and many other Bantu languages, there is no grammatical gender difference. Subsequently, God is never spoken of with the pronoun “He” or “She.” For instance, the expression *unena* means “He speaks” or “She speaks.” Second, women have always played a crucial role in African traditional religion as priestesses, mediums, diviners, or prophetesses. Finally, the African pantheon is replete with gods and goddesses. All this stems from the understanding of God’s nature as a kind of “yin-yang,” to borrow the Chinese category. God in Africa expresses his nature in both masculine and feminine forms. God’s motherhood is widely expressed in proverbs, songs, and names given to God in various ethnic groups.

Although God is often called Father in many regions, there is a significant tradition that presents God as Mother. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Bakongo ethnic group, which still practices the matriarchal system, explicitly refers to God as “Mother.” Elsewhere, God is referred to as “Nursing Mother” (among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania), “Great Mother” (Nuba of Sudan), “Mother of People” (Ewe of Benin, Ghana, and Togo), and the “Great Rainbow” (Chewa of Malawi and Zambia). It should be noted, however, that in African thought, God is basically beyond gender identity.

Thus, what people refer to when they call God Mother or Father is the quality of his caring love. God is a parent; as such, he incarnates both motherhood and fatherhood. He is called father and

mother at the same time to express what he does for human beings as protector and source of life. The image of God as Mother is not confined to matriarchal societies. Even in patriarchal societies, people consider God as Mother to emphasize His love and the fact that He takes care of people, cherishing and nursing every human being. This vision of God's motherhood is not exclusivist. It lives side by side with the vision of God's fatherhood.

Vidye Kadi Katonye

One of the most striking aspects of African worship is the abundance of "strict rules of purity" imposed to everyone involved in performing rituals directed to God. Indeed, African traditional religion is replete with rites of purification and taboos pertaining to rules of cleanliness. The diviner (Kilumbu) or the priest (Kitobo or Nsengha) who presides over a religious ceremony begins prayers, sacrifice, or a divination session only after extensive rituals of purification of the body and the mind. Priests and officiating elders must refrain not only from sexual intercourse and certain foods and activities before and after the ritual, but also from evil thought.

This purification practice stems from the fundamental belief that God is pure, and therefore it is not suitable to approach God with a "dirty heart" or "dirty hands." The Baluba explicitly state that God is spotless, stainless, and blameless (*Vidye kadi katonye*). In the eyes of the Yoruba people, God is "the pure King who is without blemish." Here the Baluba and the Yoruba express a belief common to many other Africans. This notion of God's purity is translated into three other essential attributes of God: holiness, righteousness, and goodness. By goodness is meant the notion that no evil occurring in the world can be attributed to God because the one who is pure cannot perform malevolent deeds.

Although many people raise complaints about misfortunes, no African religion considers God to be intrinsically evil. In some proverbs, God is called "the Father Creator Who creates and uncreates." He is considered as intrinsically good and the source of any good in human life. The Baluba, Bakongo, Igbo, Herero, and others say categorically that God does them only what is good. The Ewe firmly hold that "He is good, for He has

never withdrawn from us the good things which He gave us." The Banyarwanda, the Baluba, and many other people believe that only through God's will does one find a wife or a husband, a job, or wealth or is restored to good health.

This belief in divine purity and goodness is enshrined in timeless cosmogonies. In their numerous creation myths, Africans have wrestled with the question of the origin of evil and suffering. The conclusion is that God is not the source of evil. The myths of the origin of suffering stress the responsibility of human beings and present God as pure (Utoka). This notion of purity refers to the African conception that God has a "good heart" (*mucima muyampe*). This heart embodies the virtues of truthfulness, impartiality, and, most important, goodness, which is translated into love, compassion, and forgiveness. The Luba notion of God as a loving, compassionate, and forgiving God (*Leza wa Lusa ne Buswe, Leza Muyampe*) is found in many other parts of Africa.

It is worth mentioning here that African traditional religion is devoid of the notion of original sin. The African God does not hold children accountable for the sins of their ancestors, but he is a God who abhors evil and punishes evil-doers. Thus, God's goodness is the fundamental source of African morality. The notion of God as the supreme judge of human thought and actions is predicated not only on his purity and ownership of the whole creation, but also on the fundamental fact that nothing escapes God's eye.

God as Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient

Luba prayers often begin with the formula, *Abe Leza wabine ne wa buninge bonso* (O, you truthful and omnipotent God). Luba and other traditional prayers are predicated on the fundamental belief that "nothing is impossible to God." The creator and owner of the universe is understood as an omnipotent or "Almighty God." This might include the power of God's knowledge. As a Supreme Creator who transcends space and time, the Master of the universe is particularly endowed with the ability to know the past and the future, the deeds and secret thoughts of humans.

This omniscience is reinforced by his omnipresence. To better express these qualities, people use various

metaphors. The Baluba liken God to the wind (Leza udi bwa luvula). The metaphor of seeing and hearing is often used to explain God's omniscience. The Ila people say that God has "long ears." The Baganda people visualize God as "the Great Eye" or "the Sun" that beams its light everywhere. In many regions, God is given names that mean "The Wise one," "He who knows or sees all," or "The Discerner of hearts, who sees both the inside and outside of human beings." With knowledge comes the other fundamental attribute: wisdom. God is thus viewed as the wise king who governs the world wisely.

God and Names

These attributes and countless others are exemplified in the litany of praise names given to God and in the theophoric names of the African people.

In Sierra Leone, for instance, God is called *Maada* (Grandfather), *Mahawa* (Great Chief), *Yataa* (The One whom you meet everywhere), and *Meketa* (The One who remains and does not die, the Everlasting One). Names used in Cameroon include *Hilolombi* (the Ancestor of days, the first one, the beginning of everything), *Nkoo-Bot* (the Maker of People), *Mebee* (Bearer of the Universe), *Ebasi* (the Omnipotent), and *Nyi* (He who is everywhere and hears and sees everything). The Banyarwanda use *Imana* as the official name of God and various other names that describe his nature—for instance, *Iya-Kare* (the Initial one) and *Iya-mbere* (the Preexisting one).

The Bashi of Kivu (Congo) use four basic names for God: *Nyakasane* (Master, Sovereign), *Nyamuzinda* (origin and end of everything, from the verb *Kuzinda*, to stand at the end), *Nnamahanga* (Owner of the universe), and *Nyamubaho* (The Existence par excellence, from the verb *kubaho*, to be there, to exist). They use other names to describe specific activities or qualities of God, such as *Lulema* (creator, from the verb *Kulema*, to create), *Kabumba* (creator, from the verb *kubumba*, to make like a potter), *Kalanga* (conservator, from the verb *kulanga*, to preserve, to keep), or *Lugaba* (the Generous one, from the verb *kugaba*, to give, to offer). God's attributes can also be gleaned from the names of African people.

Africa has a long-standing tradition of theophoric names, by which parents give to their children names that express their relationship with God and their desire to see children grow in virtues. Thus, the Baluba use names such as *Dyese* or *Katokwe*, which convey the idea of being blessed by God. In Rwanda, Uganda, and parts of West Africa, the very name of God is incorporated in people's names. In Uganda, where God is called *Katonda* and *Ruhanga*, we find names such as *Byakatonda* (for or by the creator), *Byaruhanga* (thing of God), and *Takacungurwaruhanga* (we were saved by God).

In Rwanda and Burundi, we find names like *Bizimana* (God knows everything; *Imana* being one of the names of God in Kirundi and Kinyarwanda), *Niyibizi* (God knows all about it), *Ndayiziga* (I depend on Him), and *Ndihokubgayo* (I am alive because of Him). In Nigeria, we find some significant Igbo names like *Chukwuemeka* (God did marvelous thing to me), *Chukwuka* (God is almighty, God is the highest), *Chukwuma* (God knows), *Ikechukwu* (God is my force), *Chigozie* (God bless!), *Chimuanya* (God does not sleep), *Chiamaka* (God is beautiful, God is good), *Chidiebere* (God is merciful), *Chinedu* (God is my leader), and *Chinyere* (Gift of God). These theophoric names are prevalent in many other parts of Africa.

In Ghana, another type of theophoric name is known as "cosmological names." Among the Asante and Fante, children receive their names according to the day of their birth and, thus, carry on the character of the spirit that presides over the cosmos in that particular day. Thus, children born on Friday, like UN Secretary General Annan, are called *Kofi* (with *Afua* as the female version), and those born on Saturday like the legendary president Kwame Nkrumah are called *Kwame* or *Kwamena* (with *Amba* or *Ama* as the female version). Other names include *Kwasi* or *Kwesi* for those born on Sunday (with *Akosua* for girls), *Kwadwo* or *Kodwo* for those born on Monday (with *Adwowa* for girls), *Kwabena* or *Kobena* for those born on Tuesday (with *Abenaa* for girls), *Kwaku* or *Kweku* for those born on Wednesday (with *Akua* for girls), and *Yao* for those born on Thursday (with *Yaa* for girls).

Most important, it is held that children share some of the qualities of the specific deity that

presides over the universe on the particular day of their birth. Thus, children born on Sunday have the gift of leadership and are under the protection of the Whisk spirit (Bodua); those born on Monday have a peaceful character and the gift of peacemaker and are guided by the Crab spirit (Okoto). Tuesday's children have a special fire of compassion from the Ogyam spirit. Wednesday's children have a golden heart, solid like the rock, and live under the protection of the Ntoni spirit. Thursday's children are the children of the boar spirit (Preko) and enjoy the gift of courage. Friday's children tend to be restless, curious, and an adventurer, like the Okyin spirit. Finally, the children of the spear spirit (Atoapoma) born on Friday are tenacious. Given that a strong relationship exists among the High God, the cosmos, and various spirits, cosmological names, like the theophoric names, also illustrate the African understanding of the nature and character of God.

The African Vision

From the hundreds of divine names and attributes praised in songs or invocations, God appears in many forms and has many characteristics that could be summarized in 20 major categories. Thus, God is understood by Africans as

1. creator or the ultimate source of all existence;
2. true owner of the universe;
3. supreme judge who abhors injustice, evil, discrimination, and oppression of the weak;
4. supreme ruler of the universe;
5. a laughing God;
6. a parent (mother and father);
7. omnipresent;
8. omniscient;
9. omnipotent;
10. immanent and near to people;
11. transcendent and the mysterious one who cannot be fully understood or known;
12. perfect, pure, or holy;
13. everlasting and immortal;
14. invisible and immaterial;

15. the *nganga* (the healer of bodies and souls);
16. peaceful and peacemaker; and, finally,
17. a compassionate God who is
18. generous,
19. forgiving, and
20. caring or loving.

The African God is not a jealous God. However, the notion of might and kingship led to the conceptualization of God as a warrior against the forces of evil, with all the ambiguity that such a notion carries in the hands of evil rulers or those addicted to *libido dominandi*.

If it is true that human beings are the way they think, believe, or pray, then this African vision of God has tremendous implications for social order, democracy and human rights, the global market, and the credibility and authenticity of religious experience in this age of increasing intolerance and religious terrorism. This is all the more true because there is more to religion than mere ritual, dance, and invocation of deities. Religion is not merely a basis of consolation for souls lost in the uncontrollable machine of world politics and global market or in the vicious circle of obsolete customs and traditions.

African traditional religion, like many other forms of religion, constitutes an encyclopedic compendium of knowledge about the world that guides people in their quest for the meaning of life and their metaphysical need to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and grasp their place and role in the flow of world events. The African vision of God shapes people's consciousness of the world and of themselves. It provides a hermeneutical key for understanding the world and the *raison d'être* of political, economic, social, cultural, and religious events. As such, the attributes of God constitute a fundamental basis for the critique of all forms of religious, political, economic, social, or cultural thought and behavior. Five major areas of such implications are worth mentioning.

World Peace and Interreligious Dialogue

In a world driven by religious competition and scramble for souls, a world dramatically shaken by the missionary drive to convert to the "true

religion” the alleged godless barbarians, and a world that scoffs at respect for other religions as an impious and false relativism, it has become obvious that no peace among nations is possible without peace among religions. Because the African God is not a jealous God, and because African traditional religion is historically devoid of religious crusades, devoid of dogmas of orthodoxy, missionary zealotry, and the imperative of excommunication and hunt of heretics, the African vision of God brings a much needed fresh air of religious tolerance in a world where passions for truth and certainty and an obscene complex of religious superiority generate so much angst, spiritual restlessness, and unnecessary demonization of the other.

Universal Brotherhood in the Global Village

African creation myths establish the common origin of humankind from the same creator. Subsequently, all races, ethnicities, and religious traditions can be viewed as “chosen by God.” The inclusion of the whole humanity within the same family denounces all forms of discriminations, from tribalism to racism and nationalism, and establishes a strong foundation for human rights because the dignity of every human being stems from Shakapanga the universal creator.

Moreover, because the African principles of hospitality and solidarity are extended not only to the human family, but also to the natural world, God, as *Sha-Bantu-Ne-Bintu* (father not only of humans, but also of animals and natural world), becomes the foundation of a healthy theology of ecology, especially reverence for nature and respect for animal rights.

God as Mother

Along with the principle of a creator God, the African notion of the motherhood of God constitutes a powerful spiritual tool for the critique of patriarchy and sexism.

God as Creator

The notion of God as creator and true owner of the world informs a critique of private property so dear to the free-market economy. It raises the question of when an individual appropriation of natural

resources violates the principle of the universal destination of natural goods and crosses the line of decency to fall into the category of theft of common good. The implications for business ethic here are staggering.

No Exclusivity

Finally, by refusing to imprison God in man-made sculptures, icons, and intellectual images, African traditional theology sends a powerful warning against the absurdity of religious totalitarianism. God is not the private property of one mind, one gender, one race, one ethnic group, one nation, or one religious tradition. God as *Adro-Adroa* transcends all human categories, all human constitutions, and all human institutions.

This is even more underscored by that singular African vision of God as the father of laughter. Indeed, African traditional religion is a religion of abundant life, abundant love, and abundant laughter. Although some cultures and religions may strive to bring laughter into bad repute as a bad infirmity of human nature that a pious, rational, and civilized mind should strive to overcome, in Africa, laughter is celebrated as a virtuous expression of a humane heart.

In this era of global war on terror and rising religious fundamentalism, the hermeneutics of laughter offers us a precious lesson. It looks on the cold solemnity of fanatical orthodoxies as a spiritual disease. Laughter is cathartic and therapeutic, but also, and most important, laughter is *matter et magistra* of life. It calls for caution, discernment, and constant flexibility. Moreover, laughter is prophetic; it denounces the folly of dogmatic modes of thinking in a global village that has become the stage of maverick and Machiavellian politics and is dominated by the diktat of the orthodoxies of fundamentalist free-market theologies.

The worship of a Laughing God is a process of liberation from all types of dogmatic and authoritarian ways of thinking, praying, or being in the world. Thus, despite the numerous mischiefs of African societies and institutions, a well-understood African concept of God constitutes the foundation of those humane African virtues of *Bumuntu* so critical not only for a genuine African renaissance, but also for the creation of a genuine humanity where the global village can really be a family where all are brothers

and sisters. The revolutionary power of such a vision of God for local tyrannies, patriarchy, world politics, and a global market some see as immoral and criminal is self-evident. In a world where religion has always been a double-edged sword, used to heal and to wound, to liberate and to enslave, to bless and to curse, the power to control the definitions of God shapes the outcome of the perennial struggle for meaning and dignity and the quest for peace and happiness. The notion of a “Laughing Adro-Adroa” God constitutes a dramatic and iconoclastic force of empowerment and liberation from cultural, religious, political, and economic tyrannies in this emerging faceless global empire.

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Creation; Divinities

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GODDESSES

The African female divinity system, or sacred mother tradition, is one of the oldest God concepts in the world. In traditional African societies, national cosmologies focus on (a) a masculine God, (b) a feminine goddess, or (c) a masculine and feminine (androgynous) God. Goddesses perform the same functions as Gods. In traditional African societies, goddesses are omnipotent, omnipresent beings who control and influence the lives of mortal beings. In myth and cosmology, African goddesses are beyond human; they transcend man and woman, and thus their mysteries may not be completely understood by human beings. Throughout the continent of Africa and manifested in the African Diaspora, goddesses have traveled through time and space to express themselves in the contemporary moment. This entry looks at some of the general characteristics of goddesses and then reviews some specific examples from different parts of Africa and the Diaspora.

General Characteristics

The stories indicating how African goddesses came to be worshipped suggest that they entered human consciousness often through prophecy or are self-existing like the Gods. However, as a manifestation of the African mother image, goddesses possess a direct and logical connection for their existence and attributes through the act of human creation by females. Therefore, because African goddesses teach sacred lessons to human beings, they are archetypes of the divine woman.

African goddesses are most associated with the process of human creation in terms of womanhood, motherhood, fertility, childbirth, and pregnancy. African goddesses are often linked to the symbolism of sacred vessels, bowls, and other containers that signify the womb so they oversee the initiation of birth. In doing so, the womb and menstrual blood (which are sacred waters) cause goddesses to be keepers of great bodies of water. With the advent and rise of the masculine divinity system, many gendered attributes are assigned to goddesses, although some of them indicate a quixotic nature of female Gods. In addition, many goddesses are wives or consorts of Gods. Often African goddesses are depicted as powerful, but also as elegant and majestic in stature.

The extent of human reverence over time is indicative of this perception. People celebrated African goddesses by holding festivals in their honor, establishing shrines for worship, developing temples and priestess societies (initiations into sacred mysteries), performing ritual dramas, wearing symbols, celebrating their “birthdays,” and planting crops in their names. In African societies where goddesses are powerful, women tend to be influential (in terms of matrilineal structures, property transference, bride price, and polygny). Two of the most discussed examples of African goddesses come from Northeast and West Africa.

Isis and Maat in Egypt

In Northeast Africa, Egypt (Kmt), Egyptian goddesses such as Nut (Nit, Net, Nekhebt) existed thousands of years before the Christian era. She is understood to have existed before anything else had been created. Nut then created the cosmos and put Ra into the sky. The ancient Egyptian

goddess who captured the imagination of initiates from Africa and beyond was Isis (Auset). As the wife of Ausar and the mother of Horus, she is also believed to have been in existence at the time of creation; thus, she symbolizes sunrise (rebirth and regeneration). Although nature, agriculture, healing, and law are her domain, she is most associated with the resurrection mythologies surrounding her divine marriage to Ausur. Using magical words, Goddess Isis searched for her dead husband's scattered body, resurrected him, and produced the divine son, Horus, with him. Thus, she is the quintessential symbol of the divine wife and mother. Goddess Isis is often found depicted as a seated sacred mother nursing her child. She is represented among the first of numerous Black Madonna figures of the ancient world. She was worshipped widely in North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Nubia, and Rome until the 6th century.

The Northeast African goddess Maat represents the oldest known design for spiritual justice and divine order of the cosmos. The African goddess Maat embodies truth, justice, order, righteousness, bace, and harmony of the universe. Goddess Maat is present when the dead are judged, where she weighs the heart of the dead against her feather of truth. Ancient Egyptian males who supervised the courts of law were known as the "priests of Maat."

Other Northeast African goddesses include Sekhmet, who represented war and battle. Goddess Sekhmet symbolized the destructive aspects of the Sun. Goddess Seshat was married to Thoth (Tehuti) and, like him, is aligned with knowledge, writing, astrology, and measurement. Goddess Tefnut, the spouse of Shu (a primordial God who symbolized air), represented moisture in the form of rain and mist. Heket was also an Egyptian creation goddess who was a patron of midwives because of the way in which she supervised the birth of the sun each morning. Goddess Heket is also associated with the Nile River and the act of resurrection. The strength of Egyptian (Kmt) culture and religion has produced a goddess corpus subject to various interpretations with the impact of migration and conquest, yet a coherent system of knowledge.

Among the Yoruba

There are many feminine orishas (goddesses in the Yoruba pantheon). One of the most ancient of the

African Yoruba goddesses was Are in Ketu. Goddesses such as Are are believed to be so old that their details have been lost in time. The orisha Oduduwa, which is most associated with male divinity systems, has a feminine side depending on her location in Yoruba land. Oduduwa, it appears, evolved over time to have the image of a male-centered deity, but evidence of the worship of Oduduwa as female exists. The Yoruba orisha, Yemoja, is associated with the Ogun River and the aspect of womanhood. Goddess Yemoja is believed to have overseen the souls in the holocaust of enslavement (Middle Passage). The Yoruba warrior goddess Nana Buruku (Nana Bukuu), who is also found in Brazil, is the Mother of Obaluaiye. She protects women and dispenses courage; although she oversees birth, she also takes life.

The male Yoruba orishas possessed powerful goddess-mates. Oba was the first wife of Shango, God of Thunder and Lightning. Shango's wife, Oya, is responsible for storms and is present at the time of a warrior's death. She is also the goddess designate of the River Niger. Oshun is another river goddess who exemplifies beauty, love, and wealth. She also governs fertility and divination. Many of the African goddesses, particularly in the Yoruba tradition, are descended from or related to Mother Earth spirits, such as Iya Fera, Iya Lata, and Mama Lata (African French Creole).

Elsewhere in Africa

Other important African goddesses include Minona of the Fon (Benin). She is believed to be the sacred mother and grandmother of powerful goddesses and is a guardian of women. Minona is the mother of Mawu, the Earth goddess creator of the universe (alongside her husband, Lisa = Mawu/Lisa). She gives birth to another important Fon goddess, Gbadu. As the African goddess of Fate, Gbadu shuns human warfare.

The Asante (also called Ashanti) of Ghana in West Africa revere the ancient goddess Asase Yaa as one of the most divine feminine beings important to their cosmological system. She is the wife of the sky god Nyame (Nyankopon). Goddess Asase Yaa represents the Earth, fertility, birth, and death. West African goddesses have many similarities to other parts of Africa, including southern African female deities.

Among the Zulu, *Mbaba Mwana Waresa* (Lady of the Rainbow) has a story of searching for her divine spouse. The Zulu also revere Inkosazana, who introduced corn and beer. African goddesses tell important stories about human possibility by offering information about the supernatural realm.

In the Diaspora

African goddesses survived and developed in the Black Diaspora as a result of the holocaust of enslavement (Middle Passage) and the subsequent migration of African people. Some African goddesses brought their ingenious names with them, whereas others took new names and new forms. They consistently brought their God attributes.

They include, among many others, Yemoja (Yemaya), Oya, Oshun, Anansi, Isis, and Maat. They exist within African women's rites of passage ceremonies. In terms of women's rituals, some scholars believe that female circumcision is a mock form of masculine castration in order to achieve a greater alignment with the feminine goddess. In the African Diaspora, as on the continent of Africa, goddesses perform a variety of specific functions in support of humanity and the cosmos. Their responsibilities include

1. creating the universe;
2. protecting humanity, especially women;
3. exemplifying the role of great wife and mother;
4. serving as oracles in the divination process;
5. bringing wealth, abundance, and prosperity;
6. controlling nature (water, wind, fire, etc.);
7. giving life and taking it away;
8. healing the sick;
9. mediating between good and evil, as well as dispensing law, wisdom, and hidden truths;
10. providing sustenance to the people; and
11. balancing and bringing order to the universe.

Katherine Olukemi Bankole

See also Auset

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GOLA

The Gola people live primarily in the western part of Liberia, West Africa. Furthermore, a sizable Gola community resides in the neighboring country of Sierra Leone. Their language is called Gola as well. Many scholars have suggested that the name Gullah, a people living in the Georgia and North Carolina regions of the United States, may well originate from the word *Gola* because many Gola people were captured and sent against their will to be enslaved in the United States, among other places, during the European slave trade and enslavement of African people.

The Gola's original home was mostly in the country known today as the Ivory Coast, which they started leaving around 1300 AD to settle in their present locations. Much Gola life is centered around farming. Indeed, the Gola farmers are reputed for their great agricultural skills and knowledge. Rice is the main crop that they cultivate.

The Gola people believe in a supreme God who, once the world was created, withdrew, leaving its governance in the hands of divinities and ancestral spirits. Thus, the Gola venerate their ancestors because they know them to be an intricate part of their daily lives. They take much care in expressing their reverence and need for their protection by regularly performing rituals, such as offerings and sacrifices to them. The Gola believe in reincarnation, that is, in the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Thus, a newborn child is believed to be a returning ancestor from the family lineage. As a result, the

child, once the reincarnated ancestor has been identified, will receive the name of that ancestor.

As in many other African communities, life is regarded as marked by four critical moments: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Thus, boys and girls are initiated at the time of puberty within the context of rites of passage considered essential. This is the time when male adolescents will be circumcised. Circumcision marks the passage from childhood to adulthood and the time of a greater awareness of the spiritual nature of the world. After undergoing circumcision, the young men are secluded for a month in total isolation. This is the time when they are encouraged to reflect on life and the new meaning that it has for them as they undergo initiation.

When seclusion is over, the initiates are reincorporated into their community in the midst of much rejoicing and festivities. They are presented with many gifts, such as poultry, beer, arrows, and so on. Now that they have been circumcised and their initiation is over, the young men are considered to be adults and may enjoy the prerogatives and duties associated with adulthood, such as marriage, procreation, and initiation into different socioreligious organizations.

Given the central role of farming in Gola life, it is no surprise that many of the most significant Gola ceremonies and rituals are devoted to agriculture. For instance, at the time of harvest, and because this is common in many other agrarian African societies, a thanksgiving ritual is observed, with the first grain being offered to the spirits. Only when this rite has been performed can people eat from the new grain. Every year, the Gola organize yam and groundnut harvest festivals. As farmers, the Gola people are particularly concerned about propitiating their rain god Da, to whom they will offer a special prayer in times of drought. The request will be presented by an elder, who, holding a human skull in his hand, will beg Da to send rain to ensure the prosperity of the Gola people. A sacrifice to Da, usually that of a chicken whose blood will be poured on the skull, is likely to follow.

Ama Mazama

See also Circumcision; Harvest; Offering; Rain; Rites of Passage; Sacrifice

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GOVI

A govi is a jar or bottle usually made of red clay. It is a sacred ritualistic item in Vodou in Haiti, where it plays a significant role in reclamation ceremonies at the time of death. The word *govi* is of Fon origin. This should come as no surprise because Vodou originated among the Fon people of West Africa. Many have noticed that the Fon engage in rituals of reclamation similar to those one may observe in Haiti.

According to Vodou ontology, the human being is made up of three parts: In addition to the most obvious one, that is, the physical body, it also has a bipartite spiritual component, the *tibonanj* (one's personality, conscience), and the *gwobonanj*, which is the immortal spirit, of divine origin.

At the time of death, Vodouists believe that the *gwobonanj*, thanks to carefully followed and executed funerary rituals, will join the abyssal waters of the ancestral world, *Ginen*. However, the *gowbonanj* must be reclaimed from *Ginen* 1 year and 1 day after death has occurred. Failure to do so could have dire consequences for the relatives of the deceased. This reclamation happens through an elaborate ritual known as *Wete mò anba dlo* (literally, "removing the dead from under the water"). The ceremony that accompanies the ritual will last

all night long and, like most Vodou ceremonies, will involve intense drumming, singing, and dancing.

The purpose of reclaiming the gwobonanj is simply to separate it from the world of the living dead, thus allowing it to become again an active member of the community of the living, with the govi, the receptacle of the gwobonanj, acting as a substitute for the now decayed physical body. In other words, the govi can be thought of as a vessel that allows the deceased to resume their active involvement in the affairs of their original community.

As such, the govi is quite precious to the living because, when called on, the spirit will be able to dispense advice, guidance, warnings, protection, wisdom, and so on, to the living from the govi. The gwobonanj in the govi is regarded as most sacred, and its power is only beneath that of the Lwa and Gwanmèt (God). Govis are regularly fed, that is, they receive food offerings and sacrifices from the living. At some point, several generations later, when the direct descendants of the person whose gwobonanj is in the govi have themselves made their transition into the spiritual realm, then the spirit is returned, through immolation, to the world of the ancestors, Ginen.

The importance and significance of the govi can hardly be overstressed because it enables as well as brings to light the Vodouists' reverence for their ancestors, a ubiquitous and fundamental feature of African religion in general.

Ama Mazama

See also Vodou in Haiti

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GROVES, SACRED

Groves are sacred in African religion. They contain the spirits of the ancestors. The ancestors do not

die, according to African worldview. They join the environment and live as one with nature. Founders of nations and heads of families and dynasties identify with hills and mountains as symbols of their deep roots, solid high moral standards, and principles. Some identify with trees such as the baobab and iroko as symbols of royalty and status. Some identify with rivers, lakes, springs, pools, and waterfalls as ideal resorts for their spirits. Warrior spirits identify with animals such as the rhino, elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, or hippo as symbols of power, strength, and aggression.

Sanctity and Sanctuary

The spirits of elders and wise men find kinship with birds such as the hawk, falcon, and eagle as symbols of sagacity, far-reaching wisdom, and vision. Healing spirits associate with bushes, plants, and shrubberies as their resorts. Spirits of beauty or vanity associate with colorful flowers and rare butterflies such as the Mother of Pearl and the Eared Commodore found in the forests of the Zambezi, where the spirit of Nyami-Nyami, the snake deity, is guardian of Mosi-oa-Tunya.

The sanctity of the falls of Mosi-oa-Tunya was defiled by David Livingstone, the Scottish adventurer and explorer, who named them Victoria Falls in honor of Queen Victoria. The sacred name for the falls in Nambiya is Chinotimba, which means The Spirit of Thunder. The classical name for the falls in Shona is Mapopoma, which means The Great Deluge.

Major groves in Africa that have been declared World Heritage Sites are sanctuaries, where phenomena associated with the ancestors as deities are found. The rivers, lakes, springs, and pools of Matopo are spiritual resorts of deities as mermaids endowed with mystic powers of healing, divination, and magic, which the ancestors reveal to healers in dreams. The Njelele shrines of the Matopo Hills are World Heritage Sites dedicated to the worship of Mwari, the Shona God, and to the honor of Murenga, the Shona ancestor and founder of Zimbabwe.

The religious name for the Hills of Matopo in Kalanga is Malindidzimu, which means Holy Place for the Ancestors. The Shona name for the Hills in their myths is Mabweadziva, which means

Mountains of Floods. Ritual ceremonies for good rains and good harvests are held there regularly by the people of Zimbabwe and the countries of Southern Africa such as Zambia, Malawi, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa.

Colonialism and Defilement

The sanctity of the Matopo Hills was defiled by Cecil John Rhodes, who named them The World's View, and chose them as the ideal site for his final rest as a European deity among African ancestors. The hilltops opposite Rhodes' grave bear the cross that Father Odilo Weeger erected in honor of Rhodes as a Christian hero and conqueror of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. Rhodes' vision was to colonize the whole African landmass from Cape to Cairo. Beside him lies Leander Starr Jameson, the first Rhodesian colonial administrator of Zimbabwe and Rhodes' bosom friend.

Another ancient shrine defiled by colonialism and desecrated by tourism for the sake of money is Great Zimbabwe. It is a World Heritage Site and an important center for the emergence of early organized state systems in Africa and the origins of world civilizations. The indigenous people of Zimbabwe refer to it as *MaDzimbabwe*, which means The Burial Place for Royal Ancestors. Zimbabwe, as the name of the country, was derived from it, to replace the colonial name Rhodesia after Cecil John Rhodes. National celebrations for independence and thanksgiving ceremonies for good rains and good harvests are still held there as a holy shrine.

Among the groves and sites that Africans revere as sacred, but have been defiled by colonialism and profaned by tourism, are monuments such as El Mina Castle in Ghana and Bagamoyo in Tanzania. They contain the blood and tears of Africans who were taken into slavery across the seas in chains. *Bagamoyo* in Swahili means The Place Where My Heart Is. That is how Africans felt as they saw their land for the last time from the ships that were taking them into slavery across the Indian Ocean. To defile the sites that Africans regard as sacred in their religion or history is to destroy the links that connect them to their ancestors as the source of their identity and values as a people. Equally sacrilegious is the destruction of symbols that Africans regard as images of their spirituality and humanity.

The role of totems in African worldview and religion is to make people identify with the objects they have chosen as totems and live in harmony with them and defend them as their heritage. To destroy the symbols that represent one's spirituality as a human being is an abomination as vile as a suicide or a self-murder. The images that African ancestors painted and left on the walls of the caves in the Hills of Matopo and other sites of Zimbabwe and Africa that archeologists describe as half human/half animal and expressions of shamanism and animism in African religion are expressions of African peoples' complete identification with the animals and objects they have chosen as symbols of their values as a people. Painting was a way of immortalizing them and passing their importance on to future generations as a spiritual legacy and sacred heritage unparalleled elsewhere in world history.

Vimbai Gukwe Chivaura

See also Chaminuka; Nehanda

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GULU

Gulu is a district in northern Uganda whose name comes from the main commercial center of the

district, the town of Gulu. It is one of the historical homelands of the Acholi ethnic group. The district has been a central point for religious change, both peaceful and violent, being one of the locations where the convergence of Christianity, Islam, and the traditional religion of the Acholi ethnic group is giving birth to new formations. These novel developments involve the mutual infusion into each other of notions and practices from both Christianity and traditional religions.

Traditional religion among the Acholi can be understood in relation to that among the Luo people, to which the Acholi belong. It is centered in veneration of, and relationships with, a concept of spirit known as *Juok*, which is realized in terms of a Supreme Being, ancestors, and other deities. These spiritual beings are understood to participate in all the particulars of the daily life of the believers.

The Christianity of the Acholi is characterized by the variants represented by Catholic, Protestant, and African Independent churches. The latter are an effort to develop forms of Christianity that meet a broader range of the spiritual needs of the devotees than older Christian forms have done. This happens because the older forms are based on conceptions about the character of the universe that derive from the Western origins of the missionaries who established these churches. These conceptions are significantly different from fundamental aspects of the metaphysical conceptions that are endogenous to the Acholi.

The African Independent churches, in contrast, embodying a synthesis of Christian and endogenous metaphysics, are able to address concerns that emanate from the persistence of these endogenous beliefs and attitudes. These beliefs include a close physical proximity to spirits of various types, benevolent, malevolent, and ambiguous, who are in intimate relationship with humans. Therefore, the phenomena of possession by spirits, exorcism, and witchcraft, among others, feature significantly in the culture of these churches.

Gulu has also witnessed the development of a form of Christianity that is distinctive in Africa, a militant Christianity. The district is the birthplace of Alice Auma and Joseph Kony, the originators of this militant religiosity. Alice Auma is the founder

of the Holy Spirit Movement. Joseph Kony founded the Lord's Resistance Army, which emerged under the impetus of the earlier movement after it collapsed. The earlier and later groups have had as their *raison d'être* the engagement with the Ugandan army to create a religiously inspired government, but they use significantly different tactics that suggest different modes of syncretization of traditional and Christian forms. One of these differences is the quasipacifist character of the earlier movement and the brutally violent nature of the later one.

Alice Auma's and Joseph Kony's characterizations of themselves as empowered in their leadership by their roles as spirit mediums evokes the traditional Acholi as well as the Christian understanding of human beings as capable of possession by spirits who enable the individual with psychological and magical resources that privilege them to act as leaders in their communities.

The Holy Spirit Movement developed and operated according to a quasipacifist ideology that involved a strict practice of justice in relation to civilians. This ideology was intimately related to conceptions of justice rooted in a sense of natural order. This sense of order embodies ideas about agency in nature, both animate and inanimate, through which this order is expressed. This conception of natural order dramatizes, in a novel form, traditional Acholi notions of nature as vitalistic and agentive. The movement's conception of military activity as an effort to restore the harmony of nature violated by previous conflict in Uganda is a dramatization of a practical imperative emerging from this sense of natural order.

Another central influence on religion among the Gulu is Islam. Islam has also been described among these people as involving a juxtaposition of pre-Islamic and more conventional Islamic elements.

The development of religious forms in relation to the transformation of metaphysical conceptions under the pressure of sociopolitical experience continues in Gulu because the district is central to current conflicts in Uganda, in which religion and politics converge.

Oluwatoyin Vincent Adepoju

See also Baganda

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GURO

The Guro people live in Ivory Coast surrounded by the Baule in the east, the Gagu in the south, the Malinke in the north, and the Bete in the west. Consequently, they are influenced by and have influenced several other ethnic groups in their region. The Guro are a Mande-speaking people who probably originated in the Sahel region during the time of the Mali Empire.

They became over centuries some of the best sculptors of wood in the region, transmitting their techniques to other artists. Along with the transmission of their artistic techniques went the Guro's significant store of myths, legends, and philosophical concepts. Some people, such as the Mwa, Gagu, and Nwan, were assimilated into the Guro culture so well that they, in actuality, became Guro.

The Guro's traditional religion depended on the structure of the ethnic group. They are divided into nearly 50 villages and territories and given duties relating to the military and economy by consent. Because there is no king, queen, or chief, it is the council of elders who resolve all issues of land and kinship. In the event of a military action, a commander may be elected or appointed by the elders, but the commander has no further responsibilities after the action has been carried out. Thus, war generals and soldiers have temporary responsibilities. This system seems to preserve the authority of the elders and the ancestors in ways that more directly personal powers of a leader might complicate.

One of the reasons the sculptor is held with respect is the importance of masks for religious functions. There are several mask societies, actually religious communities, within the Guro known for their strict adherence to discipline. They are the Zamble, the Goli, and the Gye. Only men can be initiated into these groups. Among the members of

the Guro who live in the north, actually those who have been influenced by Islam, young girls are excised and then initiated into the Kene society. It is reserved for women only. There are also other select groups among the Guro. These are called the Vro, Gi, and Yune.

Power, administration, economics, and ceremonies are shared among the various groups. The male-only and female-only groups perform certain functions and duties; duties are also performed by select mixed groups. Regardless of the makeup of the group, it is the eldest descendant of the first inhabitant, the one who is nearest in line of descent to the ancestor, a person chosen by divination, or the oldest man, who makes sacrifices to the village land. Any of these persons may perform the sacrifice to the land, but this does not bestow on him or her any particular powers of leadership. If there has been a special relationship with a river, a tree, or a large mountain or stone, say, someone has been saved by holding onto a rock, or protected from animals by climbing a tree, and so forth, a family may make sacrifices to that particular natural feature. The same procedure is followed in terms of selecting a person to lead the sacrifice.

The Guro have a special procedure for seeing that a person does not accumulate too much wealth. Should an individual by his energy and creativity become wealthy through hunting, exploring, weaving, farming, and selling his goods, or even warfare, he is given the special name of *fwa*, rich, or *migone*, king. With these titles, a person does not gain in political power, but is set up to lose his wealth so that it does not pass from one generation to the next. The required generosity prevents the man from gaining excessive wealth. Everyone expects that he will give whenever he is asked. Moreover, once he is dead, the funeral costs are so high that the family often finds that it will never be able to adequately recover in order to have some small wealth. The wealth is depleted in the burial functions and activities. Neither the children nor the brothers of the deceased will be able to be a *migone*. On the basis of this ethical system, the Guro are able to protect their egalitarian way of life.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ga; Nuer

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GURUNSI

The term *Gurunsi* or *Grusi* relates to groups of people as well as languages and is therefore considered by some authors as an ethnic and linguistic unit. The following groups are identified as parts of the Gurunsi peoples in the Asante region of Ghana: Nunuma or Nuruma generally known as Nuna; Kasena; Sisala; Ko; Lilse or Lyela; Tamprusi; Vagala; Degha; Siti; Builisa; and Tem, all living mainly in Accra and Ga areas of Ghana. In this vast Western African area around the Aderé and Volta rivers, where we can find today's Ghana and Burkina Faso, live a great variety of peoples that can be grouped under the Gur language, families like the Mossi and the Bobo, as well as the Nuna, Kasena, Sisala, and Winiamá of the Gurunsi language group.

The term *Grusi* or *Gurunsi* was also found to be controversial and sometimes derogatory because it was used as a collective to denote peoples who share the same cultural traits and language roots. As a generic, it includes those who, although belonging to the Gurunsi branch, have been defeated and therefore subjugated in the historical development of the southern Asante region. Treated as servants by the conquering peoples like the Mossi, the use of the word *Gurunsi* has become, for that matter, a synonym with servant among their conquerors.

However, the Kasena, Nuna, and Sisala refer to themselves as Gurunsi, talk about Gurunsi songs and Gurunsi customs and traditions, and the Nuna even consider themselves as the best preservers of the Gurunsi traditions, where the old customs and practices still stand. Although of uncertain origin, the term *Gurunsi* is still currently used, at least by these three groups, as recognition of their common cultural and linguistic ancestry because they share the same

cultural traits and language roots and even bear the same facial marks.

Like most African peoples, the Gurunsi believe in the existence of a spirit world connected to every particular object and phenomenon in the world, in natural forces that permeate every aspect of their everyday lives, and in the powerful mediation of the ancestors to help them lead a harmonious existence—in a holistic sense of the world as a balanced relationship between the human beings and nature and the cosmos.

Their cosmological sense can be fully appreciated through their narratives of creation. These narratives vary according to the particular experiences of every particular people, and their totemic objects and masks, used in rites and ceremonies, generally embody and symbolize a particular spirit that they believe governs or is the cohesive driving force behind a particular community.

The Gurunsi, like the peoples around them (the Mossi, Bwa, or Bobo), being mainly hunters, derive their symbols from the nature around the family compounds and of the hardships they encounter in every act of daily survival. As a means of access to an invisible world inhabited by the divinities and spirits, which are held in African cosmogony to share the universe with mankind, they use masks in the course of religious rituals and ceremonies to establish communication between human beings and the spiritual world.

These masks symbolize a particular animal like the antelope, eagle, or gazelle. The narrative of their origin and identity as a people includes their encounters with such animals and determines their sense of a common history, moral values, and ideals to be preserved, passed on, taught to the new generations by the ancestors either during rites of initiation or during religious and/or social ceremonies.

However, although the concept of a first creator, a breath, a wind, a first occasion, or a great, great ancestor is paramount and present in every African community, along with the holistic sense of a human and cosmological relationship, it must be noted that, under late Semitic and/or Arab influences, African cosmology and African peoples' perceptions of the world have been severely impacted by the colonial and missionary agency that sidelined the concept of a Almighty God with African spirituality and created a conformity to a Western religious conceptualization, language, and

worldview that are nowadays deeply imbricated in African cultures, where the concept of a Supreme God has become generally accepted.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Mossi

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GWOBONANJ

According to Vodou ontology in Haiti, the human being is made up of three parts. In addition to the most obvious one, that is, the physical body, it also has a bipartite spiritual component, the *tibonanj* (one's personality, conscience) and the *gwobonanj*. The latter is thought of as the immortal spirit, of divine origin—that is, the life force. This ontological structure is reminiscent of and derives from original African ontological models, such as the ancient Egyptian spiritual duality *kalba* or the Fon *semedo/selido*.

At the time of death, the *gwobonanj* leaves its physical shell, the body, to start its journey back to the watery abyss of the ancestral world, *Ginen*, the abode of the spirits. However, this journey will be successful only if the *gwobonanj* receives proper and special care. The performance of a ritual known as *Desounen* is of critical importance here because, without it, the *gwobonanj* will wander

around and eventually take revenge on the living for their negligence by harassing them and creating havoc in their lives. Worse than that, maybe, is the fact that the ancestral line would be broken because the *gwobonanj* would not be available for inheritance by the deceased's offspring.

The *Desounen* ritual, which can only be performed by a *Houngan* (Vodou priest) or *Mambo* (Vodou priestess), officially and properly releases the *gwobonanj* from the body so that the *gwobonanj* may reincorporate the spiritual community of *Ginen* and eventually receive a new life. However, the *gwobonanj* will have to be removed from *Ginen* 1 year and 1 day after death has occurred. Again, failure to do so could have dire consequences for the relatives of the deceased. This reclamation happens through an elaborate ritual known as *Wete mò anba dlo* (literally, "removing the dead from under the water"). The ceremony that accompanies the ritual will last all night long and, like most Vodou ceremonies, will involve intense drumming, singing, and dancing.

The purpose of reclaiming the *gwobonanj* is simply to separate it from the world of the living dead, thus allowing it to become again an active member of the community of the living, with the *govi*, the receptacle of the *gwobonanj*, acting as a substitute for the now decayed physical body. It is believed that when a *Lwa* mounts a person, that individual's *gwobonanj* is temporarily displaced, thus allowing the *Lwa* to take control. The *gwobonanj* is also believed to momentarily leave during sleep.

Ama Mazama

See also Vodou in Haiti

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H

HAPI

Hapi is the neter of the inundation of the Nile. Generally speaking, the Nile was not considered a neter among the people of Kemet, with a few exceptions in certain areas. Hapi refers specifically to the inundation of the Nile, or to the spirit or essence of the Nile. Hapi was depicted as a man with a protruding belly and breasts who was holding food aloft. The protruding belly and breasts and food symbolize the abundance and nourishment provided by the annual inundation of the Nile. The inundation, or flooding, is caused by the tropical rains hundreds of miles away in the highlands of Ethiopia and Uganda. These rains cause the Nile to overflow its banks and deposit nutrient-rich silt on the lands alongside the river.

This process was essential to the survival and development of the civilization of Kemet because it provided a narrow but fertile band of land alongside the river on which to grow crops. Without it, the Nile Valley, which cuts a path through the Sahara, would scarcely be able to support human life, let alone a thriving civilization such as Kemet. The depictions of Hapi affirm this because they show a man holding two plants: the papyrus and lotus.

The papyrus is the plant that thrives in the marshes of Lower Egypt, and the Lotus is found along the banks and floodplains of Upper Egypt. Both shown together indicate that it is the flooding Nile that supports both regions. Sometimes the plants are shown on the head of man, but the meaning is similar. In addition, Hapi was shown

pouring two vases of water, again indicating providing sustenance to the two lands. Hapi did not have an explicit theology developed by priests. However, he was identified with the great primeval deities, particularly the watery abyss of Nun, and was seen as the creator of everything.

The general perception of Hapi changed when Akhenaton proposed that the waters of the Nile depend on light. It was light that controlled the rhythm of the inundation waters and light comes from Aten, he thought. Therefore, it was Aten who created Hapi. The connection between Akhenaton and Hapi is further suggested when considering Akhenaton is portrayed with a rounded belly and prominent breasts. Symbolically speaking, these features are reminiscent of portrayals of Hapi and perhaps indicate Akhenaton's association with the light of the sun disk and the life-giving essence of the Nile, hence Hapi representing the spirit or essence of the Nile.

In another aspect of Egyptian mythology, Hapi is one of the four sons of Horus (Heru). The sons of Heru are seen frequently in the Canopic jars used during mummification. In this context, the jar of Hapi has the head of a baboon and is said to be the guardian of the lungs. Like the rest of the four sons, Hapi represents one of the four cardinal directions. His name is sometimes spelled Hap, Hapi, or Hapy and is also known as Asar Hapi, Hapi-Asar, Asar Hap.

Denise Martin

See also Akhenaten; Rivers and Streams



Rice crops on the Nile River. Inundation was essential to the survival and development of the civilization of Kemet because it provided a narrow but fertile band of land alongside of the river on which to grow crops.

Source: Luke Daniek/iStockphoto.

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HARVEST

In African agrarian societies, cultivation and its different phases often dictate the social and religious calendar. The time of harvest, in particular, is a special one for obvious reasons. Indeed, the survival of the community depends on the yield of good and plentiful crops. It is therefore no surprise that much care is taken to ensure the fertility of the land. Offerings and sacrifices to the ancestors and other spiritual entities credited for sending good crops to the living are performed before sowing. The purpose of such rituals is to place the ancestors and other divinities in a favorable disposition toward the living, thus

encouraging them to bless the living with enough food. This entry looks first at the series of rituals that surround agriculture and then focuses specifically on harvest festivals.

Crop-Promoting Rituals

Among the Moba people of northwest Togo, for instance, an elder will offer a libation to the ancestors, asking them for a good harvest. A feast, known as *Nyatun*, takes place in September, prior to the beginning of sowing. Beer is made from sorghum for this special occasion. For 3 entire days, the people dance and have fun. On the third day, an animal is sacrificed to the ancestors. After harvesting, the festivities resume, on a grander scale, lasting for about a month, with much dancing, and culminating with another sacrifice, to which all the family lineages are expected to contribute. Before the sacrifice takes place, however, divination is performed to find out what animal should be offered.

The Avatime people of Ghana pay even greater attention to the presowing period and engage in many rituals whose purpose is to appeal to the ancestors and divinities so that the Avatime community will have much to reap at harvest time. Their farming year starts sometime in June, when a particular constellation of stars has appeared in the sky. The Sunday after the constellation appears, libations are poured to the rice gods in each village. What follows is a series of rituals, every other Sunday or so, when the priests go to a sacred place in the forest and pour additional libations. This is repeated one more Sunday, which ends with the priests dancing alone at first and then together. As they dance, their movements imitate the movements associated with the planting and preparation of rice. The next day, Monday, all go into the fields so that planting may start. During the period leading up to the beginning of sowing, loud noises must be avoided altogether. No dancing, no drumming, no singing, and no mourning may take place because the spirits are believed to be at work, preparing the land for successful sowing. Therefore, they should not be disturbed, but left to focus on this most important task.

Toward the end of November, the rice is ripe and ready. Preparations for the harvesting rituals get underway, with more libations being poured and the sacrifice of a black male goat that has been castrated. Cowries are tied to the goat's neck, and red and white marks are made on its forehead with clay. The meat is cooked, along with rice, and offered first to the rice gods. Only then can people start eating as well and rejoice together.

Harvest Festivals

Harvest feasts and festivals are in fact quite common throughout Africa. In reality, since ancient times, the harvest period has been one of great collective rejoicing in Africa. In Kemet (or ancient Egypt), the Africans held a harvest festival during the spring. This festival was dedicated to Min, the ancient Egyptian god of vegetation and fertility. The Pharaoh opened the festival by collecting the first ears of grain. The Pharaoh also participated in the festival parade. The latter was followed by a great feast, complete with music, dancing, and athletic activities and demonstrations. In Nubia also, the time of harvest was one of great dancing.

This tradition has remained alive in other African societies equally concerned with agriculture. The masquerades organized by the Eastern Igbo as part of their harvest festival are also well documented. The Ogoni from Nigeria have also commonly celebrated the harvest of yams with masked dances. The Homowo Festival of the Ga people from Ghana has become well known. It starts with sowing by spiritual leaders during the month of May. Like the Avatime, the Ga also observe a ban over drumming and loud noise. The word *Homowo* in Ga means "to hoot at hunger; to make fun of hunger" and is related to the Ga story, according to which at some point in their history the Ga people almost starved due to the absence of rain. When the drought was over and plants started growing again, the Ga people held a special Homowo celebration to rejoice and give thanks to the spirits.

The actual Homowo festival takes place in August, and thousands participate. All Ga people are expected to return to their father's house to take part in the celebration. Homowo Day is on a Saturday. In preparation, large quantities of food are cooked. A special ritual dish, known as *kpepele*, is prepared with steamed fermented corn meal and eaten with palm soup prepared with smoked fish. On Homowo day, offerings of *kpepele* are made throughout the cities to show appreciation and gratitude to the ancestors. After the rituals have been performed, the streets fill up with dancers and drummers, and *kpepele* is shared.

The festival known as *Yam Festival* has also become a quite popular holiday in Nigeria. The first yams to be harvested are offered to the divinities and the ancestors as a way of thanking them for their benevolence and generosity. The Yam Festival is held not only in Africa, but in other places with large West African communities, such as the United Kingdom. It is also the same spirit of giving thanks and expressing gratitude for the blessings of life bestowed upon by the ancestors that informs the African American holiday, Kwanzaa, created in 1966 by Maulana Karenga.

Ama Mazama

See also Ancestors; Offering; Rituals; Sacrifice

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HATHOR

Hathor was one of the oldest and most comprehensive neters or deities of ancient Kemet. She was known as the great mother; as protector of women and childbirth; as patron of music, dance, merriment, and sexuality; as nurse and healer; as “Queen of the West” who received the setting sun and protected the dead; and as a bloodthirsty avenger who acts out the commands of Ra. She was a personification of the Milky Way, the Daughter of Ra, and the wife of Heru.

Hathor was depicted as a cow, woman, or some combination thereof: fully bovine, a woman with cow’s ears, a cow with horns and a disk on its head, or a woman with horns and a disk. In keeping with the cosmology of the people of Kemet, early associations of Hathor were never fully displaced by later ones. The result is a complex array of attributes, myths, stories, and symbols associated with this popular neter, as discussed in this entry.

Great Mother

An early association of Hathor was with the great mother that was symbolized by a cow.

According to Charles Finch and Gerald Massey, the cow was a common symbolic archetype of motherhood among ancient peoples because the devotion that cows pay to their calves and their ability to provide life sustaining milk was analogous to the activities of human females. Celestially speaking, Hathor was seen as the heavenly cow whose milk was the Milky Way. In this sense, she was the great cosmic mother who conceived, brought forth, and maintained all life.

The name Hathor means “House of Horus” and reflects this association in that it is the Milky Way—the galaxy—that encircles Horus, the sun, or in effect serves as his “house.” The “waters” of the Milky Way were referred to as the “Nile in the Sky,” which caused Hathor to be seen as responsible for the annual Nile flood. In this guise, her names were Mehurt, Mehet-Weret, and Mehet-uret. This releasing of the waters was correlated to the rupturing of the amniotic sac that occurs in a pregnant woman just before giving birth, again linking Hathor to women and childbirth. It was said that Seven Hathors, disguised as young women, would appear at the birth of a child, and each would pronounce the fate of the child. These Seven Hathors varied by locality within Kemet and would be depicted as either women or cows.

The most important fact was that there were seven of them. The titles of the seven according to Queen Nefertari’s tomb are Lady of the Universe, Sky-Storm, Your from the Land of Silence, Your from Khemmis, Red-Hair, Bright Red, and Your Name Flourishes through Skill. Other names for the seven include Lady of the House of Jubilation, Mistress of the West, Mistress of the East, and Ladies of the Sacred Land. Throughout a person’s life, they were called on in matters of love and of protection from evil spirits. In death, the Seven Hathors appeared as cows and nourished and protected the deceased. Hathor is also linked with fertility, beauty, and love. As a neter of fertility, she appears as either a cow or a field of reeds. For love and protection, she is represented with the color red. The prominent role that Hathor played throughout the life cycle of Egyptians earned her a place as one of the most popular neters of Kemet.

Cosmological Hathor

Hathor is considered the foremost among the female neters and the provider of food for the dead in Tuat, the underworld. She is shown as a cow walking out of the funeral mountain. As the cosmic cow, her four legs were the pillars that held up the sky and her belly the firmament. Each evening the sun as Heru flew into her mouth and was reborn the next day. In some guises, she was the eye of the sun (i.e., the radiant heat and light that emanates from the center of the sun). She was also linked with the moon.

Hathor gets even more complex when considering her relationships with other neters of ancient Egypt. As patriarchy emerged in the civilization of Kemet, Hathor would become the consort, wife, mother, or daughter of a masculine Neter. At first she was consort to early sky bull deities, keeping with her status as divine cow. She was worshipped as part of the triad of Hathor, Horus, and their son Ihi. She was the mother of Heru, therefore the divine mother of the pharaoh, which was shown by Hathor being depicted as a full cow standing in Ra's solar boat with a young calve, the pharaoh, standing next to her. As mother of Heru, she became wife of Ra, Mistress of Heaven. Hathor was also said to be the mother of Isis.

After the Middle Kingdom, Hathor was combined with a neter of war from Upper Kemet known as Sekhmet. In many ways the opposite of Hathor, Sekhmet was bloodthirsty and enjoyed the slaughter of humans. In this guise, Hathor was the Daughter of Ra. When Thoth rose in prominence and was considered the father of Ra-Herakhty, Hathor as mother of Heru became his wife and took on attributes of acting witness to the judgment of souls. Hathor received the Dead as the wife of Nehebkau, the guardian of the entrance to the underworld. In later times, she also was identified as Isis, and their attributes would eventually fully merge.

Worship

Hathor's main temple is 37 miles north of Luxor in Dendera, known in ancient times as Iunet. This temple started as a shrine that dates from 5500 BC to 3100 BC and contains the remains of cows.

The structure was rebuilt during the time of Khufu (2589–2566 BC). The structure that exists today was initially built over a period from 332 BC to 395 AD. A ceiling in this temple contains a detailed map of the heavens showing the hours of the day and night, the regions of the moon and sun, northern and southern stars, planets, and the 12 signs of the zodiac. Although rebuilt in the Greco-Roman era of Egyptian history, scholars suspect that the astrological information depicted is much older.

Dendera was the principle location for the followers of Hathor and was home to numerous feasts, which included drink, dance, music, merriment, and sexuality. There were other temples to Hathor located throughout Kemet and were collectively known as the seven Hathors: Hathor of Thebes, Heliopolis, Aphroditopolis, Sinai Peninsula, Momemphis or Ammu, Herakleopolis, and Keset. These were actual physical structures, as opposed to the Seven Hathors who were mythological or perhaps priests from one of her temples.

The merriment that often took place at Hathor's temples was officiated by her priests, who were both male and female and often dancers, singers, and musicians. She became the patron of this population and a neter representing joy. This association could have originated when Hathor was merged with another cow goddess of fertility from earlier times who was symbolized by a particular musical instrument. Hathor is also known as a healer. In one of the versions of the great battle between Set and Heru, Set tore out one of Heru's eyes, and it is Hathor who restored it. The wedjat eye, which would become a popular symbol of healing and protection throughout Kemet, also belongs to Hathor.

Denise Martin

See also Children; Fertility; Sekhmet

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HAYA

The Haya (also known as Ekihaya, Ruhaya, Ziba, and Kihaya) constitute one of the dominant ethnic and linguistic groups in Tanzania, the largest being the Sukuma and the Nyamwezi. The latter occupy the region to the southwest of the Haya. Originally from West Uganda, the Haya people migrated from this region to Tanzania to escape endless wars. They currently live along the shores of Lake Victoria in the Bukoba District of the Kagera Region in the extreme northwest.

The language of the Haya people is also known as Haya and is one of several Niger-Congo languages spoken by the people of Tanzania west and northwest of Lake Victoria. It comprises a number of dialects, including Bumbira, Edangabo, Ganda-Kiaka, Hamba, Hangiro, Mwani, Nyakisisa, Ekiziba, and Yoza, which are spoken by several Haya subcultures. With an estimated population of about 1,200,000, the Haya people make up about 3.2% of the entire population of Tanzania.

Largely an agricultural people, the Haya are known to grow bananas and coffee, which they traded long before the arrival of Europeans. Throughout history, Haya women have also produced excellent handicrafts.

Like other ethnic groups in Tanzania, the Haya people have their own unique set of rituals, some of which share common characteristics with rituals performed by other ethnicities. Their traditional religious activities often center on role-specific deities, ancestral spirits, ways to defeat evil, and rites of passage, providing a channel for the seeming paradoxical expression of both righteousness and evil. Deities and spirits are known to possess worshipers at various stages of rituals. Animal sacrifice and masked dancing—a common medium for spirit possession—play an important role in the overall belief systems of the Haya. Dancing is also prevalent as a key part of their ceremonies and celebrations, as in popular cleansing rites and coming-of-age ceremonies for young people.

Although the names of the Supreme Deity, *Mungu* and *Mulungu*, are widely used throughout Tanzania and East Africa as names for an all-powerful God, the Haya also recognize Ishwanga, who they believe is another form of the Supreme Being,

the almighty and ever-present creator; the ruler of the heavens and earth that rewards the good and punishes the wicked.

In a sense, the religious practices of the Haya, like those of many other Africans, reflect a pantheon of deities, spirits, and ancestors who serve as the practical daily governors of human lives. Like many traditional African religions, the Haya do not display any rigid orthodoxy in religious performance and mythological belief. This also implies the lack of heterodoxy because there are several moral and ceremonial paths to an end despite the presence of accepted ritual items and the existence of a hierarchical structure of supernatural beings.

As part of a religious experience that exploits both good and evil, a part of the Haya belief is that there is a human element to evil. It is not simply something that is spiritual; it is real, physical, and visceral, and it is often borne in the person of another human being. The evil influences are known to cause epidemics, floods, and drought, but beyond perpetrating evil, they are believed to possess the power to halt such catastrophes. Thus, when misfortunes occur, culpable persons are typically sought and punished after a system of divination is carried out by qualified diviners. Sometimes retribution is meted out in the form of death. Women are most likely to be considered the bearers of evil. If the weather is bad and there is a downturn in the economy, men would often seek out women to be sacrificed. This appears to be directly related to gender inequities that are pervasive throughout Tanzania.

Philip U. Effiong

See also Ancestors; Rites of Passage

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HEALING

Healing is a sustained ritual process of righting the disequilibrium generated by spiritual, natural, psychological, and social factors, which are often expressed in the form of physical or mental problems. Healing practices are part of the complex conceptual framework that constitutes a people's worldview, such as in their religious beliefs. In indigenous African societies, religion and disease/illness causation are intricately intertwined. Beliefs about illness have contributed to health concerns, and the healing methods have addressed the need for healing in African societies. This entry examines how ideas about healing are connected to religious views, looks at some examples, and describes how a typical healing might occur.

Religious View of Sickness

Religious worldviews are quintessential to understanding traditional healing systems and medicine; how the people make sense of illness or misfortune; and what therapeutic and prophylactic mechanisms they adopt. Traditional healing is holistic, encompassing the physical, mental, psychological, material, and emotional aspects that result in a total well-being and wholeness. It focuses not only on symptoms or diseases, but also deals with the total individual. In a sense, healing focuses on the person, not the illness.

In most African cosmologies, sickness, diseases, and other misfortunes are largely linked to supersensible origins such as the wrath of divinities and neglected ancestral spirits, malevolent spiritual entities, witches, and wizards and sorcerers. However, people also recognize nonreligious etiologies of disease. Diseases are viewed as a direct intervention by the deities or the malevolent spiritual beings, a signal that some adjustment to the person's life is expedient. Diseases or misfortune of any other kind is a signifier that an overhaul of a person's psychic motor is necessary.

In the mental and social attitudes of many Africans, there is no belief more ingrained than that of the reality and existence of witches. All strange diseases, abnormal occurrences, physical disorders, ailments, accidents, untimely deaths, inability to gain promotions in office, failure in examinations and business enterprise, disappointment in love, barrenness in women, impotence in men, and failure of crops are attributed to witches and other spiritual agents of malevolence. This explains why they are very much dreaded and feared in the society.

When confronted with illness, impending danger, and misfortune, there is usually recourse to divination in a process of explanation, prediction, and control. The people divine in their quest to know the behest of the Supreme Being, the divinities, and the ancestors, on the one hand, and to inquire about the particular kind of fortune or misfortune involved in their destinies, on the other hand. The diagnostic process, cure, or prevention that follows is often undertaken and supervised by diviners and healers who play an interlocutory role between the physical and spirit worlds.

Some Examples

Among the Zulu in Southern Africa, the roles of izangoma diviners and izinyanga healers are differentiated, although not mutually exclusive. The role of the Nganga is central within the Bwiti ritual world in Gabon and Cameroon. She or he is believed to have extensive knowledge of healing practices. Most healers or medicine men rely on some type of divination in diagnosing a client's illness, and a divinatory technique may also be used in determining the appropriate treatment. Those who play these special ritual roles in the society undergo special medical training, which involves the novice being apprenticed to a practicing healer for several years. Epistemologies of healing are also transmitted from one generation to another. Diviners/healers are sometimes tied to specific deities in charge of divination and healing. The izangoma are called to their profession by their ancestors usually manifesting in *thwasalintwaso*, an illness syndrome.

Among the Yoruba, Orunmila is the oracular deity of divination and augury with whom the practice of Ifa is associated. Orunmila is

assisted by Osanyin, the orisa who controls 201 roots and leaves and knows their application in curing various illnesses. Ifa, which is Yoruba's most widespread system, employs the use of palm nuts or divine chain. The divination systems provide confidence and certainty in a world populated by mischievous forces. Orunmila has its own priesthood under the Babalawo, "father of secrets," or a diviner who prognosticates the past and future. The Babalawo doubles as a diviner, a healer, and a manufacturer of charms, although these roles maybe separated in some cases. She or he is believed to have the means of ascertaining the causes of ailments, misfortunes, and death. The Babalawo uses palm nuts and verses in the complex *odu* system of divination to prescribe appropriate sacrifices and rituals for his clients.

The Healing Process

The prescription by the healer, diviner, medicine man, and the use of the medicinal concoctions by patients for therapeutic or prophylactic means are central to traditional healing systems. The common method of treating patients consists of an enormous variety of medical preparations made of mixtures of roots, leaves, barks, fruits, and parts of animals and birds. The objects are often accompanied by incantations that imbue the medicinal preparation with power. The specialist consults the oracle and invokes the appropriate deity to give potency to the concoction before it is dished out to clients. In some cases, rituals and sacrifices are enacted to the appropriate spirit or divinity to sustain the immutability of such power. The treatment may include an herbal potion with pharmaceutical properties to deal with the symptoms. The medical preparations are administered orally, in ointments, by bathing, or through scarification. Although the healer/medicine man is versed in the collection of recipes and their preparation, such medical skills and knowledge are never revealed to clients.

The gradual loss of orally transmitted epistemologies of healing; the influence of Christianity, Islam, and other religious traditions; and the introduction of Western medical systems are inhibiting indigenous healing practices in some respects. However, traditional healing systems and the role of healers, diviners, and medicine men continue to occupy a significant place in modern

African societies, especially in a context where governments are incapable of providing adequate medical facilities for its people.

Afe Adogame

See also Health; Medicine

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HEALTH

Health in the African context refers to a state of positive mental and physical well-being. It is a state of normalcy marked by the absence of disease. The World Health Organization holds that health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health may also be considered as a positive state necessary for the maintenance of physical and spiritual well-being. From this perspective, Africans see health as the normal state in which individuals can attain their best, thereby contributing toward the greater social good. Health is also understood as a state of well-being. Well-being refers to the state of fulfillment whereby both the individual and society are spared from mental and physical discomfort and enjoy peace of mind. This entry looks at illness or the absence of physical health, touches on social and emotional health, and looks at contemporary health care.

Kinds of Illness

Health can also be explained in terms of its opposite state—illness. Illness is regarded as the absence of good health, an abnormal state that

hinders an individual to perform his duties as expected by society, a form of deviance. A state of ill health or illness is not natural nor is it a matter of chance. Any occurrence has an explanation. Notions of probability and coincidence are foreign to the African belief system. There are natural and unnatural illnesses.

Chavunduka distinguishes between normal and abnormal illness. Symptoms of normal or natural illness disappear quickly with little or no treatment. Natural illnesses are headaches, coughs, and stomach aches. But illnesses that persist and resist cure by simple medicine are believed to have been caused by supernatural happenings. A diviner is consulted for diagnosis. The diviner may diagnose the cause of an illness as an ancestor spirit that may want to possess the victim and has to be honored by ritual sacrifice. The spirits may also punish their living descendents if they have committed an offense.

The diviner may also diagnose illness as caused by witchcraft or sorcery by an enemy or an avenging spirit, such as that of a person who died as a result of murder. There are preventive measures that are done to restore health. If illness is caused by a witch, the diviner will break the power of witchcraft; if it is spirit possession, the patient should accept the spirit possession in order to be well. Usually the diviner will prescribe medicine to restore health. Charms or amulets are also given by diviners.

There are also preventative measures that the diviner may apply. He may recommend performance of a ritual that involves pouring tobacco and libation in order to appease the anger of spirits so that they will protect the sick person from attack by supernatural causes of illness. Once the rituals are performed, health is restored. The individual recovers and attains full health. So the state of good health is holistic because it covers the physical, social, and spiritual well-being of the individual and society.

Positive Well-Being

Health is also linked to a state of peace and serenity considered as well-being. A good state of health is naturally concomitant with stability that covers human beings and nature. This is experienced from culture, environment, and harmonious

relationships with one's spiritual elders, which bring peace and happiness. This state of good health also relates to success and prosperity in all spheres of life, such as agriculture, hunting, and marriage. Health and well-being can also be experienced in the contexts of abundant rainfall, fertility of land and people, fields bearing fruits, flocks and herds multiplying, and bumper harvests. Such a state of good health of the land and people is desirable and healthy, free from its opposite states of misfortune, sickness, and death.

In the African experience, health is an expression of the state of spiritual cosmos. The traditional worldview is abundant with belief in God and ancestors who take care of the living descendants. A healthy society is that which has a harmonious relationship with spirits, positive execution of morality, practice of good conduct, and communal living. Ill practices such as incest, murder, violation of taboos, and so on create problems and dislocate harmonious relations. When harmony is broken, the living make steps to address the anomaly and restore right relationships. Life is regarded as a special gift from God. Health is thus viewed as fullness of life. So for the religious Africans, it is the harmonious integration of the spiritual powers with the will of the living to produce a balanced physical and cosmological order.

Health Care

In their effort to attain good health, traditional healers in Africa have formed various National Associations that include several thousands of men and women. The associations are registered and recognized by governments. They operate alongside African Independent church healers who believe in faith healing. Both health systems offer alternative therapy to Western scientific medicine.

Generally, there are four determinants of health: human biology, environment, lifestyle, and health care organization. So in Africa, people sustain good health through access to nutritious traditional foodstuffs. People also make efforts to sustain health by introducing herbal gardens that grow traditional plants and produce traditional medicines. The aim is to support and maintain traditional scientific, cultural, and environmental benefits. Health is therefore achieved through sustainable use of medicinal plants.

There are numerous illnesses and diseases in Africa that claim many lives, such as tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera. HIV/AIDS is one such kind of disease that has affected many people. Millions have died so far, creating the problem of orphans who need care and attention. Vaccinations are available as a form of protection against the spread of the diseases. Global efforts to combat disease are hindered by insufficient resources. But there are also some policies that restrict access to essential treatment and comprehensive health care.

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See also Disease; Healing

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HEKA

Heka is an ancient Egyptian word that meant the action of a complete living force; it was also the name of an Egyptian deity. Yet the word has been confused, misused, and misunderstood because of distorted perspectives from some Westerners, who have claimed that the word *Heka* is the deification of magic, but that is only a part of the story. The word is literally the activating of the *ka*. Now it is true that some Egyptians understood heka to work by activation of the *ka* of a person because the embodied personality of someone's *ka* had great power and energy. It also includes the use of heka as activation of the *ka* of the gods.

To write the word for the power and the god, one used the same glyphs, which were a twisted piece of flax with raised arms. It resembled snakes entwined and consequently was depicted as a man choking two serpents. The priesthood of the deity

Heka performed all rituals that had to do with healing and medicine because it was thought that Heka was responsible for the well-being of humans.

Clearly, it was thought that Heka activated the *Ka*, and as the son of Atum, the creator, or Khnum, the creator at Elephantine, Heka was within the divine circle. Those priests and priestesses who officiated during the presence of Heka were attuned to the essential qualities of the *ka* being.

Magic in the Western world has often been equated with heka. This is unfortunate because heka is a religious rather than a nonreligious practice. Nor is heka used as a form of blasphemy. One cannot equate magic with heka so easily, and yet that is precisely what one gets from reading the texts of many Egyptologists. There is no distinction between the religious and the secular worlds in ancient Egypt. Furthermore, there is no word for religion in the ancient Egyptian language.

But there was the idea of Heka, and it could function because there was no duality as the kind that the Western world knows. In fact, there was no attempt to make a difference between prayer requests or medicine; they were part of the same process. In Egypt, the human was a whole being, with a *ka*, but as a person, whole. Thus, to speak of heka, one must speak only of that which is whole. Magic or heka could only exist because of the wholeness of the human.

To be Great of Magic, as in the case of the deities Auset and Sekhmet, meant having the ability to use powers to transform the lives of people. Words of power could be given to ordinary Egyptians by music, poetry, and dancing. Although words were considered divine and powerful, particularly in the sense of their generative quality, they often did not have the same immediacy as other forms of expression, such as dancing.

All words were divine. They could be spoken or written, but when they were used in ceremonies of heka, they could be given immense properties that would allow them to have energy over bad people, evil motives, and selfish or destructive personalities. One could use heka to replicate a name, to duplicate an image, or to bring about a good effect on a situation through the manipulation of the person's name.

The word *magic* comes to us in the modern world from the Coptic *hik*, which was equated with the Greek *mageia* and the Latin *magia* during the Christian era. The latter words meant something like “illegal sorcery,” and one can easily see where this would produce confusion in relationship to heka. However, for the Egyptian, heka relied on four pillars:

1. *Heka*: The primeval power that energized the creator at the beginning of time
2. *Rw*: the sacred texts
3. *Seshaw*: the magical rituals and treatments
4. *Pekhret*: medicinal prescriptions

Furthermore, Heka existed before duality had yet come into being. Even in its involvement with humanity, it becomes clear that heka acted with hu, the principle of divine utterance, and sia, divine consciousness, to liberate consciousness. This divine action that is creative expressionism can be attained only through speech and behavior. Indeed, the cobra on the brow of the pharaoh is named *Weret-Hekau*, meaning the Goddess is great in Heka power.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ka; *Nommo*

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HERU, HORUS

Heru, whose appearance was identified as early as 3100 BC, is one of the most complex neters (deities) of ancient Kemet. His complexity is due to the fact that, throughout the thousands of years of Egyptian culture, he acquired new qualities while maintaining his previous ones. Therefore, by the end of Egyptian civilization, there was an impressive list of symbols, characteristics, and

archetypes attributable to Heru. His name derives from the root *her*, meaning face as in “face of heaven,” which reveals his origins as a sky neter whose right eye is the sun and left eye is the moon.

In addition to these celestial bodies, Heru is also symbolized as the golden hawk, falcon, and wedjat eyes. Sometimes these images would be combined, such as the sun disk with wings, wedjat eyes with wings, or sun disk with a wedjat eye inside. In Egyptian mythology, Heru is son-consort of Hathor; the son of Ra; he is Khonsu, the moon deity; the brother of Set; Ra-Horakhty, the resurrected Ausar; and best known as the son of Ausar and Auset. His archetypal characteristics are those of the avenger, the Divine son, the fulfiller, heir, king, bringer of light, good twin, younger brother, champion over darkness and evil, and later redeemer. These multifaceted aspects of Horus/Heru are divided according to three categories—symbolic, mythological, and archetypal—as discussed in this entry.

Symbolic Horus/Heru

The primary symbol of Horus is the golden hawk or falcon. The golden color is likened to that of the sun, as are the hawk’s aggression, excellent vision, and ability to soar. The sun is aggressive like the hawk in the intense heat it brings to the Nile Valley. The sun has the ability to illuminate all things and therefore “see” all things from a high vantage point like the hawk. Last, the sun, like the hawk, soars high in the sky. The wings of this celestial falcon protect the Earth, and its eyes are considered to be the sun and the moon. Horus is also associated with the east and sunrise, hore-makhet, or Horus in the horizon.

Another solar symbol is Ra-Horakhty, in which Horus is merged with the sun deity Ra. Because of these solar associations, Horus is frequently depicted as the sun disk with the wings of a falcon or disk atop the head of a falcon. The winged disk was used as a royal symbol. The sun disk with wings was also a representation of heaven because Horus’s association with the sky, wings, and flight symbolized the journey the soul makes after physical death in Ra’s solar boat.

The wedjat eye represents the strength and power of Horus and was derived from the eye that the mythological Horus, in human form, lost in

battle; it was later restored by Thoth. The wedjat eye in a disk was also a representation of Horus denoting protection that frequently appeared in tombs and temples. Horus is presented in human form as a male with the head of a hawk crowned with a sun disk. Not all of Horus's symbols consist of disks and birds. He was shown as a suckling child sitting on the lap of Isis. Beginning in the Late Period, Horus could be represented as a statue of a child atop two crocodiles and with various animals. This image, on a stele or amulet, was used for its healing powers and as a form of protection.

Since the earliest times, the celestial falcon was equated with the king, who was perceived as being a manifestation of Horus. Therefore, the king bore a Horus name. The name was written inside a rectangular glyph that is believed to be a representation of the royal palace. On top of this glyph, or *serkeh*, which appears in the early dynastic and Old Kingdom tombs, appears a falcon. To denote kingship, Horus is depicted as a falcon with the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. The explanation of how Horus came to be associated with divine kingship is found in the mythology.

Mythological Horus/Heru

These stories detail how Horus does battle with Set for the right to rule Kemet. There are various versions of this episode that involve other neters. In a popular version of this myth, Horus is the child of Auset and Ausar and the nephew of Set and Nephthys. Ausar, a good Earthly pharaoh, is killed and dismembered into 14 pieces by his jealous brother, Set. Auset finds all of the pieces of her dead husband's body except the phallus. She fashions an artificial one and conceives Horus. Horus would grow up in the marshes of Lower Egypt and avenge the death of his father by fighting Set in an 80-year battle. The episodes in this war range from racing in boats of stone to Set removing Horus's left eye and Horus castrating Set.

After the intervention of Thoth, Geb, deity of the Earth and the father of both Ausar and Set, and grandfather of Horus, settled the dispute. Horus is declared the ruler of Lower Kemet, but in other versions he is given dominion over all of

Egypt as the rightful heir to his father's throne and protector of all pharaohs. The transfer of power is marked ritually by Horus performing the opening of the mouth ceremony on his father. Subsequently, pharaohs are legitimized by their sons' reenacting of this ceremony.

According to Charles Finch, the myth of Set and Horus originates, at least partially, in celestial phenomena that were not only carefully observed by Egyptians, but considered sacred. Each morning when the sun rises, it overcomes or defeats darkness or night. The Egyptians saw this as a victory that was by no means permanent or secure. For after shining in glory all day, the sun must again contend with the power of darkness because night inevitably comes. Over the millennia of Kemetan civilization, the story becomes more and more elaborate, incorporating diverse political, theological, and regional views without actually displacing any of the preexisting ones. Because the primal myths of Horus were never discarded and his origins linked to the eternal process of night and day, Horus emerged as a key archetype for Egyptian culture.

Archetypal Horus/Heru

One of Horus's primary archetypes is that of the champion over darkness and bringer of light because when his eyes are open the universe is filled with light and when they are closed there is darkness. In a physical sense, this is seen at sunrise; in a mythical sense, it is attested to when Horus defeats Set. In the cosmology, Horus brings light, discernment, and clarity, whereas Set represents darkness, chaos, and disorder. In this aspect of Egyptian mythology that divides everything in pairs, Horus and Set are twins or equals. Horus is the ruler of lower Kemet and Set rules upper Kemet. Over time, Horus becomes the ruler of all of Kemet—the proverbial “good” twin or the younger brother who supersedes the elder.

The preference or dominance of Horus occurred gradually over hundreds if not thousands of years. However, when a value is assigned to the qualities of light and dark, the light that Horus represents is considered good and preferred to Set's darkness, which is perceived as bad and rebuked. It is important to note that the perception of good and evil in

Egypt was not as it is in the modern West. Set was not demonized and always occupied an important place in the cosmology. When Geb decided the outcome of the struggle of Horus and Set, he placed Horus as ruler over the living, Ausar as ruler over the dead or underworld, and Set as ruler of the deserts, chaos, and disorder. However, Horus was celebrated as an archetype for that which brings good, not just in the form of light over darkness, but in all areas of life: personal, social, spiritual, and political.

The dimensions to the archetypal Horus extend beyond light and good because of his membership in the triad with Auset and Ausar. Horus as Divine Son derives from the actions of his mother, Auset, who conceives Horus from Ausar after he is killed. This miraculous conception would legitimize the Egyptian royalty as Divine. Horus is the fulfiller because he satisfies the duties of pharaoh left by the absent Ausar. In some myths, he is presented as the resurrected Ausar so that the identities of the two become merged. As redeemer, he not only vindicates Ausar, but all light in the presence of darkness or good in the face of evil. Thus, Horus' role as redeemer combines all of his archetypal qualities: As the bringer of light, he redeems any darkness; as triumphant over Set, he redeems chaos; and as avenging Ausar, he redeems his father.

Other Aspects of Horus/Heru

There is a temple dedicated to Horus located in the upper Egyptian town of Edfu. At this temple, he was worshipped as part of the triad of Hathor and their child Harsomtut. This structure dates to the New Kingdom; however, there are rock carvings that date to 3100 BC. There is another temple dedicated to Horus in the town of Kom Ombo north of modern-day Aswan. At this temple stand colossal stone statues of falcons representing Horus. In ancient times, Horus was associated with the towns of Nekhen and Behdet.

In addition to the child with Hathor, there are the other "children" attributed to Horus. The four sons of Horus are deities who act as pathfinders at the ascension of the dead and are responsible for protecting the body of the deceased, particularly the internal organs, from hunger and thirst. Their

association with Horus is described in the Pyramid Text. Images of the sons are found atop canopic jars that were placed inside mummified bodies and their names located on the four corners of coffins.

Legacy of Horus/Heru

According to Charles Finch, Horus is the prefiguration of the Greek concept of the hero. The word *hero* could be a derivation of Horus. The ferocious battles with evil male relatives and the forces of darkness to obtain redemption and glory are the same activities in which many Greek heroes engage. There are aspects of Horus that are also found in Christianity. In the Old Testament story, Moses is hidden in a basket and found floating in a sea of reeds by the pharaoh's daughter, who rears him. The infant Horus is hidden in the reed swamps of Lower Egypt, where he is nursed by Isis.

In the New Testament, Jesus is the Divine Child, who is born of a virgin, hidden from an evil ruler, battles Satan in the desert, and emerges as the legitimate ruler of the kingdom, much like the life of Horus. In addition, Jesus is resurrected and serves as the judge of the dead. Horus is the resurrected Ausar who is also Lord of the Underworld and judge of the Dead. Jesus as the light of the world parallels Heru-heb iaku, Heru, lord of light. Speaking of light, Charles Finch also proposes that the English word *hours*, with its relationship to day and time, reflect the ancient Kemet deity's association with light.

Denise Martin

See also Ausar; Auset; Ra; Set

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HOODOO

No discussion of the African essence of the spiritual life of African Americans can be complete without an understanding of Hoodoo. Hoodoo is part of the larger African American spiritual tradition that includes *conjure*, *rootwork*, *mojo*, *tricking*, *fixing*, and sometimes *Voodoo*. Indeed, these terms are frequently used interchangeably. These synonyms or semi-synonyms are often subsumed under the larger rubric *conjure* or *conjuring*. This entry traces the origins of hoodoo, looks at its history in the United States and how that history represents an evolution of African spirituality, and briefly assesses its impact on African American culture.

Background and Description

Making a distinction between the “Latin” and “English” cultural zones in America, some scholars point to the different terms used to identify African American spiritual traditions. Whereas the term *voodoo* was primarily used in French-influenced New Orleans, the term *hoodoo* was favored in Missouri. In southern Florida, with the influence of Cuban immigrants and Santeria, the same tradition was known as *Nañigo*. Etymologically, however, scholars point out that Hoodoo is a phonetic approximation of the Ewe word *Hudu*, which is still used today. In West Africa, *Hudu* is a well-regarded religious tradition passed on through family priestly lines.

Hoodoo, in its most general sense, can be defined as a system of magic, divination, and herbalism widespread among the enslaved Africans in America. The goal of Hoodoo is to allow people access to supernatural forces to improve their daily lives in areas such as gambling, divination, cursing one’s enemies or removing a curse, treatment of sickness, and many of the daily troubles of life. Some researchers, however, have attempted to distinguish the specialists within the broader field of conjure. They argue that conjurers can be divided into three categories: hoodooists, healers, and readers. According to this classification, readers reveal a client’s future, healers use herbal medicine to cure illness, while

hoodooists specialize in evil and its cure. The fact is that, as it is the case in Africa and the African culture in general, many priests and priestesses practice all three, making such distinctions ineffective.

How widespread was Hoodoo? Archaeologists have uncovered remains in Virginia and Maryland. Hoodoo caches in Black dwellings date from as early as 1702. Furthermore, Hoodoo and conjuring were not the domains of a single state or region. Long present in Louisiana, Hoodoo had spread throughout the South by 1860. During the 1850s, for example, Abbé Emmanuel Henri Dieudonné Domenech, a Catholic missionary, reported an encounter with Hoodoo along the Texas and Mexico border.

Although related, and in some circles used interchangeably, Hoodoo must be distinguished from the African American term, *Voodoo*, and in turn from the African and Haitian term *Vodoun*. *Voodoo* originated in the religion of Africans. It has its roots in West Africa in countries such as Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso—just to name a few—and is practiced among the Fon, Ewe, and other West African ethnic groups. One of the primary sources of this religious system in the United States came from the migration of liberated and enslaved Africans who migrated from the island of Saint-Domingue at the onset of the Haitian Revolution. It is argued that African American *Voodoo* initially formed an integral whole and was an organized syncretic religion, as is *Vodoun* in Haiti or *Santeria* in Cuba, but it gradually disintegrated while its folk beliefs persisted.

Links to Africa

Hoodoo is not a formal religion as much as it is a spiritual and folk belief with strong links to African traditions. The center of this African American folk tradition was New Orleans, where the worship of a snake god, drumming, dancing, singing, and animal sacrifice was customary, as in Haiti and West Africa. The most prominent figures of that early tradition were the two Marie Laveau, Mother and Daughter, who had a large following and whose reign stretched from the 1830s to the 1880s. By the 20th century, *Voodoo* as an organized religious cult had been transformed, but did not disappear.

The transformation from *Vodoun* to Voodoo and then Hoodoo serves as a powerful metaphor for the larger history of African American religious and spiritual beliefs. It exemplifies the way in which elements of African faith and traditions have persisted in the folk beliefs and customs of African Americans, although the original meaning may have been lost. In New Orleans, for example, the onset of possession in Voodoo was referred to as *monter voodoo* (mount Vodoun). Persistence of this imagery is visible in the term used by Blacks in Mississippi for hoodooists and conjurers—"horses."

Other examples of this transformation are apparent when someone is ill for a long period without any apparent cause and without getting relief from herb medicine. In this instance, the sick person is thought to be "fixed" through the malevolent doing of an enemy. Among Africans, illnesses that do not respond to natural medicines, as well as sudden, unpredictable misfortune, are believed to be the result of another's enmity.

Among other African spiritual traditions that African Americans have maintained or transformed are the belief that a person's spirit wanders while the body sleeps, the belief in the special power of twins, and the special personality of the person born next after twins. Although the fully developed system of ancestor worship did not survive, certain African funerary customs did remain and became part of the Hoodoo folk tradition.

Cultural Impact

Melville Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston were critical figures in the debate that linked Hoodoo to the African tradition. In 1931, Zora Neale Hurston, in particular, published a book-length essay "Hoodoo in America" linking Hoodoo to African religious practices and the vital role of Hoodoo in Black racial identity. Indeed, she was later initiated into New Orleans Voodoo at the hands of a priest who claimed to have received his *connaissance* (knowledge) from Marie Laveau.

The movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North during the great migration introduced Hoodoo and its practices to a larger audience. In the *Chicago Defender*,

the then most popular African American newspaper, only one page carried advertisements for Hoodoo goods and services on March 1, 1919. By July 7, 1928, however, there were 12 pages of such advertisements.

Other than these advertisements, the primary vehicle that communicated the Hoodoo spiritual folk practice was the blues and the popular "race records" of the early 20th century. Countless blues songs from the early 20th century integrated Hoodoo motifs in their lyrics. These songs spoke of Hoodoo, conjure, mojo, charms, dust, tricks, magical roots, and gopher dust. Among these were Bessie Brown's "Hoodoo Blues," Ma Rainey's "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues," Arthur Crudup's "Hoodoo Lady Blues," and Junior Wells' "Hoodoo Man Blues." More popularly, The Bo Diddley song, "Who Do You Love," contains a series of extensive puns about a man hoodooing his lover. Other blues artists who referred to Hoodoo and conjure were Cripple Clarence Lofton, Lofton Champion, Jack Dupree, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and W. C. Handy. These blues artists and their songs captured the Black experience in song and served as a prime conduit for African-derived African American spiritual beliefs.

Garvey F. Lundy

See also Conjurers; Laveau, Marie

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HOTEP

Hotep, which is also commonly known as and spelled Hetep, is a concept of ancient Kemetic origin. It originally meant “to rest,” “to be happy,” “to be present,” “to be at” or “to go to rest,” “to rely upon,” and “to be at peace with.” Ancient Kemites were a peace-loving people and considered *Hotep* to be not just a part of everyday vocabulary, but a concept that extended beyond a calm demeanor or behavior.

The ancient Egyptians used this concept mainly as a salutation or greeting. *Hotep* was also used during the course of call and response ceremonies, such as found in many parts of Africa. Although it is widely believed that *Hotep* was used mainly in greetings, the spoken word possesses a physical bioenergetic aspect. Delivered by the way of word–sound–power, ancient Egyptians believed that words have the ability to transmit either positive or negative energy depending on the intention behind the utterance.

In fact, Hotep (or peace, ease, and rest) was attained by living out the precepts or laws of Maat, the way. Maat represents truth, balance, reciprocity or justice, and right actions. The 42 laws of Maat manifest how a person may achieve a “peaceful” demeanor, experience, and life. This may be the origin of the 10 Commandments and other man-made laws. There is also a widely recognized literature or doctrine of Ptah-Hotep, which embodies the concept of Peace.

Furthermore, according to Nefer Amen, hotep is the often unrecognized conception underlying human endeavor as this state of serenity is a purpose for living. Hotep, in this view, is the master and primordial energetic configuration of the spirit. This is what people desire and most need, and it is the highest goal of meditation. It is not a state of peace that depends on outward conditions, such as with money, weapons, or lifestyle; neither is it running away from the trials and tribulations of life. Believers thought that this knowledge or relationship and connectedness to the divine power is what brings about happiness or hotep. Implicit in people’s quest for happiness is the urge not only for emotional gratification, but also for security, and there is nothing that can give one more security than the acquisition of this divine power.

Believers in the power of hotep assert that balance and peace can be attained by being elevated to one’s original primordial level of being in the subjective realm. Eternal peace or hotep can only be truly achieved when people elevate themselves to the highest part of their being, their spiritual selves.

Elizabeth Andrade

See also Maat

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HOUNGAN

In the Haitian religion of Vodou, a priest who serves as a leader in performing rituals and ceremonies is referred to as the houngan or Hungan. The Houngan or “chief of the hun” is the name associated with men leaders within the Vodou religion, whereas women of the same position are referred to as mambo.

It is believed that hougans obtain their position through dream-like encounters from gods or *loas* of the Vodou religion. During these dream-like visions, hougans are chosen to be servants of the religion, and, as such, they are expected to oversee burials, child birthing, healing/cleansing rituals, and other religious ceremonies. In addition to the advisory role, the hougans perform and lead ritual dances, songs, and chants to evoke a *Lwa*. It is a common belief among Vodou followers that if a person is visited by a particular *loa* and does not wish to become a houngan, he or she will be threatened with sickness and/or death if he or she does not submit to the *Lwa* and serve the religion.

A common misconception about hougans in the Vodou religion is that they are witchdoctors and practice “magic” against an individual. In

fact, hougans' role within Vodou culture is to perform rituals and/or ceremonies to prevent or ward off influences that have the possibility of affecting a particular person or the life of loved ones. Traditionally, hougans do not view themselves as medicine men or wielders of magic, but rather as intercessors between followers of the Vodou religion and god.

Students or assistants of the hougans are often called on to perform ceremonial dances at rituals in which the hougans or mambo is presiding. Students of the hougans are referred to as *badjicans* and can have dual roles as publicity agents or as spies to track the activities of witchdoctors.

A famous hougans among the religion is Dutty Boukman, who many believe initiated the Haitian revolution against the French after a ceremony was performed August 14, 1791, at Bois Caïman, which subsequently led to the independence of Haiti from France in 1804.

Monica L. Rhodes

See also Boukman; Mambo; Priests; Vodou in Haiti

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HOUNSI

The term *hounsi* (also spelled *ounsi*) has its origin in the Fon language of Dahomey, where it means that one has become the spouse of a spirit (*Vodun* or *Lwa* in Haiti). In accepting the call of the Vodun or Lwa to become a hounsi, one becomes accepted as a member of a *oumfò* (temple) with all the religious and communal responsibilities that such a position requires, but, more important, one becomes a *serviteur* (servant) of the divinity.

It is the Lwa who ultimately call the individual to become their wife or husband. The primary function of the hounsi is to assist the mambo (priestess) and oungan (priest). Hounsi are in fact indispensable to the overall success of the *oumfò*.

They comprise the liturgical hierarchy that also includes the hougans (oungans) and mambo, who are the primary leaders within the religious community. It is the hougans and mambo that ensure that the proper religious protocol is adhered to throughout the initiation process that leads one to the title of hounsi and thus ultimately allowing one to become a member of the *oumfò*.

Those who are initiated as hounsi are called into this sacred service by the lwa. Spirit possession of the individual is usually a sign that the lwa has chosen one to become a *serviteur*. The individual called into service is initially referred to as an *ounsi basal*. The *ounsi basal* is not a rank, but simply a term synonymous with one who regularly attends a Vodou service, but has not yet become a member.

The *ounsi basal* must first have their heads “washed” in preparation to receive their lwa. This head “washing” also serves to awaken and prepare them to fully and faithfully serve their lwa and community. After education and training as an *ounsi lave tet*, one prepares for the *kanzo* rites, which lead to the rank of *ounsi*. It is not until the *ounsi kanzo* rites are completed that one becomes fully married to their lwa or true *serviteurs* of the spirit and permanent members of the *oumfò*.

Ideally, the traditional nature of these rites maintains a certain historical continuity and authenticity if performed in Haiti. Therefore, many seeking to undergo such an initiation are encouraged to travel to Haiti to ensure strict adherence in following out of these sacred time honored customs.

For instance, during a Vodou service, the *ounsi* can be seen singing particular songs to invoke the lwa that have been invited to the service. The *ounsi* are familiar with the colors, songs, and characteristics of each lwa out of a pantheon numbering more than 1,000. Usually it is one's primarily lwa that becomes the *mait tete* (master of one's head), although one can serve more than one lwa. It is in the cultivation of the relationship between the lwa and the *ounsi* that spiritual progress is attained. When the lwa “mount” the *ounsi*, not only do they possess their “horse,” but they also provide them with information and knowledge that remain hidden from the noninitiate. It is the marriage between the lwa and the human being that completes the human process.

The lwa provides one with wholeness. “The lwa is the key to understanding one’s own character, and the relationship with the lwa represents knowledge of self.”

Douglas Edwin Thomas

See also Houngan; Initiation; Mambo; Vodou in Haiti

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HUNTING

In Africa, the practice of searching for and subduing animals for food is an ancient one. The process of hunting involves the tracking and pursuing of mammals or birds as sustenance to feed a community. There is evidence that hominids have hunted for up to 2 million years. The African hunter is a pivotal figure in African culture. The hunter is the inventor, the explorer, the adventurer, as well as the food collector. He is the source of language, cultural change, narratives for folktales, and makers of proverbs, adages, and aphorisms. This entry looks at the practice and its links to religion.

Historical Background

African hunters have discovered hunting to be a meaningful way to contribute to the human food supply even in areas where agriculture and the domestication of animals have long held sway. Clearly the supplemental protein brought into the society by hunters assisted the people in creating meaningful responses to their environment because of their strength and stamina.

Among the earliest hunting tools in Africa were spears, bow and arrows, and knives. Kings in ancient Africa were known as great hunters as well as great warriors. Depicted on the walls of

the temples in the Nile Valley, in Egypt and Sudan, are royal hunters of lions and other animals. Indeed, the use of the chariot by Thutmose III and Ramses II in hunting scenes suggests that the kings were able to use the war chariot as a vehicle for hunting.

The earliest scenes of hunting in Africa might be the rock paintings that are found in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania, Malawi, and other countries, which are dated to 40,000 years ago. They show hunting scenes painted in black, red, white, brown, and yellow colors; animals are depicted, often with men chasing the animals to kill them. The Khoi-san people believed in the great God Tsui’goab who brought them rain, food, and hunting success.

Hunting in Africa is associated with virility, in the sense that the hunter must be fit, energetic, alert, and physically capable of sustaining long journeys. The hunter must have the ability to gauge the weather, determine the seasons, navigate the terrain, and pursue animals over vast stretches of territory. Hunting is also associated with taboos that produce hunting restrictions in sacred forests where various spirits assemble. There are some areas of Africa where the hunter is restricted from access to certain holy temple or shrine sites.

The God of the Forest

The Mbuti, an ethnic group of small people who live in the Congo, are among the best hunters in Africa. They relate their hunting skills and resources to their religious ideas. They believe in the Creator Deity called Tore who is the lord of rainstorms, the master of the sky, the creator of rainbows, and the giver of all life. Before the hunters leave on a hunt, they must first invoke the name of Tore to grant them food. Thus, in this instance, the Almighty Tore is not far removed from the Mbuti hunters. Unlike many African expressions of the Supreme Deity, he not only creates but involves himself in the lives of the ordinary people.

The Mbuti and hunting are almost synonymous because they spend most of their time looking for food. They revere the moon, and some of them believe that the moon shaped the first human, covered the human with skin, and poured blood inside. This human grew to become a hunter and

laid down the principles for the foundation for hunting, which included respect for the forest.

Indeed, respect for the god of the forest is the first law of hunting. If the hunter does not respect the god of the forest, paying as much honor to the god of the forest as they do to their natural parents, they will not be able to hunt successfully. One must believe that the forest is good and will reveal to the respectful hunter all that is necessary for food. The disrespectful hunter will be disappointed, saddened, and destroyed by the forest.

Hunting is the occasion for praise songs and creative dancers imitating the various animals of the hunt. The Mbuti place a basket of food near the river as an indication that the forest deity has been invoked as they celebrate their hunt. Throughout Africa, this ritual of hunting and invoking of the deities is carried out with the same degree of reverence as seen in Mbuti tradition.

In general, African hunters discovered that the spirits of the forests needed to be invoked by offerings of food in trees and rocks. This is necessary because the spirits are able to assist humans in making a successful hunting chase. The hunters become weathermen and are able to predict and prevent the rain because of their invocation to the forest deities. The forest holds many spirits: those who have died and not been buried, ghosts of twins, monsters, tsotsies, and other creatures. Therefore, hunting in Africa was traditionally a profession laden with courage, mystery, and reward.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Food; Rituals

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HUSIA

The Husia is a collection of sacred texts of ancient Egypt. A massive work in progress, it is a result of a project begun in the early 1980s by Maulana Karenga, professor of Africana Studies at California State University, Long Beach. He stated in his pilot project for the longer text in progress, *Selections From the Husia: Sacred Wisdom of Ancient Egypt*, that “as part of a larger work, it represents a contribution to developing a definitive African sacred text which will serve as moral and spiritual guide and reinforcement in the same way other sacred texts do for their adherents and believers.” Various books of the Husia are to be published as translated until the collection of selected texts is complete. This entry looks at the text and the project that seeks to gather and publish them.

The Sacred Texts

The name chosen for the sacred text, *Husia*, is a compound word taken from two ancient Egyptian words that signify the two divine powers by which Ra (God) created the world in the ancient Egyptian creation narrative. The creation texts in the Husia say that the Creator “conceived the world in his heart/mind,” “took authoritative speech in his mouth,” and called the world into being. The word *Hu* means “authoritative utterance,” and the word *Sia* means “exceptional insight.” Thus, the two words are combined to express the concept “authoritative utterance of exceptional insight.”

The stress here is on the texts being both authoritative and exceptionally insightful. Moreover, Hu and Sia not only symbolize and express authority and insight, but are also at the heart of both creative activity and moral practice in ancient Egyptian or Maatian ethics. They are powers available to all humans so that they may understand, speak, and do Maat in an ongoing cooperative project with the Divine of constantly repairing and remaking the world.

The Husia is organized into seven major sections that represent the various kinds of texts in the corpus of ancient Egyptian sacred literature. The first section is the Books of Knowing the Creations, taken from the title of one of the narratives of creation titled “The Book of Knowing the Creations of Ra” and including various other creation accounts. The second section is called the Books of Prayers and Sacred Praises and includes literature of praise, petition, and thanksgiving to the Divine. Although what the Egyptians call “songs of praising and glorifying” also occur in other books, this section is dedicated essentially to them.

A third section of the Husia is titled the Moral Narratives and includes didactic narratives such as the Book of Khunanup, the oldest social justice text in the world, and the Book of Sinuhe, both classical works in Kemetic literature. The fourth section of the Husia is titled the Books of Wise Instruction and includes major and minor moral texts that the ancient Egyptians called Sebait (SbAyt). The fifth section is titled Books of Contemplation and includes literature called complaints, lamentations, prophecies, and admonitions in Egyptological literature. A sixth section is called the Declarations of Virtues, which contains autobiographical literature with moral self-presentations expressing virtues and vices central to Maatian moral conceptualization and discourse.

Finally, the Husia contains a seventh section called The Books of Rising Like Ra, books that are customarily called funerary or mortuary texts in Egyptology. These books include the *Pyramid Texts*, the *Coffin Texts (The Book of Vindication)*, and the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, commonly called *The Book of the Dead* in Egyptological literature. Focused on the requirements and pursuit

of the afterlife, these texts, along with those of the other sections, contain a wealth of spiritual and ethical concepts that lay an early foundation for a rich legacy of Maatian theological, ontological, and anthropological discourse.

An Afrocentric Project

The historical origins of the Husia as an intellectual project lay in Maulana Karenga’s response to the call to recover the rich legacy of Egypt by Cheikh Anta Diop, a multidimensional and erudite Senegalese scholar who pioneered the critical academic African focus on ancient Egypt as a classical African civilization. He is best known for his works *The African Origin of Civilization* and *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*.

In these works, he sought to return Kemet, ancient Egypt, to African history and to use its intellectual and spiritual legacy in the creation of a new future for Africa and African peoples. He said that returning ancient Egypt to African history after the detachment that Europeans had imposed on it for racial and ideological reasons, and to recover and engage its rich legacy, would achieve three basic goals. It would reconcile African history and human history (i.e., end the falsification of history), aid in creating a new body of human sciences, and contribute to the renewal of African culture. Diop also called for the development of an African-centered philosophy that would bring forth the best of African views and values and address the pressing modern ethical and social issues confronting African peoples and the world.

In response and contribution to this Diopian proposal and project, Karenga, with his organization Us and the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies, launched a series of initiatives. He began an intensive study of ancient Egyptian history and culture with a focus on its ethical thought. This study led to his return to the academy to earn a second doctorate in religion and social ethics and his writing a major work in the field titled *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*. He also developed and taught classes in ancient Egyptian studies at the KIPAS and CSULB, instituted an educational

process for training Seba Maat (moral teachers in the Maatian tradition), and developed the Husia project to provide original and new translations and commentaries for the instruction.

Finally, he and Us called the first Ancient Egyptian Studies Conference in 1984 and invited other scholars and interested persons as a way to introduce and advance the project. Out of this, they also formed a professional association called the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations to continue the project. Through these initiatives, especially the work surrounding the Husia and the study and teaching of the sacred texts it contains, it was anticipated that a new Maatian tradition would evolve and provide the context for developing Maatian thought as an important philosophic option of addressing critical issues of our time from an African-centered vantage point. It was also anticipated that it would provide the further development of an Afrocentric contribution to addressing enduring questions that confront humanity and the world.

Maulana Karenga

See also Book of the Coming Forth by Day (The Book of the Dead); Maat; Ra

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HUTU

The Hutu are the majority ethnic group in the countries of Burundi and Rwanda; the division of these countries is a result of European colonialism. With a population of 15 million, the Hutu represent more than 85% of the populations of

the two countries; the remaining populations in those countries are the Tutsi and the Twa, with the Twa having about 1% and the rest of the people belonging to a Tutsi identity.

It is thought that the Hutu arrived in the area from Central Africa or from Ethiopia more than 2,000 years ago. During the first centuries of their existence, the people were hunters and farmers, but gradually became farmers who worked the land with expert skill. In fact, in Hutu society, the person who is the best farmer is considered to be a highly valuable member of the community. Thus, people seek to discover new ways of planting on the hillsides that comprise the countries. Well-tended farms with extensive lines dividing the farms show the respect, beauty, and pride of the people.

Hutu social existence is based on the family and clan. It is a common pattern among African groups, and it serves to protect the spiritual linkage to the first ancestor. This is why the Hutu had *Bahinza*, kings, who ruled over limited dominions. These Bahinza were able to combine several clan groups under their rule and to exercise rights of solving land disputes, kinship issues, as well as health matters. This was the model of Hutu life prior to the coming of Europeans with Catholicism.

Indeed, the Tutsi, who had lived among the Hutu for centuries, almost as the same people, also had the same clan structure. In fact, there is hardly any difference between the two groups. When one examines their language, customs, and traditions, no real differences exist between the people except the consciousness of a separation based on the legacy of the colonial powers, privilege, discrimination, and behavioral practices. Once intellectuals and traditionalists of the society have dealt with these critical issues, there should be a more reasonable approach to the issues that have caused so much death and destruction in the region.

The Hutu people live in the rural areas of the two countries. They have their picturesque villages of neat rondavals made of dried grass and mud that comprise compounds for the family farms. These structures are spread throughout the hills of Rwanda and Burundi. Because these are farm families, they honor farm work above

all else. Men and women are on equal footing when it comes to the work. They support the persons with reputation for hard and honest farm labor.

Although only about a fourth of the people follow the ancient religious traditions, those who do appear to be the most happily adjusted, in that they maintain a love for their language and the protocols of their customs and values. They may speak Kinyawanda as well as Swahili and French. Among the activities that are closely related with the culture are iron and brass work, basket and

pottery making, and wood sculpture. They are excellent musicians and makers of proverbs.

Ama Mazama

See also Ancestors; Family

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I

IBIBIO

The Ibibio live in the Akwa-Ibom/Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria. They have inhabited this area of Africa for more than 1,000 years and possibly longer. According to their traditions, the Ibibio have always believed in the Ekpo society as one of the main institutions of state stability. Villages are ruled by a group of elders who are usually referred to as Ekpo Ndem Isong. They share the responsibilities of rulership with the heads of families who are usually the oldest members of those families. Whatever is decided by the Ekpo Ndem Isong is carried out as law by the Ekpo Society, whose members act as messengers of the *Ikan*, the ancestors.

Order is maintained by the impartiality of the Ekpo society. Because members of the society are always masked when carrying out their duties, no one knows exactly which member of the village is responsible for a certain action. This is only a technical issue because it can usually be deduced who is acting in a certain way, who is not at home, so must be on official duties, and so forth. If a person is physically punished by the Ekpo society, fear of retribution and, worse, fear of the ancestors' punishment keep the people from reporting brutality.

The Ibibio rely on the Ekpo society for its stability. Membership is open to all Ibibio males, but they are normally the ones who have attained some wealth. Without influence, wealth, or prestige from some occupation or profession,

a person may not be able to achieve the highest ranks in the society.

Religion among the Ibibio is about paying tribute to the village ancestors. A village is blessed when it remembers the ancestors, whereas it is cursed when it fails in its ritual responsibility. The failure to honor the ancestors just as they were honored while alive on the Earth means that the village will feel the wrath of the ancestors. Fortunes can be won or lost depending on the ancestors. One can say that if you want to be fortunate and you want to be praised, then you should honor your mother and father on the Earth and all your ancestors whom you do not see.

In the Ibibio village, the moral head of the society is the village leader. He has ritual responsibilities as the guardian of the ancestral shrines. He may be a secular leader (i.e., a business person, a professional, or a successful farmer) who may also have moral leadership by virtue of his membership in the Ekpo society. Without membership in this important body, the secular leader cannot effectively hold leadership in the village. Therefore, it is essential that all leaders seek initiation into Ekpo.

Abasi is the creator deity and Ala is the Earth deity who is appeased through the Ogbom ceremony that is believed to make children plentiful and to increase the harvest. It is celebrated in the middle of the year, every 8 days for 8 weeks, by each section of a village. The masks and decorations make up much of the Ibibio response to cultural and moral crisis. Drumming and music

are equally important to the spiritual ceremonies. The Amama, the highest rank in the Ekpo society, is the level of the greatest wealth in the village.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Igbo; Yoruba

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IBIS, SYMBOL OF TEHUTI

In ancient Kemet, Tehuti was the head or leader and messenger of the gods. Represented by an Ibis, Tehuti is also called Djehuty, Tahuti, Sheps, Lord of Khemenu, Khenti, Mehi, Asten, and Thoth, and, finally, Hermes Trismegistus. The name Tehuti is derived from the Kemetic *tehu*, meaning to measure in relation to the moon. Tehuti is derived from the oldest name of the Ibis in Egypt, hence his physical depiction as an Ibis, often illustrated with a head of an ibis as well as a baboon on occasion. Tehuti is known as the father of written language, and many other contributions to mankind are attributed to this legendary figure.

The Ibis Representation

Most of the Neteru or Gods were associated with an animal or totem. Of course, the Ibis is the symbol for Tehuti. An ibis is stork-like bird that is presently extinct in Egypt, but was plentiful in

ancient Egypt. The writing system of Egypt used the word *akh* (i.e., the image of a crested ibis) to express a powerful concept.

The *akh* is an evolved spirit form as a result of the reintegration of the *ka* and *ba* after death. The *ka* is the essence or spirit, and the *ba* is the personality concept; the merging of the two is what brings one to the image of a crested ibis, the *akh*. Also, in *medu neter*, the ibis and the heart are interchangeable. The name of the ibis is “Tekh,” and the beak of the ibis resembles that of the crescent moon. Tehuti’s connection to the crescent is believed to relate to his invention of the 365-day calendar because he also measured the Heavens and planned the Earth.

A Writing System

In the beginning, in Africa there was the word, an oral tradition, a powerful concept with the ability to breathe forth life and make all things manifest into reality. Then came Tehuti, who demonstrated the ability to transform these energetic oratory tools into symbolic representations to further enhance communication and emphasize the way people see themselves and their world. Tehuti is credited with the invention of the world’s oldest and most sophisticated writing system, *medu neter*. His depiction often shows him holding a scroll and papyrus, the symbols of a scribe, and wearing a crown that illuminates his Earthly royalty, cosmic powers, sovereignty, strength, and virility. The Kemetians’ reliance on symbols was prevalent throughout their ancient culture, and Tehuti simply stepped it up another dimension by giving meaning to the visual clues. Tehuti laid the foundation for formal written communication.

In addition to the invention of divine words, Tehuti personified the thought process, manifested first from knowledge and wisdom. Thus, Tehuti is often recognized as the epitome of manifest reality. He is the source of power that can make all come to fruition. In many other African religions and traditions, the power of the word, such as *Nommo*, is believed to possess the innate ability to heal the sick and resurrect the Dead. Adherents of New Age occult sciences believe that prayer or word–sound–power has the ability to change the molecular structure of water or simply raise the vibration of food to be eaten.

According to Kemetians, Tehuti was at the beginning because he is said to be born of himself. Tehuti symbolizes how the esoteric aspect of a being can materialize into the exoteric. This ideology is an aspect of the philosophy of the above and the below or microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm. Tehuti is also referred to as the “Divine Tongue” and represents the will to do and courage to hone the higher faculties to maximize one’s full potential.

Tehuti as Writer and Subject

Tehuti made his mark on civilizations of the past, and his contributions are still evident today. In fact, philosophy credits him with writing more than 1,000 books, and much of what has come after him reflects his understandings about life on and after Earth. He has made a significant contribution to the history of Western thought. A few of his most well-known texts are the 42 books of Thoth, which detail instructions for achieving immortality and foundation for much of the Western sciences; and the Emerald Tablet, which details “truth” and axioms of the universe and the human connection to it, also known as the Kybalion. He is also said to have authored the *Ebers Papyrus* and the Divine Pymander.

Tehuti is said to have written and was written about in texts ancient and modern, such as the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, better known as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, individually, but more so in juxtaposition with other Gods and Goddesses. These books were versions of the original pyramid or funerary texts, a compilation of spells that accompanied the deceased, earlier only accessible to royal families and later democratized. In the Pyramid Text, Tehuti is thought to be a funerary entity, appearing as a god who helps the Dead and awaited for by those souls that passed onto the after- or underworlds.

He is also referred to as the heart of Ra, the sun god and master of the physical and spiritual realms. Tehuti personifies Ra’s mind and heart and built the Great Pyramid under his orders. In mythology, the primordial egg was a gift to Tehuti laid by the ibis, from wherein Ra emerged. In *The Book of the Dead*, Tehuti plays a significant role by the weighing of souls before the acceptance or

denial into the afterworld. One could not access the next level of existence without his permission.

He is also known as the brother of Osiris and serves as the judge in the battle between Horus and Set. Tehuti had the ability to, in his binary relationship with Auset, resurrect Ausar to life. In connection with Maat, the Goddess of Justice, Reciprocity, and Truth, he established the principles Maat represents. Tehuti and Anubis balance the scales of Maat, judging heart against feather.

Tehuti’s contributions to mankind extend beyond the parameters of writing; he is also known as a master in the areas of medicine, chemistry, law, rhetoric, advanced mathematics, astronomy, and early understandings of universal order and principles.

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See also Ausar; Auset

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IDOMA

The Idoma-speaking peoples live in central Nigeria. They inhabit Benue, Plateau, Cross River, and Anambra States of Nigeria, with the majority living in Benue State. There are also many Idoma speakers in other parts of Nigeria, and the total population is estimated to be about 5 million. In Nigeria, Idoma-speaking people occupy important positions in local, state, and national life, and there are many university graduates, administrators, and businesspeople among the Idoma. There are many primary and secondary schools in Idomaland, most of them established by Methodist and Roman Catholic missionary groups. Only

recently have governments, individuals, and Islamic organizations begun to establish primary and secondary schools.

Origins and Ethnicities

There is a strong drive for Idoma to be extensively used in all Idoma Schools of Benue State, and many Idoma writers and scholars, such as Onka Oblete, Ismaila Amali, Idris Amali, Usman Amali, and Stephen Obeya, are writing in the Idoma language. The Idoma trace their migrations from the east, from Kwararafa over a period of 200 years in three main phases: The Royal Emigration (c. 1535–1625), The Fish Totem Exodus (c. 1625–1655), and the Civet Cat Totem Exodus (c. 1625–1655). The migrations were stimulated by dynastic or other political struggles in which losers migrated.

The western origins (c. 1625–1655) occurred in the context of Igala history. Migrations from Igala also took place in three phases: from the Idah kingdom (c. 1625–1685), from the north of Igalaland (c. 1655–1745), and from the Ankpa kingdom (c. 1685–1745). These migrations originated elsewhere (from Benin, possibly from the Igbo areas to the south) and may have been made by persons originating in western and northern Kwararafa communities as well. Being totemic peoples, the discussion of their western origins includes speculation on the function and symbolic significance of totems.

Totemic identifications by different groups within the Idoma population to trace origins, migration routes, and political allegiances are a key element in the understanding of the role of Idoma *ibo* (forbiddences) in their belief and religious practices.

Totems are presented as narrowly functional, reflecting kinship or political relationships or other forms of solidarity, and demonstrate the complex and diverse origins of Nigerian cultures that can even change totems or adopt additional totems to symbolize changing political allegiances, but also from sociocultural necessity of providing evidence for historical reconstruction.

There are two particular features regarding the Idoma peoples' cultural and political systems that must be emphasized. One is the creation, among the Idoma, of a state system that emerged in a

multiethnic situation that could well be taken as an operative strategy for other African states: the coming together of both the Igala and Kwararafa elements, where peoples of different cultures but of similar population strength might promote either a *modus vivendi* or breed tension and sometimes even harden lines of hostility.

In both Igwumale and Agila, there were three distinct ethnic groups: the Igala, Kwararafa, and Igbos. The situation in both Igwumale and Agila necessitated a new political strategy—a state system in which one group assumes leadership to cope with the needs of society. Indeed, in the two states of Igwumale and Agila, evidence indicates that tension existed.

However, the situation was saved with the arrival of the third party, the Igbo immigrant group. Thereafter, whereas Idah and Kwararafa groups emerged as the royal families in the two states, other groups took charge of religious and military matters. Thus, within each state, the secular, religious, and military organizations reflected its diverse ethnic composition without conflict.

Death-Related Inquests

The other particularity in Idoma culture and society relates to death and represents, along with their totemic orientation, their cosmological and ethical values. After a death, an inquiry is held in the Idoma-speaking communities to find out who is responsible for the death. This is not undertaken to ascribe blame, but to find out the social reason for the death.

The use of inquests (*ikpelokwooka*) as dramatic narratives among the Idoma-speaking people of Oturkpo located southeast of the Niger-Benue confluence in Nigeria required the *omioko*. The *omioko* were young men with good, vibrant, resonant, and powerful voices who had learned their art through observation and participation and other modes of training and knew the society and its traditions well—namely, the Idoma-Oturkpo ancestral mythical story known as *Odegwudegwu*.

Inquest performance is public dramatization of societal and individual grief, which restores a sense of health to the society and the individual and serves as a deterrent to evil people by reforming and punishing those presumed to have caused the death

of any person within the society. In the Idoma belief system, man's suffering arises from the ability of forces beyond him, particularly death, to manipulate and dictate his actions and thoughts.

Therefore, the inquest is a collective investigation of death by the society and man's attempt to debate, inquire, interact, and solve the conflicts and, in short, come to terms with the forces that cause suffering. Although it is performed for persons of all ages, it comes in an elaborate form for the middle-aged and the very aged members of society. The oracle determines the cause of death, while the elders demand restitution in the form of sacrifice and reparation to the forces responsible for the death, as well as for the accountability of the members of the community to prevent a reoccurrence, drive chaos away, and restore balance and harmony.

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See also Reincarnation

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IFA

Ifa is first and foremost an *orisha* or deity in Yoruba traditional religion. Ifa is also a complete system of divination. As an oracle, it plays a practical and significant role in Yoruba traditional religion by offering answers and solutions to existential problems in forms of ritual offerings and sacrifices to the appropriate deities. It is one of the higher divinities in the Yoruba pantheon, which contains as many as 400 deities responsible for all aspects of life and living in the Yoruba community. Ifa divination is also used by contiguous cultures such as the Edo, Itsekiri, Ewe of Togo (Afa), Fon of Bénin (Fa), and the Ga people of Ghana.

In the African Diaspora, especially in the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean, Yoruba traditional religion has successfully survived slavery and some four centuries of imposed Christianity.

Lately, there has been a resurgence of Yoruba traditional religion in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. Enslaved Africans, their descendants, and new African immigrants have adapted original African religious practices to American soil, and Ifa has been a significant part of this cultural survival and renaissance. Today, Afro-Caribbean syncretism is expressed through religions such as Candomblé, Vodun, and Santería.

The latter presents obvious and strong affinities with the Yoruba tradition. For example, Santería has faithfully preserved the names of deities, Ifa divination procedures, liturgical music, and musical instruments (*bata*, *dundun*), incantations, and sacrificial practices. Santería also relies on a vast repository of herbal medicine and healing rituals, much of which can be found in Ifa practices back in Yorubaland. It must not be forgotten that at least a third of all Africans enslaved in Cuba were Yoruba.

This entry looks at Ifa as a system of divination, as a god, and as a sacred text; at the training of its priests; and at the contemporary impact of this belief system.

Divination System

As a divinatory system, scholars agree that the ancient origins of Ifa may have been lost to history, but there is sufficient reason to believe that it may have been derived from Nupe (northern neighbors of the Yoruba) geomancy. The Nupe divination method is derived from the divinatory practices of Siwah, an ancient city of pharaonic Egypt, which was famous for the temple and oracle of Zeus Ammon during the 5th century BC. The main idea is that quite likely Ifa may be part of ancient Egyptian religion.

Ifa divination is based on the mathematical square (4^2 , which equals 16). Sixteen palm nuts or cowrie shells are held with the right hand, while one or two nuts are left in the left hand. If two nuts remain, a single mark (I) is made on a divinatory tray (*opele*) or on the sand; if one nut remains, a double mark (II) is made. These nuts can be tossed repeatedly in conjunction with the 256 derivative figures to arrive at specific answers or revelations. Therefore, the 256 (again 16^2) derivative figures or *odus* (esoteric meanings) function as interpretative keys to the whole process.



A wand or tapper used in Yoruba Ifa divination. The babalawo taps the Ifa board with the point of the tapper repeatedly to summon the attention of the necessary Orisha, Eshu, and Orunmila. Yoruba people, Nigeria. Ivory.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

The 256 chapters are subdivided into verses called *ese*, whose exact number is unknown because they are constantly increasing (there are around 800 *ese* for each *odu*). These keys contain myths, legends, rituals, and taboos to be prescribed for the appropriate questioner and their needs. The verses, considered the most important part of Ifa divination, are chanted or incanted by the priests in poetic language. It is pertinent to note that Ifa divinatory permutations (and as a system of knowledge) are akin to associative algebra, which generates complex numbers using quaternions or a four-dimensional number system. Clearly, Ifa is an important African epistemology rooted in a specific spirituality—Yoruba.

God of Destiny

Ifa (or god of destiny) is often conflated and assimilated with Orunmila, the deity of Wisdom who, according to Yoruba mythology, is believed to have been the only deity present when *Olorun Olodumare*, or God almighty, embarked on creation. Thus, Orunmila, whose appellation literally means “only God knows where the lines (of destiny) fall,” is the keeper of God’s secrets. Because Ifa is Orunmila’s son, it is understandable that he, too, will be privy. Therefore, among the Yoruba, when one says *Ifa*, most people know that the person is speaking of Orunmila. Many scholars agree that Ifa must be understood both as a method of and a deity of divination.

As the preeminent orisha, Ifa is the cornerstone of Yoruba religion, metaphysics, and spirituality. Therefore, other major divinities such as Ogun, Sango, Eshu, and Obatala appear to play supportive roles because ritual, sacrifice, oblation, and other forms of religious practice only follow Ifa’s dicta and prescriptions. Yet it must be emphasized that this supportive role by other deities does not mean that they are subordinate to Ifa because whole families, clans, and communities may adopt specific deities to the exclusion of Ifa over many generations, either for totemic, artisanal (guilds), or ontological/historic (ancestral veneration) reasons.

An example is hunters, warriors, farmers, and various types of metal craftsmen who worship Ogun (god of war and iron). Farmers in particular tend to worship Ogun, in addition to their

reverence of lesser deities such as orisha oko (god of agriculture). Indeed, diachronic analyses of Yoruba patronyms provide clear indications of the evolution of Yoruba religion and devotion to the various divinities of the pantheon.

Sacred Text

Although they have, like most other African peoples, come under the influence of both Christianity and Islam, due largely to slavery and colonization, and have adopted these scripture-based theologies, the Yoruba, however, have not abandoned their original belief systems, which are the matrices of their cultural identities and ethos. With that said, the Ifa can be considered as a sacred text—just like the Qur’an and the Bible. It is subject to exegetical interpretation and discourse simply because it provides a unifying and verifiable vision of the world, and of ultimate reality, for more than 30 million Yoruba—even as they adhere or claim to adhere to Christian or Islamic doctrines and dogma.

As a sacred text that deploys several epics, Ifa is, as in all religions, eschatological, apocalyptic, and cosmological in terms of its message. For the Yoruba individual, it gives moral direction and purpose to living through regular reiteration and interpretations of the odus (or esoteric chapters). Socially, Ifa provides for the Yoruba people the essential cultural and ethical foundation of their identity as expressed through its literary corpus of myths, legends, and morality tales—of which only 256 are available as transliterated texts. Ifa is thus the sacred text of the Yoruba people.

Becoming a Priest(ess)

To become an Ifa priest or priestess, one must submit to a rigorous training and initiation process guided by an Ifa expert known as *oluwo* (master of esoteric knowledge). This training can last from 8 to 12 years. During that time, the neophyte (*omo awo*: child of secrets) learns by mnemotechnic the 256 esoteric chapters of the corpus. This is facilitated by the ingestion of *isoye* (literally that which awakens the mind), a psychoactive drug not unlike the Amerindian *peyote* or the Brazilian *ayahuasca*.

They also train in the magical arts—how to make curative potions from the local flora and fauna. Furthermore, the Ifa neophyte is schooled in Yoruba oral history and tradition, and their linguistic and oratorical skills are sharpened. Their training ends with an oath that is substantially comparable to the Hippocratic Oath. Among other things, the Ifa initiate or *olodu* (keeper of secrets) swears to use the knowledge and wisdom acquired for the benefit of the community and not for personal material gain. He or she also swears never to divulge the esoteric knowledge acquired.

Thus, from a comparative perspective, initiates of Ifa known as *babalawo* or *iyalawo* (father or mother of secrets) whose vocation is a lifelong commitment to practicing the ethical and practical teachings, as well as applying the knowledge and wisdom for the benefit of Yoruba society and culture, are no different from the members of Christian or Islamic sacerdotal orders and practitioners of scriptures of their respective traditions; they are governed by training, initiation, and codes of ethics. The major difference is that Ifa is an oral and oracular text, somewhat more dependent on imagination and creativity to be fully expressed. In other words, Ifa is a mythopoetic text. The Yoruba is a metaphysical as well as pragmatic philosophical system.

Thus, Ifa can be considered as an agent of Olodumare's will and an influence in the affairs of humans. Because of its importance in the daily lives of people, an orisha is also seen by the Yoruba as an inseparable part of each individual's destiny (or Ori, which is also an orisha) here on Earth. Sacrifices are often offered, after consulting Ifa, to propitiate the orishas to gain their protection or support. Each orisha has specific offerings and rituals peculiar to their qualities.

Contemporary Influence

Despite foreign cultural encroachments over the past centuries, most Yoruba people still practice their original religion. The ethical values inherent in Ifa as a system of knowing live in the heart of every Yoruba through oral tradition and other modes of cultural transmission, such as proverbs, aphorisms, adages, and legends recalled from the Ifa corpus. Therefore, one should not be surprised

that the average Yoruba even today, of whatever proclaimed faith, will still consult Ifa and honor the family's orisha or guardian deity in times of crisis.

Also, before any of life's major undertakings—marriage, child birth, migration, new career, and so on—the Yoruba will often seek the counsel of the shaman or *babalawo* who is the Ifa adept or seer, in addition to the spiritual support of their local bishop or imam, without any sense of contradiction. Thus, it is possible to envisage the Yoruba person exploiting the symbiotic and syncretic relationship between Ifa, other deities of their religion, and the Abrahamic faiths to live life as optimally as possible—to participate in the human and the divine.

In modern times, Ifa priests and priestesses, as promoters of community health and wellness, also play a vital role in Nigeria's health care system, especially in the areas of mental health, maternity services, spiritual counseling, and even in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Indeed, the WHO and other intergovernmental bodies now recognize the role of African religion in dealing with modern health scourges and crises. Ifa will always be of great importance as long as there are Yoruba who live by the values it embodies—wisdom, knowledge, right conduct, and action.

In October 2005, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recognized Ifa by proclaiming it as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage, thanks to the efforts of Wande Abimbola, the most visible and outspoken Ifa priest, expert, and specialist.

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See also Orisha

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IGBO

The Igbo people are located primarily in the southeastern area of Nigeria and constitute one of Africa's largest ethnic groups, with a population of approximately 25 million. Although the large majority of Igbo people live in the southeastern part of Nigeria, Igbos are also found in neighboring countries, such as Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Niger.

The migration paths the Igbos walked to get to their current territory in southeastern Nigeria is still a debated issue. According to one theory, the Igbo people could have migrated to West Africa from as far away as Egypt thousands of years ago.

Traditionally, Igbos have placed a great emphasis on land and farming, and this, coupled with their will to work hard, helped shape their mental and spiritual frame of reference, to this day. In this culture, working the land and tilling the soil is seen as making a person closer to the good Earth and nearer to the generous God. It can be said that the Igbos have developed, through time, an effective religious system that sustains them. This entry looks at their belief system and at their experience during the time of slavery.

Religious Beliefs

The Igbo religious way of life promotes a personal and positive connection with their family and

people, nature, water, the Earth, the sun, the universe, fire, and God/Goddess. According to Igbo cosmology, two worlds exist—spiritual and physical. The two worlds are distinct, although also deeply interrelated and interdependent. The spirit world is inhabited by at least four distinguishable sets of entities.

First are the spirits that have become disconnected from the physical bodies at the time of death, *Ndichie* (*Ancestors*). Some of them have reached their destination and lay in the spiritual space of good spirits. Others, in contrast, who have failed to do so sometimes make incursions into the physical world and cause misfortunes among the living. The second set of entities is personal spirits, *Chi*- (*Guardian*). The Igbo believe that every human has been endowed with a *Chi* at the time of their birth. The *Chi* is responsible for the source of life and destiny of the individual. The third set of entities is the spirits connected with nature and nonhuman entities, *Alusi*. Those, such as the Earth, the sky, the sun, and the water, never had physical human bodies. Finally, the fourth set of spirits is evil spirits *Ula Chi* (“adversary of *Chi*”), and *Akaloglii*. The Igbos believe those evil spirits to be humans who became completely wicked and enjoy inflicting pain and grief on humans. Whereas offerings and sacrifices are bestowed to all of the spirits in the Igbo cosmology to appease them for blessings and protection, evil ones are not granted such an honor. Instead, they are given the least and worthless items to keep them at a distance to prevent havoc in families and the society as a whole.

The Supreme Being in Igbo mythology is addressed as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. *Chukwu* is a compound word from *Chi* (“personal guiding spirit”) and *ukwu* (“big”), which can be translated as “the big or great *Chi*.” *Chineke* is also a compound word from *Chi* (“personal guiding spirit”), *na* (“who”), and *eke* (“to share out”), which can be translated as “supreme being who shares.” The Igbo traditional and ancient religious system is centered around the belief that there is a single, unique, and individual spiritual being who is the foremost provider and on whom, as a result, all living things are ultimately dependent for guidance, blessings, love, protection, support, and so on. *Chukwu* is not categorized as either a male or female spiritual entity.

This, in turn, allows inclusive spiritual space for both genders, especially for women, who are excluded from the highest pantheon of spiritual force(s) in other religious expressions. Actually, all living entities, known and unknown, seen and unseen, are connected to and are from the same spiritual force. Nothing and no one is given priority or special consideration based solely on superficiality or physical characteristics from the Supreme Being, only those who are positive and perform good deeds that add to the forward progress of humanity.

The traditional Igbo cosmological view of Chukwu is anthropomorphically conceived as a spiritual being that exists in the Heavens high above the sky. Between Chukwu and humans are minor spirits that act as mediators and messengers—for example, *Chi* (personal guardian spirit), *Alai* (Earth spirit), *Igwe* (sky spirit), *Anyanwu* (sun spirit), and so on. The world is managed and directed through Chukwu's sons and daughters (the minor spirits). The omnipotence and responsibilities of Chukwu are so great that any acknowledgments, honors, and sacrifices are presented to Chukwu's messengers, and they pass them on to him or her. Chukwu has no temples or priests honoring her or him. However, there are titles and expressions that exalt the Most High, such as *Ama amasi amasi* ("A being who is somewhat known but remains incomprehensible"), *Eze binigwe ogodu ya nakpunani* ("The king who lives in the sky, whose clothes touches the ground"), *Ogbara nkiti okwu biri n' onu ja* ("The silent one that has the last say"), and *Ekekereuwa* ("The sharer or creator who brought the world into being").

New World Slavery

During the West African Enslavement Holocaust, a million or more Igbos were captured by warring rival groups who handed them over to enslavers of humans, who forcibly sold them into an unthinkable nightmare when the hate boat arrived in the Western Hemisphere. An oral legend has passed down through time that a group of Igbos was taken to St. Simons Island, Georgia, which linked to the Gullah/Geechee Sea Lands culture, which runs parallel with

the South Carolina and down to the Florida coastlines.

According to the legend, some of the Igbos walked into the water in May 1803, preferring to drown rather than continue life as slaves. As the Igbos walked into the water in front of the White enslavers to free their bodies from bondage, they sang in their motherland's tongue the following words: *Orimiri Omambala bu anyi bia Orimiiri Omambala ka anyi ga ejina* ("The Water Spirit brought us; The Water Spirit will take us home"). According to one oral myth, the Igbos on St. Simons Island did not drown, but actually ascended into the air and flew back (Sankofa) to Igbo land in West Africa to avoid enslavement.

Like other enslaved ethnic groups of West Africans, many Igbos fiercely resisted the monstrosity of enslavement. An Ibo landing dedication and sanctification ceremony was conducted in the summer of 2002 to honor the Igbos' struggle for freedom, dignity, and achievements in the Western Hemisphere.

Ibo Changa

See also Ga; Yoruba; Zulu

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IKIN

Ikin are some of the special instruments that are part of the Ifa divination apparatus within the Yoruba religion. They also appear in the Yoruba-influenced Vodun religion of the Ewe (where Ifa is referred to as *Afa*) and of the Fon (where Ifa is referred to as *Fa*). More specifically, Ikin are the 16 palm nuts used to form binary sets of data during the divination process. In addition to Ikin, other indispensable tools include a divination tray (*Opon Ifa*) covered with white powder obtained from a particular tree (*Iyerosun*), a tapper instrument (*Iroker Ifa*), a receptacle for the Ikin (*Ajere Ifa*), and, optionally, a belt made with beads for the diviner (*Babalawo* for a male Ifa priest and *Iyanifa* for a female Ifa priestess) to put on while divining. Sometimes, instead of Ikin, diviners will use chains, known as *Opele*, but Ikin are deemed to have a superior divination capacity.

Divination is a critical epistemological mode in African religion, and diviners and their instruments of divination are highly regarded. Indeed, Ifa divination allows people, through diviners, to consult *Orunmila* (also known as Ifa), the orisha of wisdom, knowledge, and divination, to gain insight into the present and future and to receive advice and guidance on how to best proceed. The instruments, hence the Ikin, are used to record Orunmila's message to the diviner.

According to the Yoruba oral tradition, Ifa once lived on Earth at a time when the Earth and the sky were still united. Ifa had married and fathered eight sons, and all lived on Earth. Because the Earth and the sky were still one, Ifa could then go back frequently into the sky to be consulted by Oludamare, the supreme God. However, one day, one of his sons insulted Ifa, who then decided to leave the Earth and go back to live in Heaven again. His decision had dire consequences, creating much havoc, because famine and disease plagued the Earth. Barrenness became the norm. The elders, desperate to obtain relief, sent eight children to Ifa, begging him to take up residence on Earth again. Ifa refused and instead, and out of pity, gave each one of the children a set of 16 palm nuts, the sacred Ikin, which would allow them to communicate with him. Through Ikin, then, Ifa speaks to the living.

Although there are different types of palm nuts, only those with three or more eyes are eligible to become tools of Ifa. At the beginning of a divination session, the diviner holds all the Ikin in one hand. He or she then tries to shift all the nuts in the other hand at once. The diviner does this several times. Usually, each time, one or two Ikin will not be transferred into the other hand. As the Ikin go back and forth from one hand to the other, the diviner keeps a record, by tracing one vertical line (if one Ikin is left in the hand) or two vertical lines (when two Ikin are left) in the white powder spread on the divination tray.

This goes on until a particular *Odu Ifa* emerges. There are 256 possible *Odu Ifa*. *Odu Ifa* are believed to address all possible human situations and predicaments. Each one is associated with a particular spiritual meaning, specific predictions, and prescriptions, which the diviner will reveal to their client. He or she will also inform their client should it be necessary to perform any offerings or sacrifices as propitiation or expiation rituals.

In addition to being practiced in Yorubaland in Nigeria, Ifa, and therefore the presence of Ikin, is also attested in many communities influenced by Yoruba culture and religion, such as Lukumi in Cuba, Santeria, Candomblé, as well as in many other places with large West African communities, such as Europe, the United States, Canada, Mexico, and South and Central America. In 2005, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization listed the Ifa Divination System as one of the "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

Ama Mazama

See also Babalawo; Candomblé; Divination Systems; Epistemology; Ewe; Ifa; *Odu Ifa*; Oracles; Orisha; Yoruba

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ILÉ-IFÈ

Ifè (or Ilé-Ifè, the sacred place of creation) is an ancient city created by the Yoruba people and located in the southwestern part of the country of Nigeria. Recently, evidence has been discovered that pushes the history of this city back to around 500 BC. During this period, the Yoruba around Ifè were agriculturalists. They had domesticated many crops used in their diets.

The city of Ifè is said to have originated when the founding deities, Oduduwa and Obatala, began the creation of the world. According to the origin legend of the Yoruba, these deities were directed by the paramount deity, Olodumare. Because the city was founded by the early deities of Yoruba, it is generally regarded as the city where God made the world come into being. It is the sacred place, the mighty spiritual center of all Yoruba, because the creation of the world is recognized as starting at this place.

It was here that Obatala created the first humans out of clay, while Oduduwa was designated the first divine king of the Yoruba. The Oni of Ifè claims direct descent from the god Oduduwa and is ranked first among Yoruba kings. Thus, the importance of Ifè is directly related to its origin and the fact that the divinities chose the site as one for the miracle of creation.

The city of Ifè has always been significant, but between 700 and 900 AD it appeared to leap in artistic contributions. A renaissance in the culture of the region led by the people of Ifè produced a tremendous amount of artwork during this period. The city developed as a major center for culture, and the city was a settlement of substantial size between the 9th and 12th centuries, with houses decorated with the icons and symbols of the Yoruba. Ilé-Ifè, as it is called, became known worldwide for its incredible bronze sculptures and

terracotta figures. This art movement reached its height between 1200 and 1500 AD. Soon there was a decline in the political and economic power of the Yoruba people as the nearby kingdom of Benin began to dominate the landscape of southern Nigeria.

Ifè is still a thriving city with lots of trade and farming. In fact, the people of the region grow yams, grain, cassava, tobacco, and cotton. Thus, the city has continued to be a center of human activity into the modern era, and the Oni of Ifè still resides in the palace in the city. A bustling city, Ifè boasts hotels, a university, and radio and TV stations. Yet the most powerful legacy of the city is its bronze heads that created a period of realism long before the European Renaissance and demonstrated the advanced civilization that existed in West Africa.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Creation

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IMHOTEP

Imhotep—also referred to as Imhotep, Son of Ptah—distinguished himself as an important individual in ancient Kemet. He served as the viceroy of the Pharaoh of the III Dynasty, King Djoser. During this period, Imhotep was partly responsible for enhancing the architecture, the schools for sages, and the practice of medicine. He is among the significant figures of antiquity who have made monumental contributions toward African societies and have received special recognition. In some cases, these individuals have been revered as divinities and/or divine beings. This status is often occupied by those who have exemplified acts that were imperative to the community's well-being. His contributions and his transformation to a deity are discussed in this entry.

Serving His King

As a vizier of King Djoser, Imhotep was responsible for serving as chief judge, with duties such as overseeing the King's records. Moreover, these responsibilities also included, but are not limited to, Judiciary, Treasurer, War (Army and Navy), Agriculture Supervisor, and the General Executive. The role of a vizier was highly regarded as an honorable commission and was obtained by those who were considered divine. Thus, those who carried this responsibility would have Life, Prosperity, Health attached to their names.

Imhotep was admired as being an exceptional architect in Kemet's rich history of architectural design. Furthermore, Imhotep was said to be responsible for the construction of one of the first pyramids known to human history. He served as the chief architect on the design of the Step-Pyramid of Sakkarah. The construction of the Step-Pyramid of Sakkarah not only indicates the sophistication of the ancient Kemetic civilization, but it also provides insight on the architectural genius of Imhotep. This structure has lasted thousands of years, illustrating the skill and intellect of Imhotep. Imhotep designed the Step-Pyramid of Sakkarah in honor of King Djoser, his royal master.

Imhotep was also involved with the construction of the first temple of Edfu. Imhotep was attributed with being the chief architect of this massive structure. The inscriptions in the temple identify Imhotep as "the great priest Imhotep the son of Ptah, who speaks or lectures." The temple at Edfu was developed in the predynastic period and was one of the first structures of this time. As a result of Imhotep's architectural contributions to ancient Kemet, he was inducted into an honorable community of exceptional architects. Figures inducted into the community were those who were chief architects. They were also pioneers, influencing other architects in ancient Kemetic history.

Sage and Author

Furthermore, Imhotep developed a reputation of being a great sage. In fact, he is recognized as one of the greatest of Kemetic sages. Imhotep's intellectual thought help to create a tradition of critical thought and a high appreciation for wisdom. His thought has unquestionably impacted the field of medicine

and architect in antiquity and contemporary times. His work remains relevant, although often overlooked, in Western medicine and architecture. His philosophy, in the form of proverbs, was used as instructions for life. These teachings were passed down for generations.

Imhotep was highly noted for his poetic delivery, resulting in being portrayed as a master of poetry. Imhotep's status as a great sage is illustrated in the "Song of the Harper," in which his name is recognized along with Hordedef as being a distinguished sage. The "Song of the Harper" provides lessons of life and acknowledges Imhotep as a wise sage. It was passed from generation to generation, inducting Imhotep's name in history as a wise man.

Imhotep took an interest in studying the heavens and stars and their influence on human life. Although there is no notable reference to his name in these fields, his name was associated with Thoth, the deity of astronomical observation. It is apparent through his work that he believed in a strong influence of the heavens on human phenomena. The belief that the course of the stars strongly affects human fate was commonly shared by ancient Kemetic communities, thus the studies of the movement of heavenly bodies, planets, and other astrological phenomena were observed.

Transition to Deity

Imhotep also distinguished himself as a highly accomplished physician. He served as a medicine man/healer of a period of the III Dynasty during King Djoser's reign. He was also King Djoser's court physician. Imhotep's work in medicine would eventually result in him being deified and revered as a significant individual who had been as a son of God. Imhotep was said to utilize magic and medicine, as well as other methods, for healing the sick. Magic during ancient Kemet was closely related to religion and was revered as being a divine gift of God. He healed people with illnesses of the body, spirit, and psyche. The Westcar Papyrus makes references to Imhotep as an extraordinary medicine man/healer. His reputation as a healer earned him recognition, which would lead to his deification as a deity of medicine.

The legacy of Imhotep endured for thousands of years. More important, his legacy remains

today. Although he lived during the period of the III Dynasty, about 2900 BC, he was inducted to the community of gods Kemet during the Persian period dating from 525 BC. This illustrates the longevity of Imhotep's influence and contributions to ancient Kemetic civilization. Prior to his induction into the community of gods, Imhotep was referred to as a significant contributor; thus, he took on the status of a demigod. As a demigod, he received semidivine worship and reverence.

Imhotep Son of Ptah is elevated to a deity due to the great contribution he made toward medicine, architecture, and as a sage. During the period of 525, Imhotep was venerated as a God and developed a substantial following. His philosophy of life was reflected in the form of beautiful structures and wise proverbs. His wisdom was alluded to in inscriptions of holy temples, pyramids, and other monuments commemorating significant figures. His work in the field of medicine remains relevant to current tradition and helped to sustain a healthy society. His name was mentioned thousands of years after his death, making him an important figure in African history and religion.

Justin Gammage

See also Chaminuka

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INCARNATION

The term *incarnation* descends from a Latin action word, *incarn*, which literally means “embody in flesh.” The term figuratively employs *flesh* as a manifestation of life and is therefore

symbolic surrogation. *Incarn*, when employed in the resultant term, *incarnation*, more accurately means “to bring to life.” The manifestation of this concept is widespread in Africa, and documented proof of its anteriority to its use in Latin is resident in the Mdw Ntr (called hieroglyphics by the Greeks) of the Pyramid and Coffin Texts and in the many hieratic scrolls occupying museums throughout the world.

In African religion, there are several varieties of incarnation that share some basic similarities:

- Through incarnation, spiritual forces from ancestors through supreme deities can potentially enter a human being temporarily or for a lifetime.
- Deities and ancestors are allowed to enter and be active in the visible part of the world and return to the invisible part of the world.
- Extraordinary human beings can become incarnated deities.
- Ordinary human beings can become reincarnated ancestors depending on the favorable balance of their conscious behavior in the visible life.
- Human beings and deities do not occupy flesh simultaneously.

Incarnation, in the form divination, is also practiced by African populations that reside outside of the motherland. Such practices are Africanisms that remain with African descendents and neighboring populations impacted by their culture in the Caribbean and South and North America. After a brief look at the puzzle incarnation seems to pose for Westerners, this entry turns to the origins of this concept in ancient Egypt, describing its development there before turning to other expressions of incarnation in African religion.

The Christian Debate

Much discussion on incarnation is framed around the debate within Christology concerning the nature of Jesus as deity, human, or both. African orientations and theologies have avoided this conundrum by making the world continuous, meaning no outside but divided between visible and invisible.

The debate in Christology over Jesus' nature broke down along Northern and Southern orientations. Africans, Asians, and Europeans were on

all sides of the belief orientations. Whereas the Christian community stretched across both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, the Coptic Church, impacted by Nile Valley traditions, refused to consider the son of the creator as a human. Such a discordant and chaotic concept was considered profane for these monophysites, from a culture rich with speculation of spiritual manifestations.

Egyptian Origins

Rulers Embody God

Nile Valley civilizations were acquainted with deity incarnations more than three millennia prior to Christianity. These civilizations had divine rulers who were incarnations of the creator deity, and that deity often became part of the ruler's name. Examples include the following:

Mena (Menes): Mn-a: I establish (transposed as Amn)

Maat-ka-Ra (Hatshepsut): maet-ka-Ra: true spirit of Ra—or—Ra's true spirit

Akhenaton: akh-n-Atnl: spirit of Aton—or—Aton's spirit

Ramesses: Re-mss: Born of Ra—or—Ra is born

Tutankhamen: tw.t-ankh-Amn: this [is the] life of Amen—or—this Amen lives

The name of each of these rulers, with the exceptions of Mena and Akhenaton, was often preceded by the epithet, "son of Ra (God)."

Humans Become Deities

Africans in Nile Valley civilizations were also familiar with the incarnation of extraordinary human beings to the elevated status of a deity—or, in Christian-speak, a "patron saint." This act is known as deification. Imhotep, the multitalented genius of the Old Kingdom, gained some of the patron characteristics of Ptah and was included in that Ptah's family. In this case, Imhotep became the son of Ptah and Sekmet, replacing Nefertem and adjusting the trinity of Mn-Nfr (called Memphis by the Greeks). Imhotep's incarnation as a holy life in the realm of deities probably owes its

existence to the revolutionary social development following the end of the Old Kingdom.

Written records of Kemet's (called Egypt by the Greeks) Middle Kingdom show that mummification was common during that era and represented a distinct break with exclusive royal access of the Old Kingdom. The masses in Kemet employed veneration, prayer, and wise oaths, along with mummification to ensure their incarnation in the next life. The Neb-Ankh and the body contained therein was only returned to the soul after the plaintiff successfully testified that his or her loved actions outweighed the hated actions, making his or her heart as light as the feather of Maat.

Preparation operations for incarnation on a mass level affected the chemical and biological sciences as well as the arts of communication and graphics. Literacy was expanded, and Coffin Texts accompanied the Neb-Ankhs (coffins) of the classes that could afford them. Although material culture may have experienced a revolution, the change in the cosmogony of the people may have been an evolution of a previous development.

Ancestral Connections

Mass access into the next life may have evolved from a deeper African belief that ancestral life is a border realm between the present life and the next life. The Nile Valley concepts of Ba, Ka, and Akh—soul, collective spirit, and divine spirit, respectively—prescribed the type of fluidity to life that made incarnation an expectation. It surely became a preferable expectation to the eternal nothingness that the concept of death evoked. This broad African wisdom probably ushered in the practice of divination and the function of mediums.

Those living in the visibly manifested world communicated with ancestors through a skin—or a body—in this world: the medium. All incarnations required sensory titillation, usually in the form of dance, music, and incantations developed as elaborate processes of divination. Precise methods and training of mediums were required by some diviners, and strict discipline went into the preparation of a person serving in such a role.

Diviners and mediums remain important elements of the religious order in many African societies. The incarnations that they cause are for short durations but are incarnations nonetheless.

The medium is turned into a loaner for a spirit from the invisible realm to occupy, enabling the spirit to temporarily manifest itself and connect with this realm of life. The medium's personal soul is invisible during the incarnation because it appears that one soul is to inhabit a body at a time.

There is one final form of incarnation that invokes fear into societies: the incarnation of the disturbed ancestor or evil deity. These incarnations are usually forced onto the reluctant medium or, in the worst-case scenario, reanimate the dead for destructive purposes. This last incarnation is what gave rise to the dreaded Zombie.

D. Zizwe Poe

See also Creation; Transformation

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INCENSE

Incense and oils are made from aromatic raw natural materials that can bring about a calming, sensual, alluring, and spiritual affect when the scent enters the olfactory channels or is daubed on the body. Indeed, the smell of highly fragrant incense and oil in the nostrils can induce an elevated mind and spirit. This entry traces the history of incense to Kemet and, in particular, to religious practices there.

Historical Background

Various fragrant herbs, flowers, fruits, gums, plants, resins, roots, seeds, and trees can be cut up, ground, dried, and soaked to become powder, stick, cone, and oil products. The use of fragrances from nature may have dated back to pre-history, and the attractive scents may have been

discovered serendipitously during the burning of uniquely attractive scented wood, when people encountered exceptionally pleasant-scented dehydrated plants and roots or found alluring scented live flowers.

The people of Kemet (ancient Egypt) were masterful in the art of creating aromatic scents for sensual, sacred, and spiritual purposes. As far back as 6,000 years ago or more, during the predynastic Badari period in Kemet (approximately 4500–3200 BC), natural fragrance incense burning and body oil anointing traditions were developed and refined into an art and used during spiritual practices in homes, temples, and pyramids.

During the most sacred ceremonies and spiritual rituals, barks, bushes, dried flowers, gums, herbs, resins, roots, and trees were burnt on the altars in temples as religious services were conducted. This was also commonly done at the time of burial. The generous gifts of beautifully scented incenses and oils for the transitioned souls were a symbolic expression of love and aspiration to assist them on their travels to the next realm of existence. Archeologists found ebony chests, anhydrite urns, and alabaster unguent jars with residue of incenses, oils, and sweet herbal-scented medicine in the burial chambers for the transitioned pharaohs and queens.

Use in Worship

The people of Kemet believed that the gods loved incense and oil fragrances because the noses of the gods and people were flattered and uplifted by those sweet-scented offerings. In fact, the people of Kemet believed that incenses and oils were intimately connected with the gods and that fragrances were the breath of eternal life, which came out of the eye of the Sun God, Ra.

There are chamber wall paintings, temple-embossed gold engravings, and granite tablet records illustrating Pharaoh Ramses III (12th dynasty, reigned 1186–1155 BC) bestowing incense to Ptah; Pharaoh Ramses II (19th dynasty, reigned 1279–1213 BC) burning incense to honor Amun's shrine lifted by priest during a procession; Pharaoh Tutankhamun (18th dynasty, reigned 1333–12224 BC) pouring enchanting scented oil on the Queen's hand; Queen Ankhesenamun

massaging King Tutankhamun's arm with floral scented oil; Pharaoh Thutmose IV (18th dynasty, reigned, 1401–1391 BC) burning incense to appease and attract the gods; Pharaoh Empress Hatshepsut (18th dynasty, reigned 1479–1458 BC) monitoring the shipment delivery of frankincense and myrrh; and the import of *Boswellia Carterii*, *Boswellia Frereana* *Commiphora Myrrha* trees to Punt from South Arabia, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

Frankincense, myrrh, almond, and cedar were the most desired and valued fragrance incenses and oils in Kemet, as well as India and Mesopotamia. Frankincense and myrrh were just as valuable as gold in that era and hundreds of years following. It was recorded in the Bible that infant Jesus was given frankincense, myrrh, and gold by three wise men as an offering to appease, bless, and respect his coming in this realm of existence. An extensive frankincense and myrrh trade route was established from India to Kemet, which was just as prominent as the highly valued ancient gold, salt, silk, and spice routes.

The priests in Kemet used incense to assist in elevating the spiritual belief to create a positive effect on the psyche of the ill and a demon-haunted person. In a similar fashion, priests in Kemet employed strong incense to induce trances, temple sleeps, oracles, and divination visions during ceremonies.

The nonroyal people of Kemet used the sweet aroma of incenses and oils to burn on altars in their homes and adorn the body. Many of the natural incenses and oils currently available to bless and purify the home with beautiful fragrances and adorn the bodies with sweet scents for emotional and spiritual elevation are similar to those used during the zenith times of Kemet. Throughout Africa, the use of incense and oils during religious ceremonies is widely attested. The belief in the spiritual nature of incense and oil is indeed widespread, and has become an intricate part of African religion.

The art of making highly fragrant appealing incenses and oils emerged throughout various locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and other locations of the world. Currently, in the United States and other Western countries, the art of creating beautifully scented fragrance incenses

and oils is associated with the “New Age” and are positioned in the marketplace as aromatherapy.

Ibo Chang

See also Ceremonies; Clay; Water

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INFERTILITY

In Africa, infertility is most commonly thought of as a terrible curse, certainly one of the most tragic things that one might experience. Such a conception of infertility as a great misfortune is attested early on in Africa, even among the gods. As one might remember, Ra, the supreme god in Kemet (ancient Egypt), had cursed Nut, the goddess of mist, whom he considered his wife, with barrenness: Jealous of Nut's feelings for Geb, the god of the Earth, Ra placed a spell on Nut, condemning her to eternal infertility. She should never bear children.

Fertility, the regeneration and continuation of life, is highly valued by African people in general. Great care is taken to ensure the continuous and harmonious reproduction of life, in all its forms, be it human, animal, or land. Precautionary measures are taken to avoid infertility. For instance, because women are most valued as child-bearers, they will avoid certain foods or certain places before or during pregnancy. After giving birth, they will also observe certain rules to protect their child.

Generally speaking, rituals abound to propitiate the ancestors who, among all spiritual entities, are most closely associated with fertility. When a man and a woman experience difficulty conceiving a child, for example, the ancestors are immediately suspected of having shut the woman's womb or having afflicted the man with sexual impotency out of retaliation for actions deemed disrespectful or neglectful to them. The breach of a taboo may be one such major fault. Failure to perform certain important rituals may also constitute a serious crime. Rituals to appease the ancestors and, in the process, restore the harmonious balance of life become then absolutely necessary.

The birth of many children is indeed seen as an imperative and as a blessing because those children will ensure the continuation of the family lineage. Also, the children will be responsible for the proper burial of their parents and for performing commemorative rituals that, in turn, will maintain the deceased in a state of immortality through their continued connection with the world of the living.

Likewise, the generous reproduction of animals, domesticated or wild, is beneficial to the group because it means plenty of meat to be eaten—enough to feed the whole community. Also, the falling of sufficient rain will ensure the growth of fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants for the benefit of all. Obviously, in the African religious and spiritual context, infertility, which may manifest as an absence or lack of children, reduced cattle or game, and/or the hampered growth of plants, cannot be considered a positive development under any circumstances.

As far as African people are concerned, fertility always requires, by definition, sexual fusion—that is, the sexual encounter of the male and female of a given species. Even in the case of land fertility, it is believed that the sky—the male creative power—fertilizes the Earth—the female creative power—through the release of life-sustaining water, rain. Homosexuality, which precludes this life-giving sexual fusion, is therefore apprehended as a terrible and incomprehensible violation of the cosmic order on which fertility depends. As such, it is a punishable taboo in many African societies, for it stands in the way of the regeneration of life because it can only spread infertility, a true calamity for African people.

Ama Mazama

See also Family

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INITIATION

Initiation is a process of culture transmission and community survival. It is always a collective responsibility. Nearly all African cultural groups mark major points of transition throughout the life cycle by rituals and ceremonies related to birth, end of childhood and beginning of adult life, marriage, eldership, and death. Generally, African cosmogonies view the human life span as a journey along a spiraling cycle in which the individual exists in the spirit world before birth, is embodied and born into the physical world, and, at death, the disembodied spirit returns to the spirit world to be reborn in physical form.

By the time children in African societies reach adolescence, they know their place within the social fabric of their communities and have learned important aspects of their social and cultural heritage. This is accomplished through everyday life in the context of family and lineage. This preparation, however, is regarded as insufficient. Initiation is required for admission to adult status. Three practices that feature prominently among initiation rites are education in the ways of adults, seclusion of initiates, and circumcision. This entry looks at those common practices and describes their use among two African peoples.

Education and Seclusion

After the observances that mark the child's birth, the ceremonies or rituals of the initiation period

that mark the transition from child to adolescent to adult status in the community are the second major point in the life of the individual. These rituals and ceremonies establish the place of the individual among the adults in the community.

A girl or boy will never be considered a woman or a man no matter what her or his physical age unless she or he has undergone initiation. The initiation period is an introduction to knowledge that is only accessible to adult members of the community. Through this education function, essential knowledge deemed critical to the continuity of the people, their collective identity, and their way of being in the world and universe is passed on from one generation to the next.

In West Africa, especially, initiation to adulthood is a prerequisite for other forms of initiation, such as those required for membership in secret societies or entering the priesthood. Although not all African peoples focus on the initiation period in the same way or to the same extent, most give it special recognition. Variations exist in the frequency in which initiation rites are performed, age at which initiation occurs, time of year, length of seclusion, and, if circumcision is performed, who is responsible and how it is done.

Initiation rites often include a period of seclusion away from the home environment to ritually introduce the initiates to the art of communal living. Girls are taken away to be with female elders and boys with male elders. During this period, the elders will share their wisdom, teach the initiates the roles of functions of vital ceremonies and rituals, transmit the cultural history of their people, and ensure that they know the personality traits and behaviors valued in their culture. The period of seclusion is symbolic of the life cycle. The initiate's childhood dies. Living in seclusion is likened to living in the spirit world after death and being reborn to rejoin the community as an adult.

Circumcision and Identity Marking

The deep structural significance of circumcision is rooted in African cosmogony and is directly traceable to ancient Kemet (Egypt). In the example of the Dogon (Mali) cosmogony, symbolically removing something female from the male and something male from the female is meant to establish the dominance of a single sex in an

individual. Thus, circumcision is thought to clear the way for the individual to behave in the world as a responsible being.

Circumcision is a ritual of scarification that in precolonial times was almost always part of the initiation process. During initiation, the shedding of blood, through circumcision, creates a bond among the initiates (male and female), the land, and the ancestors. The cutting of flesh symbolizes the passage from childhood to adulthood. The scars on the initiates' genital organs are also deemed to be marks of unity that identify and integrate them with their people.

Female circumcision, increasingly regarded as genital mutilation, is at the center of a controversy that is viewed by some as "an old and hopeless tradition" and by others as a valued tradition that must be maintained. Many African countries are signatories to the United Nations charter abolishing the mutilation of children. However, the tradition continues to be practiced among many ethnic groups, often in great secrecy.

Initiation to adult status in some ethnic groups incorporates scarification, the filing of teeth, and other markings to identify membership within the ethnic community. These processes are also tests of endurance that earn praise and respect for those initiates who can withstand the pain with no outcry.

Two Illustrations

The brief descriptions that follow are of initiation practices that continue to operate in contemporary African societies. They reflect some accommodations to the demands of wage labor and the influences of Western religions and schooling.

Asante

The Asante puberty (or nobility) rites for girls are not performed until after the onset of menses. It is the responsibility of a girl's mother to inform the queen mother that the girl is ready to be initiated. Traditionally, the queen mother would examine the girl to ensure that she is not pregnant or had not had sexual intercourse. This process would then be repeated over three consecutive menstrual cycles. In contemporary times, this practice has increasingly become more symbolic.

Rites delineating the transition from childhood to adulthood for boys are not commonly practiced among the Ashanti. There are, however, ceremonies for boys that are largely tests of bravery and that vary widely among localities. In one type of ceremony, less popular in contemporary times, young men receive from their fathers a weapon as a symbolically important gift. During the ceremony, the elders of the clan are present, and prayers are offered to the deities for their protection and guidance in times of anger.

Bakôngo

The kindezi system of the Bakôngo people is an example of an initiation process adapted to circumstances that require adults to leave their children to go to work. Kindezi provides social readaptation/preparation toward fatherhood/motherhood responsibilities. The kindezi system, said to have existed in Africa from time immemorial, develops the moral and intellectual character of the youth and provides the basic elements of cultural concepts. Its philosophical foundations rest on the social, political, cultural, linguistic, and economic foundations of Bakôngo life. In African regions where agriculture is the bedrock of the local economy, the role of kindezi is of unquestioned value.

The one who practices the art of kindezi is called the *ndezi*. Every member of the community, at one time or another in his or her life span, is an *ndezi*. There are three main categories of *ndezi*. The first is the young *ndezi*, the second is the old *ndezi*, and the third is the occasional *ndezi*. The birth of a child is viewed as the rising of a unique “living sun” into the community. The child will traverse five stages of changing social roles and statuses: (a) the young child who needs an *ndezi*, (b) the child becoming a young *ndezi*, (c) the “living sun” becomes part of the community productive force, (d) the “highest kindezi”—elders able to offer experience and serve the community, and (e) “old-age childhood” or the setting of the “living sun.”

The *ndezi*, in their role as teacher, initiate children into the community and prepare them to become adults who know who is who in the community, the elements of its social structure, as well as the structure and hierarchy of kinship relationships. The kindezi system shapes the life

of the child and, in doing so, shapes the entire life of the community.

Mwalimu J. Shujaa

See also Age Groups; Circumcision

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INTERMEDIARIES

A Luba proverb teaches that *Vidye kadi kula umwite ukwitaba, umulonde bukwidila* (“God is not far away, if you call upon it it will answer you, but if you take the road to walk toward it you will never meet it”). This proverb expresses the ancestral understanding of what is now referred to as the immanence and transcendence of God. The Lugbara people put this in a more poetic expression. For them God is essentially *Adro-Adroa*, a God who is at once “near” (*Adro*) and “far away” (*Adroa*). God, understood as the Ultimate Reality, is absolutely pure and way beyond human imagination.

It is a remarkable fact that, although Africans produced sculptures of ancestors and various spirits, they did not make statues of the supreme God, the creator of the universe known as *Olodumare* among the Yoruba, *Shakapanga* among the Baluba, and *Unkulunkulu* (“the first one”) among

the Zulu. Likewise, although people pray directly to the Supreme Being, most religious rituals are dedicated to spirits and ancestors, so much so that shrines dedicated to the Supreme Being are rare because it is understood that God's temple is the entire universe.

To preserve the sanctity and majesty of God and to avoid anthropomorphic reductionism, African spiritual sages understood the necessity of intermediaries between God and humans. Thus, although God in Africa is thought of as the creator of the world and all that is, God is not, however, to be involved directly in the governance of the world. This task is left to spiritual intermediaries, who assist the living in their daily tribulations, and appeal to God on their behalf when necessary.

The notion of intermediaries occupies a central role in the African definition of God as well as in rituals of worship. To better understand this notion, we have to turn to the African understanding of the nature of God and the notion of worship. African religion is essentially cosmotheandric because Africans understand the notion of divinity as including three levels: the supreme Great spirit or ultimate reality, various spirits including those of nature, and finally the ancestors.

In the Luba religious tradition, for example, three important figures—Leza (Supreme God), Mikishi or Bavidye (various Spirits), and Bankambo (ancestors)—are the main actors of the spiritual world. In the world of the living, the main figures are Kitobo or Nsengha (priest), the Nganga (healer), and the mfwintshi (the embodiment of evil and the antithesis of the will of the ancestors). This cosmological framework reflects the fundamental theological structure of many other African religious traditions.

These traditions recognize the sacredness of nature, God, and humans. Hence, African belief systems include the belief in the existence of a Universal Creator (Shakapanga), the afterlife, the communion between the living and the Dead, and the observance of ethical conduct (Mwikadilo Muyampe) as a sine qua non condition for being welcomed in the village of the ancestors after death. As for worship, it includes prayers (kulomba, kutota), praise songs and formulas (kutoba), dances, sacrifices, offerings, libations, various rituals (mainly rituals of cleansing or purification), and rites of passage.

Because God is absolutely pure, it can be approached better through the ancestors and other spirits, as well as the nganga that undergoes rigorous purification rituals. At the same time, the notion of intermediaries preserves the fundamental African vision of the universe as a family. In this family, there is constant interaction between the dead and the living, as well as a complex web of interdependence. The notion of intermediaries or "lesser gods" does not mean that Africans ignore the supreme God or do not pray to the supreme God directly as derogatory colonial scholarship of "Deus otiosus" and "Animism" claimed. The Luba proverb cited earlier clarifies the notion of intermediaries and highlights a sophisticated response to an ancestral theology that strived to preserve the majesty and holiness of the Supreme Being while maintaining its closeness to human beings.

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Nehanda

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INVOCATIONS

Invocations are one of the most ancient forms of worship in the world, appearing in the literature during the Old Kingdom in ancient Egypt. Invocation is the physical act of appealing to a higher power for assistance. There are a number of forms utilized for invocation, including prayer, praise, and conjuration as a style of incantation.

African traditional religion accepts the notion that humans can appeal to authorities higher than humans, and this type of invoking of the divinities or the ancestors is at the heart of invocation in Africa. The great priest Osofo Nana Kwadwo of

the Gyemprem Shrine in the Akyem region of Ghana believes that invocations can be traced to the earliest African ancestors who confronted extraordinary situations. In these trying situations, the people often invoked the names of the divinities for support through the ordeal or difficulty.

One could begin such an invocation by announcing the name of the most relevant deity. It is rare in Africa that the name of the Supreme Being is invoked; usually one invokes the names of the ancestors or lesser spirits than the Almighty Creator. This is not to say that it does not ever exist because we know that among some people the names of the creator deities are used in invocation.

The ancient Egyptians raised up the names of Amen-Ra, Ptah, Amen, Atum, and Ra. But they also invoked the names of Heru, Ausar, Auset, and Set. It was not unlike the Egyptians to glory in their ability to call on their divinities in the times of great distress. Ramses II did so when he was in the great battle of Kadesh with the Hittites. He was able to call on "Montu, his father." During periods when pestilence, famine, or war strike a region, the people are inclined to use invocation more often than at other times. This is not to say that Africans did not act out of a sense of ordinary piety toward the deities because that would be misleading, but rather to say that like Ramses II many African societies accept calling on the major divinities at a time of threatening calamity.

An invocation may be a prayer, but a prayer may not necessarily be an invocation in the African sense. One could express a prayer in a simple form as praise to a divinity, but in the case of an invocation, one is by doing the act of invoking to ask for assistance. Thus, to invoke is to seek aid and support by calling out to the divine.

Among the Akan, priests and priestesses use the name of *Nyame*, particularly in the form of *Oboadee*, *Odomankoma*, *Ananse Kokuroko*, or *Nyankopon*, meaning Creator, Infinite, The Great Designer, and Eternal One, respectively. This is an example where the Supreme Being is appealed to for assistance as in ancient Egypt. Yet in most of Africa, religion expresses its invocation through appealing to the *nsamanfo* (ancestors in Akan). These are the intermediaries that can hear the appeals and be able to do something about them more immediately than the distant Supreme Deity.

It is also possible that a people may designate a certain spiritual place such as Kariba Lake, Lake Bosomtwe, or Kilimanjaro as a sacred region; they may also locate a house, valley, tree, or river bank as a special place for invocations. The act of invocation, however, may occur anywhere and at any time, but it is always reserved for asking the divinities for assistance.

Molefi Kete Asante

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IWA

Iwa is a key moral category in the Ifa tradition and means character or moral behavior. Among the most preeminent scholars of Ifa, it is believed that the term *iwa* means the essence of being. Wanda Abimbola, considered the major authority of Ifa, always claimed that *iwa* characterized a person's ethical life. Within this conception, humans may have either good character (*iwà, dàra, rere*) or bad character (*iwà bururu*). In addition, *iwapele* (gentle character) is embraced as the finest kind of good character. In the Ifa tradition, *iwapele* is the greatest virtue a person can possess. The essence of worship is to cultivate *iwapele*. The reason for this is that *iwà lèsin* means religious devotion. In other words, character is the essence of religious worship.

The position of good character as the major moral value in Ifa tradition can be seen in several passages in the *Odu Ifa*, the sacred text of the Ifa tradition. In Odu 31:3, the text says, "Character is all that is required. There is no destiny that needs to be called unfortunate (bad) in Ifè City.

For character is all that is required.” In other words, the central requirement for a good life and future is to have good character. In another text specifically dedicated to the emphasis on character, Odu 39:1, it says that, despite all the other things one might have, character is the indispensable thing one must have. “Character, iwa, is what we are looking for, character,” it says. Indeed, “All the good things we have, if we do not have character, these good things belong to someone else. And so it’s character, iwa, we are looking for, character.”

In Odu 70:1, a person is instructed that it is through your “conduct and character which will enable you to avoid death.” Because, in fact, as in Maatian teaching, good character is a memorial for those who have it and provides a path to life after death in this world and the next. Moreover, it links character and sacrifice, a key practice and focus in Ifa tradition, saying that “Your sacrifice is in vain if your character is deficient.” Character is also one of the main requirements given for creating a good world in Odu 78:1, a pivotal Odu in the theology, and moral anthropology of Ifa.

The texts also say that the excessive love and pursuit of money is damaging to character. Odu 82:1 says, “A person who loves money excessively, his character will be ruined” and that “Good character is the finest beauty of a person.” Given that Yoruba society has historically been an urban society and wealth and money were fundamental objects of pursuit and exchange, this Odu is particularly relevant in its concern for the effect the overemphasis on wealth and money can have on character, a cardinal value in Ifa ethics. The Odu notes how people say “they would give up everything and they would continuously run after money.” Second, Ifa speaks of the dual challenge for “money is a raiser of status and a corruptor of character” and, as noted previously, excessive love of it will clearly ruin one’s character.

Orunmila, the master teacher, says the key to the correct approach to the pursuit of wealth and money is to realize, “It is the teachings of Ifa we should honor and regard highly.” He also says it is important to realize not only the corruptive effect on character, but also that it does not save you from vulnerabilities of the mind and body. Thus, he says, “You should go and get more wisdom so that you may think deeply about things.” In addition, “You should cultivate good character

... acquire wisdom and come and sacrifice so that you may be at peace inside and out.”

Ifa also teaches that “Patience is the father of character” (Odu 31:1) and that “a person who is patient will become a master of all things.” Here the narrative of Orunmila, the sage and divine witness to creation and Iwa, is instructive. For Orunmila lost Iwa, personified as a woman, because he lacked patience. In the prior verse, he is looking for Iwa and regretting that, although he had good things, he lost Iwa because he had no patience.

The interrelatedness of character and patience is also found in instructions to elders to be patient and to act carefully because of their power and the respect given to them (Odu 10:3). Impatience, inconsiderateness, and shameless disrespect by elders are seen as lack of character and without balance. Odu 19:4 states, “Bad conduct is what is attributed to youth. Bad *character* is attributed to elders.” In a word, youth, especially young ones, are developing their character and often simply demonstrate bad conduct in the process. But elders have formed their characters, and what they do tend to reflect it.

Ifa also teaches that iwa is not only life-enhancing, but also life-sustaining. For as Odu 119:1 states, “It is gentle character which enables the rope of life to remain strong in our hands.” Finally, it is taught that Iwa is defined by doing good in and throughout the world. Thus, Odu 166:2 says, “Doing good worldwide is the best expression of character.”

Maulana Karenga

See also Maat

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IWA PELE

Iwa means *character* among the Yoruba of Nigeria. *Iwa* refers to a person's essential nature and psychic self, as well as the origin and totality of what a person is as an individual. Among the Yoruba, good character is referred to as *Iwa Rere*, which could also mean good nature, and a person with good character must have *Iwa Pele*, gentleness, whereas bad character is referred to as *Iwa Buruku*. A person with *Iwa pele* or gentle character is referred to as *Omoluwabi*: a gentle person, a person who embodies all the qualities appreciated by Yoruba people. Such a person shows respect to elders, works well in a team, and is respected by the community.

The *Iwa* Concept

Iwa, or character, is personified in the *Ifa* literacy corpus as the wife of *Orunmila* in *Ogbe Alara*. *Iwa* was the daughter of *Suuru*, patience, who is the son of *Olodumare*, the traditional name given to the Supreme Being. Thus, *Iwa* is the grandchild of *Olodumare*, which means that *Olodumare* is the embodiment and source of good character.

The concept of *Iwa* redeems human beings from the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the universe and provides them with a set of principles they can use to regulate their lives to avoid collision with the supernatural powers and their fellow people. *Iwa*, which is the essence of being, is what can be used to characterize a person's life especially in ethical terms. The word *Iwa* can be used to refer to either good or bad character, for example:

<i>Omo t' o dara ti ko n' iwa</i>	If a child is beautiful but has no character
<i>Omo langidi ni i</i>	He is no more than a wooden doll
<i>Iwa rere l'eso enia</i>	Good character is the beauty of a person
<i>B' obirin dara bi Egbara</i>	A woman can be as beautiful as a little mouse
<i>Bi ko ni iwa</i>	If she has no good character
<i>Omo langidi ni i</i>	She is no more than a wooden doll

<i>B' okunrin suwon</i>	A man may be very handsome
<i>Bi eja inu omi</i>	Like a fish in the water
<i>Bi ko n' iwa rere</i>	If he has no good character
<i>Omo langidi ni i</i>	He is no more than a wooden doll

Iwa pele (gentle character) in the Yoruba society is essential to live a good life. It is for this reason that *Iwa Pele* is regarded as the most important of all moral values and the greatest attribute of any person. The symbol of a good character in *Ifa* corpus—*Ogbe Alara*—is a woman. This is believed to be so because women are seen as the symbol of love, care, devotion, tenderness, and beauty. They are also seen as the symbol of weakness, callousness, deceit, and disloyalty. In Yoruba thought, by using a woman as a symbol of good character, it should be understood that every individual must take care of his character as he takes care of his wife. Just as a wife can sometimes be a burden to her husband, *Iwa pele* (gentle character) can also be a burden to the just and the upright, but they must never shirk away from the responsibility. Good character may be difficult to have as an attribute, but without people who have it, the world will be a difficult place in which to live.

Characteristics of *Iwa*

Iwa is what is used to characterize an individual's life in ethical terms. In *Iwa Le Wa*, character is beauty, although not beauty in the physical sense. Character is seen as one of the symbols that affects destiny and hence an individual's achievements. *Iwa* could affect a person's destiny either for good or bad depending on the type of character the person has. People with good character, whom the Yoruba call *Iwa Rere* or *Iwa pele*, have great achievements in life. People with bad character, called *Iwa Buruku*, do not achieve anything even if they have a good destiny because, through bad character, they would lose whatever they gain.

Iwa pele can be seen as part of what a person is supposed to fulfill while on Earth. The Yoruba

believe that people have an Ori or destiny, which may be reflected in their way of life, but a good Ori does not automatically lead to its fulfillment if unsupported by Iwa pele. A good Ori unsupported by a good character is worthless. People who claim to have good character and want their good Ori to come to fruition must have a number of good qualities.

Suuru or patience is usually referred to as *Baba Iwa*. Another quality a person of good character must have is *Ifarabale*, which means to have control over the physical body and mind. It is a quality everybody strives to achieve. People with this quality will have many blessings. *Iluti* (good hearing) is another helpful quality. It is the ability to listen, respond, and carry out instruction. Other important qualities are *Otito* (truth), *Iteriba* (respect), and *iferan* (love).

People with good character are referred to as *Omoluwabi*, the child of the source of *Iwa*. *Omoluwabi* is a person who embodies all the qualities appreciated by Yoruba people. Those who aspire to have good character must be prepared to struggle with what the Yoruba call *Egbin*, a filthy or an indecent thing. They must understand that they will sometimes find themselves in unpleasant situations, which will offend their sense of dignity and decency. Yet they must not disengage themselves from the path of good character lest they lose the essence and value of their life.

Reward and Punishment

As the embodiment of good character, *Olodumare* expects human beings to have good character as well. It is a sin against the divine law of this Supreme Being for anybody to deviate from the path of good character; people who do so will be punished by the divinities unless they offer sacrifice. This, then, is the reason that the Yoruba regard good character as the essence of religion. People with good character leave good memories behind after death. The importance placed on the principle of *Iwa* by the Yoruba shows that African traditional religions are based on deep moral value, which sustains the beliefs of the adherents of those religions.

Iwa is also important for life, after death. As a result, the Yoruba usually think twice before they act. There is the following saying:

<i>Iro pipa ko wipe</i>	Lying does not debar one
<i>k'a ma l'owo l'owo</i>	from becoming rich;
<i>Ile dida ko ' wipe</i>	Convenant-breaking does
<i>k'a ma d'agba</i>	not debar one from
	reaching old age;
<i>Sugbon ojo a-ti sun l'ebo</i>	but the day of death, there
	awaits trouble.

The Yoruba believe they will have to give an account of how they have used their Earthly life, particularly with reference to their *Iwa*. *Gbogbo obun ti a base l'aye, l'ao kunle ro l'orun*, it is said ("All that we do on earth, we shall account for on our knees in heaven"). Thus, people are allowed a place in the good Orun, the Orun of the Father, or consigned to the Orun of potsherds according to the verdict of *Olodumare*, who judges people on their *Iwa*.

Kunbi Labeodan

See also Iwa; Maat

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IYALORISHA

The Iyalorisha is a medium of the gods or the bride of the Orisha among the Yoruba of Nigeria. Like the Babalorisha, who is normally a male, the Iyalorisha is a key person in the Yoruba spiritual hierarchy because she is married to the Orisha. The Babalawo or the Iyawo represent counterparts of the spiritual priesthood of the Yoruba people. In the form as Iyalorisha, the female becomes the medium for translating the spiritual truths to the community.

Festivals and celebrations are regularly held for the Orishas in Yoruba. A series of rituals occur during these festivals and celebrations, with possession trances as the typical culmination of the ritual sequence. The Iyalorisha experiences these ritualized possession trances, which serve as the periodic retying of the bond between the physical and spirit worlds. When Iyalorishas become possessed during one of these ceremonies with their Orishas, they act in traditional behavior of the Orishas that possess them. The Iyalorisha experiences, among most groups, about a year-long and intricate initiation process, which is described in this entry.

Overview

To become an Iyalorisha, one must become a part of the family, the Iyawo of the Orisha. Iyawo is a word that has become important because of the Cuban/Puerto Rican component of the Yoruba religion. It might be said that the Iyawo is literally an initiate into the family of an Orisha. A ritual of 10 days must be performed. The Iyawo is labeled as such usually after the initial 10-day ritual, but the Iyawo cannot perform her duties until the entire year of rituals and celebrations has occurred. The beginning of that initiation process lasts between 8 and 10 days in the Santeria/Lukumí (this is mainly from the Puerto Rican or Cuban region) tradition of Orisha religion. On the first day of this 10-day ritual is the birth of the new Iyawo and her Orisha, as the Iyawo receives the Orisha internally and becomes linked for life.

For 7 of those 10 days, the Iyawo is sometimes in seclusion. After these 10 days, the person becomes an Iyawo, but her behavior is severely restricted for 3 months. Then another ritual is done, but this ceremony takes only 1 day. Some of the restrictions are lifted after this ritual, but the Iyawo still faces some restrictions for the next 9 months.

Depending on the particular ethnic group, the restrictions on the Iyawo will be lifted on the 1-year anniversary of the initiation, 7 days after the 1-year anniversary, or a certain number of days after the 1-year anniversary based on the ritual number of the Iyawo's Orisha. At this point, when the restrictions are lifted, some of the houses in the town may have a ceremony similar to the 3-month ceremony.

The Initial Period

The Iyawo, after her 7- to 10-day initiation, is believed to be a child and therefore must be treated as such for the first 3 months. Therefore, the heavy amount of restrictions during this period stems from this belief. During this 3-month period, the Iyawo is always supposed to be well dressed, with her clothes always white and clean. Women are supposed to wear baggy skirts and blouses or dresses, but never pants, and they must have something covering their heads—be it a hat or scarf—at all times during this period except when bathing or sleeping. A piece of cotton is placed underneath their head covering throughout these 3 months.

The Iyawo must not only be immaculately dressed, but he or she must have immaculate hygiene. However, the Iyawo is not allowed to use perfumes or any sort of cosmetics except deodorant. The medium must bathe religiously because it is an abomination to attend a religious event without bathing beforehand.

Although Iyawos are supposed to look presentable, they are not allowed to use razors to keep up their hygiene until the entire year elapses. Iyawos are also not allowed to cut or comb their hair for the first 3 months. They cannot even decorate their bodies with jewelry, particularly during these first 3 months. They are only allowed to wear the following special set of jewelry: the bracelet on the left wrist that identifies the Iyawo's orisha and another bracelet, usually white or silver, that identifies Obatala. Women Iyawo may also wear bracelets that identify female Orishas.

Ongoing Restrictions

The Iyawo can never eat at a table and must instead eat on a mat. The Iyawo is given a plate, cup, and spoon that he or she uses for the entire year. The Iyawo is not allowed to look in a mirror, even for dressing and hygiene. The Iyawo may be allowed to use a mirror for driving and her work.

These mediums are not supposed to expose themselves to the sun at noon, and they must be home before dusk. Also, around midnight and noon, Iyawos are not supposed to be outside and in some cases must stay indoors until 5 minutes

past those times. Of course, there are exceptions, most often if they must be outside at those times for their jobs.

The Iyawo cannot go to any event where there are a lot of people, except a religious event. At these religious activities, the Iyawo is mandated to help in any way needed. To go to a religious event or an olorisha's home, the godparents or another olosha picked by them must accompany the Iyawo.

The Iyawo is prohibited from consuming liquor and any sort of drugs or hallucinogens, and he or she cannot even be present when other people consume them. The Iyawo is not supposed to take pictures or shake anyone's hands. Iyawos are not supposed to speak unless it is necessary. However, they are always supposed to be listening for lessons from the elders, whom they should always show respect regardless of whether it is warranted.

Life as an Iyalorisha

After this year-long ritual is completed, these restrictions are lifted, and the Iyawo is allowed to perform her duties as a medium for her particular Orisha. There are variations in the process of ceremonies based on the ethnic group. After the ceremonies during the up to 10-day initiation process, in some cases, the future ceremonies are held based on whether the Iyawo can pay for them. Therefore, the 3-month ritual may not occur after the first 3 months if the Iyawo has not secured the funds for it.

Among some groups (as in Cuba), the Iyawo is able to perform her duties or work as a priest after the 3-month ceremony. But in most cases, the Iyawo is not given the right to work until all of the ceremonies and rituals have occurred. The Iyawo is

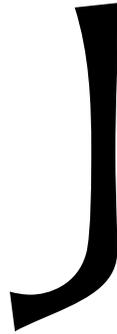
given that right to work through a public ceremony. In effect, the Iyawo is generally considered an Iyawo after the initial initiation process, but he or she cannot perform her duties until after all of the rituals are completed.

Nonpriests are not allowed to call an Iyawo by the title of "Iyawo." In the hierarchy of the priesthood, that would be considered rude. An Iyawo is also considered a novice in relation to her Orisha. So a nonpriest would be calling this person a "novice," although the Iyawo is higher in the hierarchy than the person calling him or her a novice. Instead, nonpriests call an Iyawo by her family name.

Ibram H. Rogers

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JOK (ACHOLI)

Jok is a concept that derives from the Lango people of East Africa. The core of the religion of the Lango is Jok, which is a neutral power that permeates the universe. In fact, Jok is both the creator and sustainer of the universe. As the creator, Jok is indifferent to humans. The task of Jok was to bring into being all things that exist and then to sustain them in their proper place. Jok manifests itself in a thousand ways, including as severe sicknesses.

The religion of the Lango is based on the multiple meanings of Jok, also called Juok, Juogi, or Jouk. One can see in the pursuit of Jok the discovery of medicine, the maintenance of the human spirit, the order and harmony of the universe, and the power of human energy when it is directed toward the rituals of reverence for the ancestors.

Jok is the spiritual food of the Lango people. It is fundamentally impersonal, but able to manifest as spirit, *lipo*. In fact, Jok is associated with all human beings as soul, that is, *lipo* or *chyen*. As such, it might be applied to the nature of the world as spirit or soul that is reinvigorated with all propitiation by human beings.

Reincarnation does not seem to be part of the Lango thinking about Jok, but clearly immortality is important, and the ancestors' reverence is at the source of the idea of eternal life. One supports and sustains ancestral reverence and respect to gain the ability to manifest as present in the world and transcend presentness in a transformative sense.

Therefore, the *ajwaka*, the medicine people, are the ones who can best bind the people together as community. Jok is at the core of all discussion of disaster, disrespect, disorder, and disintegration of society, and the Lango attribute to Jok all obstacles that stand in the way of community. Jok is everywhere. It is medicine, magic, and belief, and one must always do the proper ceremonies, make the right offerings, and perform the correct rituals to be able to ensure community.

Lango religion has its own cosmology, ways to believe in the transcendent, and ritual practices, and at the center of this religion, Jok organizes all disparate elements. It is good and evil, it is abnormality and normality, and it is birth, death, the big toe, wind, trees, animals, plants, cosmological complexity, funny things, healing, sickness, running, and the Supreme Deity. In effect, Jok exists as the key to understanding all Lango philosophy and religion.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also God

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JOLA

The Jola, Dyola, Diola, or Yola (people) reside primarily on the Atlantic coast between the southern banks of the Gambia River, the Casamance region of Southern Senegal, and the northern part of Guinea-Bissau. Diola society has long been characterized by regional diversity.

The cultivation of rice is perhaps the oldest economic activity, but Diola people are also skilled in other traditional economic activities, such as fishing, farming groundnuts, taping palm wine, and processing palm oil. They also raise cows, pigs, goats, chickens, sheep, and ducks. They are skilled at crafts such as basket weaving, pottery, and house building.

Hundreds of years before the introduction of Christianity or Islam, the Diola people believed in *Emit* or *Ata Emit* (Person of the sky) as the Creator God. The Esulalu, a cgroup of Diola people, say that *Emitai*, the Supreme Being of the sky, created the Earth, its peoples, and various types of religious paths for different peoples to seek spiritual assistance in resolving the problems of human existence. *Emitai* created and continues to create various types of spirit shrines called *ukine* that serve as intermediaries between the Diola and their Supreme Being.

Adebayo Adesanya (a Yoruba writer), John S. Mbiti, and others depict the Creator God as manifested in all elements of nature in traditional African philosophy. Religion, social theory, land law, medicine, birth, and death are all interrelated. Hence, for traditional Africans, there is no division between sacred and secular. Although there are differences in the nuances of language among the Diola people, general themes emerge in terms of religious and political practices. For example, one major theme that emerges is that the political system is based on collective consciousness totally linked to the religious belief of supernatural spirits known as *Bakin*, *Eneerti*, and Mandinka *Jalang*. Before Islamization of the northern Diola, each extended family maintained a shrine called *bekin* or *enaati*, depending on the region.

Thousands of years ago in African societies, animals, birds, and reptiles were recognized as double or twin spirits of human beings. These twin spirits were established as a major component of a cultural

system in Africa. J. David Sapir describes the Diola-Kujamaat double or twin system as a “totemic system.” Totemic doubles (human/animal doubles) are called an *ewúúm* (pl. *siwúúm*), which literally means “result of transformation.” Sapir makes it clear that *ewúúm* only refers to the animal double and not reincarnation. Some animal doubles are antelopes, leopards, monkeys, snakes, lizards, and, on rare occasions, a hyena or a crocodile; in the bird family, vulture, and in the fish family, the biting fish.

Doubles are always the same sex, that is, men’s double are males and women’s doubles are females. Men’s doubles include antelopes, leopards, and monkeys that live in the bush, whereas women’s doubles include antelopes, lizards, and snakes that reside in the residential compound. According to Ogotemmêli, the late Dogon priest from Mali, “every human family was part of a long series of creatures.” When a human is born, somewhere an animal (the human’s twin) is born. Ogotemmêli’s twin animal was the antelope.

Funeral and *Bukut* (boys’ initiation) are two of the most prominent rituals among the Diola people. Before the influence of Islam and Christianity, the Diolas placed great respect in the proper observation of the funeral ritual. Both of these rituals required enormous amounts of food, which included rice, meat (usually cattle), and palm wine. This food is required to feed the entire local population as well as visitors for a week or more. The traditional African belief is that a proper funeral ensured that the dead person’s soul would return to and enter the presence of the creator (*Ata Amit*) and join with his or her ancestors.

The ancient ritual of *Bukut*, or initiation, takes place every 20 to 25 years for an entire generation of men between the ages of 12 and 35. Many men living abroad return to their local regions to participate in the ritual of *Bukut*. Like *poro* societies in West Africa, *bukut* takes place in the sacred forest. Elders and spiritual leaders teach the initiates ancestral secret knowledge as well as practical knowledge while secluded for a period of time in the sacred forest.

Bukut is a village (community) event that includes public celebrations such as singing, dancing, feasting, and shooting ancient trade muskets or homemade cannons; these acts of celebration are performed by those who have been initiated as well as by the neophytes. Women also play a

major role in the initiation preparatory process on the village level; for example, mothers prepare food and compose songs for the neophytes, and the senior woman in the compound greets the dancers at the ceremonial visit called the *buyeet*.

In traditional thought, *bukut* is transformative; all males were regarded as children until they completed the *bukut* ritual. When the initiates leave the sacred forest, they appear in a new style of dress. At the close of the ritual, the newly initiated men also adorn elaborate masks filled with symbolism as part of the ceremonial process.

Although many Diola people have converted to Christianity and Islam, rich traditional African religious practices continue to prevail. African religious rituals, shrines, and other beliefs and practices continue to play a vital role in the lives of the people.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also God; Initiation; Rites of Passage

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JUJU

Juju comes from the French word *joujou*, meaning “plaything.” Juju belongs to the realm of magic. Magic operates on the premise of the existence of a spiritual force that can be tapped into by women

or men who have received the knowledge and the training to do so. Magic, and ipso facto juju, is neither good nor bad, but may be resorted to for constructive purposes as well as for performing nefarious deeds. Juju stems from the spiritual belief system emanating from West African countries such as Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana, although its assumptions are shared by most African people.

To be quite specific, Juju refers to the magical power deliberately infused into a particular object. Thus, juju indicates that a given thing has been endowed with magical properties. However, the jujued object also becomes known as juju. A monkey's head is probably the most common juju object one may encounter in West Africa.

Juju operates on the principle of spiritual contagious contact based on physical contact. The underlying belief is that two entities that have been in close contact have similar properties even after being separated. It then becomes possible to manipulate one in order to reach the other. Thus, in that context, a person's hair, fingernails, a piece of clothing, a shoe, a sock, or a piece of jewel worn by them are all perfect candidates for juju because they retain the spiritual aura of their owner.

Likewise, it is possible to create spiritual similarity by deliberately placing two things in physical contact. The underlying belief is that spiritual assimilation and fusion will take place, with one entity absorbing the qualities of the other. Amulets, charms, and mascots are all common forms of juju. Usually worn for protective purposes, those objects have been infused with a particular type of energy, and wearing them is expected to create paths and possibilities for the wearer, as well as guard them against ill fortunes and evil spirits.

It usually takes a specialist, a woman or a man, with extensive know-how and experience to extract the spiritual aura of a given object. Such a specialist may be a healer because juju is used to cure physical and spiritual ailments—from healing insect and animal bites to counteracting and neutralizing curses. However, the specialist may also be a witch or a sorcerer involved in the reprehensible business of harming someone—through the casting of spells or curses, as well as placing juju objects in their close contact so they may become spiritually contaminated and polluted.

For instance, one may be offered spiritually poisoned food or drinks, which will inevitably bring about disruption, trauma, or even death if not dealt with promptly and efficiently. A live animal may also be used as a juju. It may be infused with a negative energy and then sent near someone. Once physical contact has been made, the person will most likely become ill. Again, although juju is neither good nor bad, it may be used to either uplift and heal or destroy and kill. Thus, Juju—at its best—is a powerful and positive set of practices when it uses a spiritual intent to heal the mind and body, thus giving protection and blessing to the soul of a person.

On a lighter note, Juju has been linked to a style of passionately performed West African music (primarily from Nigeria) that incorporates intense traditional polyrhythmic drumming with funky electric guitars, shimmering keyboard, hot horn playing, rhythmic dancing, and call-and-response singing that can produce semitrance states of mind among live audiences. Juju music developed to an apex in the 1960s to 1990s by Nigerian highly creative musical artists (e.g., Peter King, Segun Buchnor, Sonny Okosuns, King Sunny Ade, Lagbaja, Tony Allen, Fela Kuti, etc.). Fela Anikulalpo Kuti's was a Juju African-Beat international musical superstar who sang and uttered gutsy political lyrics as his 20-piece bands rocked and *Juju*'ed the audience and five female dancers shook the stage with their dancing hips, feet, and background singing. In similar respects, Fela Kuti was to Nigerian Juju-African-Beat and music world what Bob Marley was to Jamaica Rastafarian-Roots-Reggae and music world.

Ibo Changa

See also Healing; Magic

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JUSTICE

In the African conceptual system, justice is inseparably linked to freedom. Justice is not sustainable without freedom, which in turn has no anchorage in an unjust system of human organization. Justice is viewed alongside freedom as an important characteristic of the Supreme Creator.

Justice implies that an individual contribution to society is just as important as the societal contribution to the development of the individual human essence and spiritual existence. This is the *principle of equal standing* in nature from which justice is projected to the individual and the social collectivity. In African social formation, justice maintains within society the equality of human essence established in nature. In this respect, social justice is derived from belief in the characteristics of creation and seeks to establish general forms of societal rules that must be applicable to all under conditions of freedom. Thus, there is a complete rejection of the idea of injustice. Differences are nothing but manifestations of the same *Thing* that is *All* and *All* that is in the *Thing* (God).

Differences among individuals can never be used to violate the principle of equal standing because difference is an asset of the universal idea of unity among human beings. Any violation leads to injustice, which is contrary to the postulate of a Just Creator (God). The Creative Force is Infinite and Just. This is revealed in the Principles of Opposites. The Creative Force is in All and is the All and hence sits in judgment of all to constitute the socially derived principle of justice.

The principle of justice is thus composed of two subprinciples: natural justice and social justice. Natural justice constitutes a primary category of fairness because it is an implementation of freedom that we find in nature. Social justice is a derived category of fairness from natural justice as the work of the Creative Force toward the implementation of freedom in society.

The principle of social justice compels humans to behave so that each works in defense of all and all work in defense of each. Thus, social justice ensures collective unity and social stability so as to avoid destructive conflicts that may be generated by the dynamics of individual–community duality in a manner that can undermine the foundations of the society. This principle of social justice formed the foundational construct of Maat, the moral ideal in ancient Egypt, as revealed by the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day* and its administration. This principle of justice is also the foundation of African land tenure system, where land distribution is democratized; land is collectively owned and held while the individual temporally owns a piece of the land according to need and use.

Freedom and justice are inseparable in nature; moral rules and legal parameters must be derived from natural rights in such a way that natural freedom supersedes social justice, whereas social justice is a guide to social freedom and collective security. Freedom and justice as one combined principle define a framework where social responsibility, duty, and benefits are shared equitably by individuals and society in terms of ability, strength, and need. Thus, this construction of the combined principles constitutes human activity in the administration of social production and distribution. It is this principle of justice-freedom that gives rise to social oaths of allegiance and the rites of passage.

Justice is not simply giving each person what is due or setting right what is wrong; this is its meaning in the Eurocentric conceptual system, which leads to the projection of law and order over freedom

and justice. Social justice is about stability and unity of the social organism composed of individuals with differences in nature, whereas freedom ensures the human essence as an indestructible element in the creative process incorporating what is due to the individual and what is due to society as a function of the dynamics of individual–community duality. In the adjustment process of the dynamics of individual–community duality, justice is simply the mediator of individual–community relationship.

Kofi Kissi Dompere

See also *Book of the Coming Forth by Day (The Book of the Dead)*; Maat

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K

KA

In ancient Egypt, the word *ka* was used to mean the life energy in humans and deities. The word was used in many different contexts, but always at the base of its use was the idea of the life energy of an individual. The ancient Egyptians represented the ka by a pair of up-stretched arms, similar to the vertical horns of a bull. Because the ka was life energy, it did not exist in a dead person; it was a living force, however, that continued even after the person had died. Therefore, the ka could be made to live forever if the proper rituals were performed.

In the tradition of the ancient Egyptians, when a person was born, the ka was created at the same time. In fact, Khnum as creator god would make the ka on a potter's wheel right alongside the human figure. Because the ka was also considered a type of force—indeed, a life force—the idea was that the ka was a double of the individual. It was often depicted in a form smaller than the individual person, but similar to the person in shape.

There are many texts where the words “May your ka live forever!” are written at the end of a particular statement. The worst situation that a human could have is to have a ka that has not been properly cared for in life. Thus, when a person died, the ka continued to live. Because it lived, it also had to be fed with food, and normally the food was offered in scenes on the walls of the tomb reflecting food. This food was activated, made usable by the ka, with an Offering Formula

that was addressed to the ka. The ka, once the food was activated, took the food and, instead of eating it, drained the necessary life-preserving energy from the food. The ka could also take the necessary sustenance, a name sometimes used for the ka, from drinks. Among the living, sometimes the ancient Egyptians greeted each other with the words, “for your ka,” while serving drinks.

Elaborate tombs often had false doors, and it was at the false door that offerings were made for the ka. Sometimes images of the ka of the deceased as funerary statues were set up in the tombs. One wanted, of course, to have one's ka live forever and also to have the ka transformed into an Akh, one of the blessed dead. To ensure this possibility, one sought to have the ka protected and ritualized.

The ka was the divine essence of the human being. It was that which lived forever and ever and was therefore indestructible because it was a part of the eternal continuum that connected all living beings. In fact, in the royal continuum, one could say that each new king or queen at birth became a part of the line that stretched across the generations and through history to the time when the gods ruled the Earth.

The way the ancient Egyptians understood their world was through ideas and concepts. The ka was an idea, but it was one of the most powerful ideas in the society because it went along with the nature of the kingship. Such an idea could be made more potent in the minds of the people by the various rituals. When the king, for example, performed the Opet festival at Waset, he would

enter the temple with the crowd outside the sanctuary, and when he returned to them he would have merged with his ka to become divine. The king was therefore divinity before the people in a ka ceremony overseen by the god Amen.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ankh; Ba; Soul

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KABRE OF TOGO

The Kabre, a Voltaic people from northern Togo (which is located in West Africa), profess that the first human being was an androgynous being who descended from the sky, which is said to be male, to the Earth, which is female. *Kumberito* landed between two small mountain ranges where the Kabre community is currently located. For some years, *Kumberito* roamed the caves and plains, eventually becoming frightened by what he thought were the sounds of men coming to kill him, but were only sounds of owls hooting in the night. He subsequently fled to the mountains of the northern massif, where he settled, built a house above ground, and ultimately produced the children who founded the area's other communities. At death, *Kumberito* came back to the Earth, along with his descendents who were all buried in caves in the ground located on the highest points of the massif.

The myth begins as *Kumberito* is unable to balance an opposition between sky and Earth. He decides to climb the mountain located between the two and then is able to establish the balance needed so that he lived in peace and generated the livelihood that the Kabre experience today. To honor *Kumberito* and their ancestors, the Kabre bury their dead in caves—hence the term for

ancestor, *ateto*, or “underground person.” More important, the Kabre continue to embrace the tradition of balance that *Kumberito* exhibited on the mountain by generally living in houses that are not located in the highest points near their ancestors tombs. Instead they live on the hillsides and valleys, understanding that living near the tombs might upset some wandering spirits, possibly causing harm to their families. The balance in living in the “low” parts of the mountains occurs because “low” is female according to Kabre, whereas “above ground” is male. This represents the balance between sky and Earth; living in the low part of a mountain, which is above ground, is essentially living between the sky and the Earth, again creating that balance, just as *Kumberito* had long ago.

The essence of balance portrayed in the myth further extends itself to the Kabre culture through the institute of marriage and family. In the Kabre household, labor is divided between traditionally female and male duties. For instance, the men cultivate the food and the women cook. Also, in reproduction, it is believed that the Kabre husband's blood or sperm is “cooked” inside the wife's tomb and children are produced. The wife's womb symbolizes a pot of water; if a miscarriage occurs, it is said that the woman spilled her pot of water on the way back from the spring and must refill it by becoming pregnant again. Interestingly, the consumption of sorghum beer (a female product) by the male stimulates the ability to produce children, whereas the consumption of porridge (a male product) enhances that same ability in women. Thus, the idea of balance reflected in the myth is manifest again.

The Kabre communities are organized into two groups: male and female. Each group has a ritualistic role in the community, and they both are responsible for ceremonies based on both age grade and calendar, which occur during their season (the female season is during “wet season” and the male season is during “dry season”). In one particular situation, during the *kojunduku* (the age-grade initiation that takes place during the “wet” female season), the male group gives a performance of *dogonto*, which “dries out” the wet season temporarily. The female group also performs a fertility ceremony that balances the male dry season. More important, both groups consist

of males and females, and males sometimes fulfill “female” roles just as females may take on “male” roles. The individual’s performance in a particular role is the determining factor as to which role that individual may play.

Deonte James Hollowell

See also Akan

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KALÛNGA

In Bakongo cosmology, Kalûnga is the fire force. It emerges complete from within *mbûngi*, the empty circle in existence before creation. The Kalûnga fires up and releases a storm of projectiles, overrunning the *mbûngi*. Because life would emerge from this event, Kalûnga is the source and origin of life and potential, the force that continually generates. Kalûnga is also the symbol for force and vitality and a principle of change. Because Kalûnga occurred on a cosmic scale, Kalûnga is the idea of immensity and the principle god of change. Kalûnga is life. Because Kalûnga was the first activity within *mbûngi*, it is force in motion. Therefore, all living things are in perpetual motion.

Kalûnga also divides the Bakongo circular cosmos in half. The upper half is the world of the great spirit, Nzambi, whereas the lower half is the world of ancestors, Bakulu, spirits, and beings preparing for a material body. The upper world is physical *ku nseke*, whereas the lower is spiritual *ku mpèmba*. The Kalûnga line is a line on which all living things dwell. Although material beings live along Kalûnga, it is an invisible barrier between the two realms. It is sometimes likened to a river. Because the Bakongo have a circular worldview, a person crosses the Kalûnga line at birth and death and repeats the process again when he or she is reborn.

The point at which a person crosses the Kalûnga line and is physically born is called *kala*. This is called the sun of all births and equates with sunrise and physical beginnings. For the person, *kala* is distinguished by speech. The person will learn to hear and use words along with their power. The color of *kala* is black. The other point is *Luvemba*, the point at which one leaves the physical world and reenters the world of living energy and the ancestors. This sun of death is linked to the sunset, endings, and is represented by white.

The person moves along the horizontal plane of the Kalûnga meeting challenges and collecting experiences. Movement along the Kalûnga can be forward, backward, or sideways. The purpose for the *muntu* is to acquire knowledge. If the *muntu* does not learn along the Kalûnga, he or she becomes powerless. The community also exists along the Kalûnga, therefore Kalûnga connects all community relationships and supports the learning of the *muntu*.

Denise Martin

See also Fire

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KHNUM

Khnun, whose name means unite, join, or build, was the ancient Egyptian god of fertility. He was depicted in semi-anthropomorphic form as a ram-headed god wearing a short kilt and a long tripartite wig. He was depicted with the horizontal, undulating horns of *Ovis Longipes*, the first species of sheep to be raised in Egypt. However, as time passed, he was also depicted with the

short curved horns of the *Ovis Platyra* ram (the Amen ram) and may thus have two sets of horns atop his head. He was also called “high of plumes” and may be seen wearing two tall feathers, the plumed atef crown, or the white crown of Upper Egypt on his head.

Khnum was considered the great potter who was responsible for creating children and their Ka. His most common form was his depiction in front of the potter’s wheel when he was often depicted molding a child as a concrete representation of his creative work. This scene was usually depicted in the *mamisi* or birth houses of temples where Khnum was represented forming the child king. There were similar representations in the fully zoomorphic form of a walking ram (e.g., in many amulets and pectoral decorations), but without inscriptional evidence, these representations are often extremely difficult to distinguish from those of other ram deities such as Heryshef. The sun god was thus depicted as a ram-headed being in his netherworld representations, and Khnum is sometimes called Khnum Ra. In a similar manner, he was also held to be the ba of Ra, as well as the ba of the gods Geb and Ausar.

Khnum was mentioned in several ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts. The ancient Egyptians also believed that he was the guardian of the source of the Nile and thus the helper of Hapi. Khnum’s role changed from river god to the one who made sure that the right amount of silt was released into the water during the inundation. This gave him one of his titles: “Lord of the Cataract.” In a site in Upper Egypt “Esna” between Waset “modern Luxor” and Aswan, it was believed that he modeled the first egg from which the first sun was created. As a creator god, he held the titles of “Father of the Fathers of the Gods and Goddesses,” “Lord of Created Things From Himself,” “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” and “the Duat and Water and the Mountains.”

In addition to his role as a god of creation and fertility, Khnum was a god of the sun, a protector of the Dead, and a protector of Ra on the solar barque. He was a popular god from the early times through to the Greco-Roman period. Hatshepsut was one of the rulers of Egypt who encouraged the belief that Khnum

created her and her ka through the story of the divine birth depicted on the walls of the second terrace of her mortuary temple at Deir Al Bahari (Western Waset).

Khnum’s main cult center was on the island Elephantine at Aswan, where he had been worshiped since the Early Dynastic period. The island was the main city of the first nomes of Upper Egypt, and its ancient name was Abu (meaning “City of Elephants”). As easily seen from the hieroglyphic spelling, it was the gathering point of products from inner Africa, and the most important trade commodity was ivory, the tusk of elephants. From geological aspects, it is located at the most northern of six rapid streams area within the Nile at the southern border; often called the first cataract, it is really the last, where the first sign of annual water increase (the arrival of the new waters, beginning of the new year) can be observed.

In the New Kingdom, Khnum was worshiped there as head of a triad composed of his consort Satet (a fertility goddess of the Nile and purifier of the dead) and daughter Anuket (a hunter goddess of the first cataract near Aswan). There is a temple dating back to the Greco Roman period that was dedicated to him at Esna, where he was given two consorts, Menhit (a lion-headed war goddess, “She Who Slaughters”) and Nebtu (a local goddess of the oasis). Khnum was also associated with the war-like creator goddess Neith at Esna. In Antinoe (Middle Egypt), he was considered as the husband of Heqet, the frog goddess who gave the child his first breath before being placed in the mother’s womb.

Shaza Gamal Ismail

See also Ra

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KHONSU

The ancient African lunar deity, Khonsu, was the divine child of Amen-Ra and Mut during the new kingdom. He was the son of Het-Heru and Sobek at Kom Ombo and was revered as the spirit of light in the night sky. He was associated with the placenta of the per-aa (pharaoh). Ancient Africans wrote about Khonsu in the earliest Pyramid and coffin texts as the aggressive spirit who aligned himself with the deceased king to put down enemies in the Underworld, devouring their life force to absorb their strength for the benefit and protection of the King.

During the middle kingdom, Khonsu replaced the aggressive god of War Montu as the son of Mut in Theban theology. The root of his name *Khns* denotes to travel, move about, crossover, or run. It derives from two roots: *kh* (placenta) and *nesu* (king), representing the royal placenta. His name is associated with the Moon and means the wanderer, adventurer, embracer, and pathfinder. As Khonsu nefer-hotep, he is a beautifully satisfied pathfinder. His name meant defender because he possessed absolute power over evil spirits.

Ancient Africans believed that when Khonsu caused the moon to shine, women conceived, cattle became fertile, and the nose, throat, and lungs filled with fresh air. At Waset, also called Thebes, the main center of his veneration, he was associated with the termination, healing, extension, and regeneration of life. Africans knew him as the protector and provider in Theban times, often invoked to increase male virility and aid with healing.

A story goes that Ramesses III fell in love with a prince's daughter while on tour in Syria. He married her and returned to Kemet with her as his Great Royal Wife Neferure. He received word later that his wife's younger sister had fallen ill. He consulted Khonsu in Thebes, known then as the place of beauty and peace. Khonsu responded by sending a representation of himself as *Pa-ir sekher*—the one who heals and drives out omens. Ramesses, then, sent the Khonsu form on a 17-month trek to Bakhtan to the aid of his wife's sister, resulting in her recovery.

The Prince of Bakhtan, however, retained the statue for 3 more years. The prince subsequently experienced a crisis of conscience after having a dream of Khonsu flying away as a golden falcon. Feeling ashamed, the prince gratefully returned the statue of Khonsu in Thebes adorned in treasures. Thereafter, Africans revered Khonsu as the god who could perform mighty deeds and miracles, vanquish the demons of darkness, and influence the gestation of humans and animals.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Amen

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KIMBUNDU

The Kimbundu are a historic ethnic group found in the country of Angola. European colonialists often called them the North Mbundu; however, they prefer the term *Kimbundu*. Their area of concentration is across a wide swath of the Angolan provinces of Malanga, Cuanza Norte, Bengo, Cuanza Sul, and Luanda. Known for their highly developed sense of culture, the Kimbundu believe in exercising all efforts to maintain community.

According to their oral traditions, the Kimbundu have been in the same area for more than 2,000 years. There are some reports that they migrated to this area during the 1400s, but this latter conclusion is probably a result of their interaction with the Portuguese. In other words, because the Portuguese met them in their current territory, they assumed that the Kimbundu had to have come from somewhere else because the Europeans had developed an elaborate argument around African

migration from the East to the South. Of course, the Portuguese came to Angola as traders, missionaries, and conquerors during the 15th century and discovered the beautifully articulated artistic, ceremonial, and creative culture of the Kimbundu. Related in political and social ways to the Ndongo culture, the Kimbundu culture places a lot of emphasis on familial and ancestral relationships, communal responsibilities, and the spiritual world.

As one of the groups that fought the Portuguese to prevent the slave trade, the Kimbundu established a record of resistance against conquest and the slave trade that lasted for more than 100 years. They finally succumbed to the Portuguese in 1671. After that time, some of the Kimbundu people adopted many of the ways of the European Christians.

The Portuguese continued to deplete the number of Kimbundu through wars and the slave trade. Many Kimbundu were taken to the Americas and forced into slavery. In fact, the Portuguese colonial administration of Angola succeeded the slave lords and established a Hell on Earth for the Kimbundu and other ethnic groups. When the resistance began in earnest against the Portuguese, it was the Kimbundu who were the core of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. They were able to force the Portuguese out of the country by 1975.

Like other people in Africa, the Kimbundu spiritual values have been battered by the need of the people to defend themselves against the encroachments of the West. Although they retain a strong sense of relationships with each other and the unseen ancestors, they are competing with the remnants of the colonial conquerors for the survival of their culture. Despite this, they have managed to add words to the Western languages such as *canary*, *gorilla*, *chimpanzee*, *boogie*, *bongo*, *funky*, *marimba*, *mojo*, *gumbo*, *zebra*, and *zombie*.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ovambo

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KINGS

The sacred and divine office of king in both classical and traditional African society was and continues to be the most integral cultural, religious, and political institution defining the heart of African civilization. Kings function as conduits between the sacred cosmos of ancestors and spiritual entities and the mundane affairs of everyday human activities. Historically and in many African societies, kings serve as both of head of “state” and head of “church.” Alternatively stated, the role of kingship in African culture fulfills at least four fundamental purposes: leader and arbitrator for family, clan, and nation; ritual specialist and mediator for the spirit world and living community; guardian of cultural legacy and traditions; and upholder and defender of social propriety and justice. Subsequently, kings serve their constituents by representing their traditions, culture, and aspirations as a divine and ethical imperative, and, conversely, they serve the divine through their capacity as high priest and caretaker of the people. After a brief discussion of the importance of kings in contemporary African society, this entry looks at their rich history, their religious significance, and some current monarchies.

Contemporary Significance

Since the end of the colonial era and the rise of secular nationalist governments throughout Africa, the historic power of African traditional kingships has been seriously curtailed. In some instances, such as in Uganda, the revolutionary nationalist government, on acceding to power, attempted to obliterate the office of kingship for fear that kings presented an opposing political force. Today, Ugandan kingdoms like the Bagandan and Bunyoro have been reinvested with their historic cultural and social legitimacy, yet they exercise no legislative power within the political processes of government. Due to the cultural centrality of kingship throughout most African societies, however, countries such as Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa have included a “House of Chiefs” as an advisory body to parliament to function with consultative power.

There continues to be a debate among certain African intellectuals, political theorists, and leaders about the contemporary relevance of African kingship for the development and forward progress of Africa. Some argue that the institution is antiquated and incompatible with the demands of globalization and technological innovation. Others argue that African kingship is indispensable to the social, cultural, and political maturation of African civilization.

What is apparent is that the institution of kingship in Africa is a pervasive and enduring reality that is deeply embedded in the social fabric and cultural memory of African society. Why has the institution of kingship historically emerged as so fundamental to African social, cultural, and political life? Is the institution of kingship simply about adhering to a system of traditional governance, or are there factors of more philosophical and cosmological importance that need to be considered here?

Considering that Africa produced the first institutions of sacred and divine kingship and the longest, continuous established monarchy in human history in the civilizations of ancient Nubia and Egypt, it is reasonable to assert that kingship emerged concurrently with the evolution of African civilization. A brief survey of kingship in ancient Nubia and Egypt provides insight into the philosophical and cosmological underpinnings of kingship throughout African civilization, as well as demonstrates why kingship in Africa emerged as a sacred and divine institution.

Classical African Kingship

Ancient Nubian and Egyptian society and culture was centered on the sacred office of divine kingship. Nubian and Egyptian kings were considered to be divine and the progeny of the divine whose duty it was to establish and restore unity, extend justice, and defend the cosmic and social order. The ideology of divine monarchy posited that the king was the son of the god, a descendant of the Supreme Being, sent to Earth to bring justice to humanity and build temples for the gods.

From before the inception of the unified state in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia in 3100 BC, divine kingship was preeminent in ancient Nile Valley civilization. The significance of kingship in classical Nile Valley civilization was so central

that existence without it could not be conceived and life void of divine monarchy equated to imminent doom and chaos.

The most prominent example of this literary tradition from classical Nile Valley culture is the *Prophecy of Neferti* dated to 1938–1909 BC during the reign of king Amenemhet I in the Middle Kingdom. Neferti describes a future of foreign invasion, civil war, religious impropriety, and social decadence, but exclaims that a king from the south, an Amunian and son of a Nubian woman, will rise and restore order in the Two Lands. It is important to note here that this “prophecy” equates restorative kingship with Nubian initiatives.

The Cosmology of African Kingship

Kingship was the nucleus of classical Nile Valley culture, a worldview that some scholars have referred to as cosmotheism. The Egyptian conception of the universe was that of a sacred cosmos that functioned as a “collective agency of various different powers.” The Egyptian sacred cosmos was also “pantheistic” and “polytheistic,” in the sense that it posited an original divine essence of the universe as the embodiment of all of life and that it organized the diversity of divinities into systems of kinship and relationship.

The king’s role in this cosmological system was to exercise his authority as a representative of divine power and to perpetuate cosmic order by maintaining justice and fulfilling ritual obligations. This cosmotheistic, relational polytheism that some ascribe to ancient Egyptian cosmic understandings is similar to the philosophy of the African theologian Okechukwu Ogbonnaya’s conception of Egyptian divinity as communotheism.

Communotheism asserts that the divine is a community of interdependent, interrelated gods who are united by a common ontological source. Ogbonnaya derives his notion of communotheism from his explication of traditional African concepts of the divine, where the plethora of gods are principally represented as aggregates of families organically linked by their essential nature. Ogbonnaya is not alone in postulating the affinity between classical Nile Valley conceptions of communal divinity and divine kingship and traditional African cosmological formulations of sacred kingship.

Other scholars believed that the ideological sources of kingship seemed to be rooted in African traditions of the greatest antiquity and argued that classical Nile Valley culture emerged out of a remote East African substratum. Many striking similarities between classical Nile Valley kingship traditions and the traditional kingships of the Baganda kings of Uganda and the Shilluk kings of southern Sudan, for example, were highlighted. According to the late Senegalese Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop, the concept of kingship is, by all accounts, one of the most significant indications of the similarities between Egypt and the rest of Africa. Diop focuses on the Sed festival, which symbolically portrayed the king as “dying” so that he could be ritually rejuvenated. The king’s health and vitality reflected the vigor and strength of his kingdom, and therefore his rejuvenation ritual represented the revitalization of the state.

According to Diop, similar practices as the Sed festival in ancient Egypt can be found among the Bunyoro kingdom of Uganda and the Hausa kingdoms of Northern Nigeria. The Africanist and ethnolinguist Christopher Ehret argues that Egyptian divine kingship was an offspring of Sudanic Sacral kingship, a tradition that is still much alive in Sudanic Africa today.

Contemporary Expressions

There are other similarities in Africa that reflect the role of the king as divine and the chief priest and the leader of the cult. The Oba, king of the Edo-speaking people of Nigeria and Benin in West Africa, represents the tradition of kingship where monarchs are viewed as sacred and living deities participating with the gods and ancestors in a sacred divine community. The role of the Oba among the Edo-speaking people of Nigeria further illustrates the cosmology of kingship in ancient Nubia and Egypt. This tradition of kingship is also evident in the Kuba kingdom of the Congo, where the *Nyimi* (King) is understood as “a descendent of the creator-god.”

The king as the premiere functionary and leader of the cult is uniquely expressed among the Asantehene (King) of the Asante in Ghana, West Africa. It is the Asantehene that enters the sacred shrine of the ancestors and makes food offerings

to the sacred stools of royal ancestors on behalf of the kingdom during periodical festivals called *adae*. This communal ritual celebrates and reinforces the intimate link between humanity and the spirit world.

In ancient Nubian and Egyptian temples, the most pervasive and enduring literary formula inscribed on the walls was the classic phrase *htp di Nisut*, translated as “an offering that the king gives.” The Egyptian king (Nisut), like the Asantehene, was always represented either giving food offerings to the various divinities or presenting the symbol for truth, justice, and righteousness, *maat*.

In both contemporary and classical Africa, the office of sacred and divine kingship epitomizes the union of the mundane and sacred dimensions of life where ancestral traditions and current and future imperatives are negotiated by the monarch in service of family, clan, and nation.

Salim Faraji

See also Divinities

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KINTU MYTH CYCLE

Kintu is the First Human in Buganda legend, founder of the kingdom of Buganda, and “Father of Humanity.” The Buganda people’s first human legend is similar to those of other African traditions. Indeed, the national narrative of the Buganda has striking similarities to that of the legendary Mbona in the neighboring Mang’anja religion. The first written record of the first legendary ancestor, Kintu, appears around 1875 AD, but the narrative is much older in the oral form. However, the myth of Kintu should not be confused with the Buganda history of the origin of the Buganda Kingdom. Indeed, the Kintu of the myth is not the Kintu of the story of Buganda political origins based on the ancient clan structure.

According to the Kintu Myth, the hero meets Nambi, the daughter of Heaven, and after some time marries her. They then migrate to Heaven and, after a while, Kintu and Nambi return to the Earth. They are confronted with many obstacles once they arrive in the country that would become Buganda.

The couple, along with other couples, soon discovered that in the search for peace of mind, they needed something more than supernatural powers. Thus, Kintu emerged as a leader whose experiences took him through difficult times, where he confronted betrayal, violence, loneliness, solitude, and poverty, but through it all, he displayed courage, character, triumph, humility, generosity,

and sacrifice. These would become the values that would characterize the Buganda spirit.

Kintu was able to face all kinds of disappointments and disasters because of his great strength of character. It is said that, prior to his marriage to Nambi, she had gone to Heaven to seek her father’s approval for their marriage, and during that time Kintu suffered greatly. For example, Kintu had but one cow, which he did not know how to milk, so he lived off her excreta. Adding insult to injury, Kintu was robbed of that cow, leaving him with only bark to eat. These living conditions improved after Nambi’s father reimbursed him for the cow, giving him other equipment so that he and his wife could enjoy a more civilized life.

As reigning king of his capital in Magonga hill, Kintu at one point decides to leave the capital for a while, only to return and discover that his deputy, Kisolo, has been “creative” in his absence. Kisolo not only invents agriculture by domesticating wild bananas, but he also develops the practice of procreation by fathering a child with Nambi. As a result, Kintu injures his deputy’s foot with a spear and asks the chiefs to reprimand Kisolo. Ambassadors are sent to arrest him. Kisolo escapes into a brush area fearing that Kintu’s intention was to kill him. Kisolo, bearing the same relation to the common noun, *nsolo*, meaning “wild animal,” remains in that brush, according to the Buganda tradition. This part of the myth of Kintu seems to relate to the end of primal innocence. Kisolo’s crime is his creativity because he initiates culture, sex, and the eventual death of Kintu as he curses the exiled king.

Kintu goes on to have children of his own with Nambi, but her brother, Walumbe, whose name comes from the word *olumbe*, meaning “death,” murders Kintu’s children. Symbolically, Kintu utters these words: “Let Death go on killing my children if he must. I, man, will go on begetting them, and never will he be able to make an end of us.” This supports the belief in many traditional African religions that men, women, and children are mortal, but humankind altogether is indestructible.

Deonte James Hollowell

See also Aiwel; Akan

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KIRDI

The Kirdi or Kapsiki people are cattle keepers in the Mandara Hills along the Nigerian border in the area of Margui-Wandala, between Mokolo and Bourrah, a fairly uneven plateau where apparently few herds of humpless cattle still exist on the Nigerian side of the border with Chad and Cameroon. The people cross the three borders, but share similar culture.

Kirdi is a general term used by the Fulani for non-Moslem peoples among whom the Kapsiki people can be found, with the two terms generally overlapping. They are traditionally cattle owners, and cattle play an important role in their customs and ceremonies. This entry looks at their history, the role of cattle in their culture, and their religious beliefs and practices.

History and Behaviors

The Kirdi fled to their present home during the 19th century after many battles with the Fulbe. They resisted Islam and Fulbe domination by moving their homeland to the isolated valleys and hills of the Mandara mountains.

Among the Kirdi, the Fali group, who are often distinguished by their multi-colored clothes, beautiful hairstyles, and glass beads, are seen as far more isolated than other Kirdis. However, the Guduf and the Afade, also Kirdi ethnic groups, share more with the Fali than they do with the Mousgouma who live in the plains of Chad.

They terrace the sides of hills and plant their crops in neat rows along these terraces. Crops include melons, beans, peanuts, millet, maize, and pumpkins. In addition, the people grow cotton, cereals, indigo, as well as spices and medicinal herbs for religious and hunting purposes. Labor is divided along male and female lines. A man, for example, is involved in spinning and weaving,

leather making and iron making, and even basket making, whereas a woman's work includes making clay objects, working with children, preparing meals, and doing other household work. Children are respected and honored, but are put to work at a young age as caretakers of small animals, helpers in the farms, and assistants to their mothers and other siblings.

Because Kirdi houses are clustered in a village around the top of a mountain or hill by clan or lineage, it was not easy to access the Kirdi people. They protected themselves by brick barriers often overgrown by thorns. This made the villages difficult to access in an ordinary sense. Straw fences that serve not to divide, but to unite, the people connect family buildings in the Kirdi villages. The buildings are positioned around an open space that is usually reserved for public meetings, commentary, and libations. Each home has an attic, kitchen, and a room for a husband because the wife or wives live in their own houses.

The Role of Cattle

The cattle they keep are similar to other types of cattle herded by the Savanna West African Shorthorn populations such as the Baoulé and Ghana Shorthorn. However, unlike the camels, these animals do not have humps. They are rather small, with medium-size horns and usually a black or black-and-white coat. They are transhumant herders who mix with other transhumant groups who bring their cattle into the area during the dry season.

Individual households generally own only 5 to 10 cattle or sometimes fewer. These are brought together in village herds and are tended by children. They are herded together in the grazing areas during the day and penned together at night or sent back to the households to be penned in their compounds. They are never milked and have only recently started to be used as draught animals.

Cattle play an important role in traditional Kapsiki society. They are not exploited commercially, but are used for dowries and slaughtered for special feasts. At least one animal must be slaughtered for a funeral, and the hide is used to wrap the body.

Other so-called Kirdi groups in northern Cameroon, such as the Mafa, Mofu, or Meri, kept humpless cattle in the past. These animals have completely disappeared for various reasons, such as population movements toward the mountains, lack of grazing land, or absorption by other breeds. These groups still sometimes keep one as a domestic animal to be slaughtered every 4 years at Mere on special occasions, but this tends to be a Zebu that they purposely buy from the Fulani.

Expressions of Culture

The Kirdi people are polygamous, yet most men have only one wife. In the case of the Kirdi culture, men and women are usually married after much consultation with parents. The marriage has to be agreed on by the parents.

The Kirdi believe in one creator god who is responsible for all created things, but who does not act as an administrator on a daily basis. The Kirdi allow the ancestors to take care of their ordinary needs and to intercede for them if necessary. Others can be called on to assist the community in maintaining its moral order. Indeed, the priest, diviner, healer, and therapist of the clan are responsible for using herbs, rituals, surgery, and psychology to make the society well. These persons are also the mediators between the spirits and the human society.

Using instruments such as flutes, horns, drums, and harps, the Kirdi religious leaders practice ancestor reverence and hold special celebrations for the ancestors during festivals. Finally, the Kirdi say that the Earth is the mother goddess who brought into the world all supernatural things, like thunder and lightning.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Tiv

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KISALIAN GRAVES

The Kisalian graves represent one of the largest collections of artifacts ever found in an African site. Discovered in the area where the Baluba exercised hegemony, the Kisalian graves have become identified with the southeast area of the Central African Forest near the shores of Lake Kisale in the Upemba rift.

Initially, 145 graves were excavated, and 2 atypical ones were dated to the 1st century AD. What this means is that the Baluba culture is far older than the usual date given in the 18th century; this is particularly true if the founders of the Kisalian culture were related to the current occupiers of the region. Given that most European anthropologists date the Baluba culture from the time they became known to whites or Arabs, it is important to appreciate the significance of the Kisalian culture.

Kanimba Misago, a Congolese, and others have tried to reconstruct the culture of the region. Indeed, by the end of the 1970s, more than 200 graves were excavated. More than 40 of the sites had radiocarbon dating done on them, and the age of the sites was more precisely established. Scholars have now structured the activity at the grave sites into four broad stages. The first was the Kamilambian tradition dating from the earliest time of the Kisalian culture in the region to the end of the 8th century AD. The second stage was the Ancient Kisalian stage from the 8th century to the 11th century. The third tradition is called the Classic Kisalian, which began in the 11th century and lasted until the 14th century when the Kabambian tradition, the fourth tradition, began according to the artifacts that were found in the graves.

A Rich Culture

Clearly, the Kisalian graves reveal a rich cultural tradition on the shores of the lakes and rivers in the Upemba depression. Since before the Early Iron Age, humans have occupied most of these cultural sites, with little lateral movement. This means that sites have served purposes of living, harvesting, burial, and settlement. A lot of the

habitations were not preserved because of the materials used to build the houses, but materials made of the iron that was used in these sites were preserved. Therefore, the graves provide incredible information about the nature of the culture of the Kisalian people.

Well-developed pottery with spouts and handles appear alongside hoes, axes, arrowheads, curved knives, spearheads, barbed harpoon heads, fishhooks, necklaces, and link chains. In addition, bangles, anthropomorphic bottles, copper bracelets, and ivory carvings were recovered from the graves. Researchers have also found copper in the form of croisettes used as ingots and currency. Consequently, it is probably true, as some believe, that extensive trade occurred between the villages of the copperbelt of Central and East Africa. The old Kisalian culture revealed items of trade that could have existed along the route of trade with people from the Indian Ocean coast.

Religious Implications

It appears that fishing was the principal activity of the people of the Kisalian culture. Because it was the way they subsisted, it is likely that fishing was centrally located in their cultural practice. There were so many fishhooks and harpoons buried with the dead and so many bones of fish inside the grave pots that the idea of fishing as the core of the culture does not seem to be off the mark. The graves also held remains of goats, chickens, elephants, antelopes, and crocodiles.

Studies done on the graves also reveal that there was a relationship between the age of the person and the burial of the corpse. Infants were buried in shallower graves than children, and children were buried in graves shallower than those of adults, who were buried the deepest of all. They were all buried decubitus dorsal, meaning lying on their backs, and their feet were pointed downstream in relation to the river. The pottery in the Kisalian graves was often used for funerary purposes, much like that of ancient Egypt.

It is impossible to determine the precise practice of the Kisalian grave culture people. However, it is possible to see how the Baluba are related to these people, their ancestors, as people who relied heavily on fishing and the cultivation of the land

near the banks of the river. This is one more piece to add to the complicated narrative of the African contribution to human civilization.

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See also Ilé-Ifè

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KUMINA

Kumina, also known as *Kalunga* or *Kaduunga*, is a Kongo-based religion primarily found in the Parish of St. Thomas in the eastern part of Jamaica. It is quite likely that Kumina emerged there as a consequence of the presence of large numbers of Africans from the Congo-Angola region. Although other African religions existed there as well, the numerical superiority of the Africans from the Congo-Angola region allowed their religion to be dominant and to integrate aspects of other African religious traditions. The practice of Kumina is also attested in the Parish of St. Mary and St. Catherine, but to a lesser degree. Although the origin of the word *kumina* is still debated, one likely source is *kambinda*, the name of a particular Bantu people.

Although Kumina followers believe in the highest God, *Oto*, also called *King Zombi* (from the word Kikongo *nzumbi*, meaning “spirit, God”), their religion evolves most critically around ancestral spirits and veneration. Those ancestral spirits, named *zombi*, are called on during ritualistic ceremonies to inhabit the bodies of living humans and deliver messages through them. Adepts of Kumina believe that when a person who had once been mounted by a spirit while dancing during a ceremony dies, his or her spirit would join the ancestral world and would come back to Earth to mount someone. Otherwise, on dying, their soul

would go to Oto, never to find its way back onto the Earth, an unenviable fate. This entry looks at the religion's worship and historical context.

Ritual Ceremonies

Kumina ceremonies are held in the form of ecstatic dance, as a way for the participants to gain knowledge from the ancestors. The dancers receive messages from the ancestors through spiritual transcendence known as *mayal*. The ceremonies take place during the evening hours and may well last until sunrise. The most important elements of Kumina worship involve music, dancing, spirit transcendence, and healing through prophecy.

Like much in the African religious tradition, drumming plays a paramount role. The lead drum is called *kbandu* and is accompanied by shakas, graters, and catta sticks, as well as singing. Kikongo words are common in Kumina songs. Drumming is a central part of Kumina because it is used to communicate with the spiritual world of the ancestors. The rhythms of the drums call the ancestors to commune with the participants of the Kumina ritual.

The repetitive, circular-patterned dance used during the ceremony brings about energy in the participants that allows the ancestors to have better accessibility to their body and spirit. The dance pattern is relatively simple: It involves dancers moving in a circular fashion anticlockwise around the drummers. At first, the dancers move in a syncopated and slow manner and then gradually accelerate their motion. Over the course of the ceremony, the dancers become increasingly excited and fast-paced, which helps to move them from this Earthly plane and into the realm of the ancestors through transcendence.

In Kumina, transcendence is called *mayal*, whereby the dancers' personalities change and become unusual. Their voices become distinctly different because of the external supernatural ancestor who inhabits their body. During transcendence, the dancers may be able to perform extraordinary physical acts, such as walking while in a trance and speaking in a different language. Usually the participants use the African language during Kumina religious ceremonies. While in a state of transcendence, the dancers

receive messages to help the living achieve health and balance in their lives and relationships. Such messages are known as prophesizing.

Prophesizing is an important tenet of Kumina because it relates to the spiritual messages that are received from the ancestors and translated to the living. During the ritual, the dancers receive the sacred message through *mayal* (spiritual transcendence). This is the real purpose behind the Kumina religious ceremony. Indeed, when individuals, families, or communities have become physically imbalanced through natural or unnatural acts, such as death or violence, then there is a need to receive prophecy from the ancestors on the best way to restore peace and harmony in their disrupted lives.

The religious leader, who may be a male or a female and who will have undergone strict training under the supervision of a king or queen of Kumina, is called to help the dancers receive the message from the ancestors. Again, such a prophecy is expected to help the person or group involved neutralize or cure the spiritual imbalance that has resulted in a calamity or an event.

Historical Context

Kumina is often associated with the Maroon communities of Jamaica, although many who do not claim such ancestry also practice Kumina. Nanny, Queen Mother of the Maroons and the only female national hero of the Jamaican people, was a practitioner of Kumina and is largely responsible for making Kumina a revered and respected religion. It was her work as a revolutionary that popularized the Maroon culture throughout Jamaica.

She fought against the British soldiers and government that enslaved the Africans. She was the first woman recorded to have practiced an African-based religion because she was from Africa and brought this tradition with her from the Motherland. It is said that her spiritual work assisted her in defeating the British in many battles. As a spiritual medium, she used many military tactics that were unfamiliar to the British and caused them to fear her and Kumina.

Edona M. Alexandria

See also Obeah

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KURUMBA

The Kurumba live on the borders of Burkina Faso and Mali. Although many of them have now become Muslims, they have a long and fertile history of African religious and cultural practices that derive from their experiences before their immigration from the region occupied by the Dogon. Indeed, like the Dogon and the Bamana, who are neighbors to the Kurumba, who prefer to be called Nioniosi, the people are organized according to clans and have strong ancestral ties to their traditions.

In fact, the Nioniosi have several clans that are keys to understanding their traditions. Among these are the Sawadougou, the Zale, the Oueremi, and the Tao. Each one of these clans represents a lineage that is connected ultimately to the great hero who came from Heaven to create all things and to teach the people how to grow crops. As an agricultural people, the Nioniosi are spiritually connected to the idea of land. They believe that the land is the most precious of all creations because without the land the people cannot live. Therefore, each clan celebrates the importance of the agricultural inventions that made it possible for their ancestors to survive.

Among the attributes of the Nioniosi that demonstrate their connectedness to the ancestors are the cyclical ceremonies and rituals that show their respect and reverence for the deceased. Even in a contemporary funeral, the Kurumba masks are brought out to establish a connection between the myths and the agrarian rituals. The great Kurumba masks are called *adone* and are sculptured helmet masks worn on the heads of the dancers whose faces are covered with raffia during the ceremonies.

Because the Nioniosi believe that the most significant of all their ancestors was Sawadougou, the members of the Sawadougou clan must perform the rituals. The spirit of the Dead comes through the Kurumba mask, the *adone*, and is placed in the center of the people's altars. It is this ancestral commemoration that is at the heart of the traditions among the people. The main hero of the nation, Sawadougou, after whom one of the clans is named, is asked to strengthen and restore the people. Like the dancers, the makers of the masks, those who carve and decorate them, must be from the clan of the original person who came from the sky to create the Nioniosi nation. They are all members of the Sawadougou clan.

Sawadougou is appealed to because, when he came to the Earth with his wife and children, they were involved in the process of civilizing humanity—teaching agriculture, proverbs, wisdom, birth, death, and values and ethics. Although modern Nioniosi (Kurumba) people may only know their culture through the remnant masks that are found throughout the world, the richness of this African cultural form remains current for contemporary generations in its beauty, conceptualization, and performance.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Bamana; Dogon

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KWA BA

The Kwa Ba, also referred to as *Akua'ba*, is the great primal mother of all humans in the Akan construction of the universe. She is the one who welcomes humans into social existence and makes it possible for human community. Without the Kwa Ba there is no greeting, and without greeting there is no recognition of the humanity that exists in each person.

The primal mother is the one who receives young girls into womanhood when they have their first menstruation and receive the wooden or clay images of *Akua'ba* from their elder mentors. Indeed, in some societies in West Africa, a massive image of Kwa Ba precedes the king in royal processions through villages and to special festivals. Each of these uses of the Kwa Ba refers to the power of the image and concept to have meaning in the lives of the people for two reasons. The first reason is the reverence for the idea of motherhood, and the second reason is the relationship of the Kwa Ba to the establishment and maintenance of communal values. These are interrelated ideas that are held together by a reverence for propriety and respect.

In the first instance, the mother is the one who brings all humans into life. Without a mother, it is impossible to have community and the source of life, as we know it, is from the womb of a woman. The primal mother (i.e., Kwa Ba) recalls for humans the unique position the mother holds in society. Second, the maintenance of communal values could only exist if there were common ideas of origin, meaning of life, modes of thinking, norms of relationships, and respect and propriety

among all in the community. It is this profound understanding of the role of the mother, the primal mother, the one who gives birth to society that marks the coming of the Akan into a philosophical relationship with an active social idea.

Often represented by wooden statues with outstretched arms, the *Akua'ba* or Kwa Ba figure appears like the ankh of ancient Egypt. It has not been established that there was a relationship between the creation of the ankh and the creation of the *Akua'ba*, but there is certainly a convergence of meaning in the idea of the two figures. This is not simply based on the similarity in the construction of the symbols, but also in the philosophical, indeed religious, underpinnings of the symbols.

In the case of the ankh, it is a symbol for life; in the case of the *Akua'ba*, it is also a symbol of life, but in the sense that it represents not so much personal life as it does the idea of communal life. One does not enter community life without first being brought into existence and greeted by the primal mother. In this regard, the Akan notion of the Kwa Ba, the *Akua'ba*, is the prime example of the social creator as the natural gatekeeper to the human community.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ankh; Nkwa

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L

LAKES

Lakes embody unique qualities of water that are distinct from streams, rivers, waterfalls, seas, and oceans. Like streams and rivers, lakes are a source of precious freshwater and fish, both essential for sustaining life. However, unlike rivers, lakes are completely bordered by land that, combined with their ability to nurture and sustain life, liken them to the life-sustaining fluids of the womb. Therefore, many lakes are considered “mothers,” have feminine attributes, or are connected with origins.

The Luo name for Africa’s most famous lake, Nalubaale (Victoria), the second largest freshwater lake in the world, translates as “Mother of Gods.” *Lubaale* means deity, and the prefix *na* denotes the feminine. A further connection between lakes and motherhood exists in the region where Nalubaale is located, which is called the Great Lakes region of East/Central Africa. The Great Lakes region is part of the Great Rift Valley, home to the world’s earliest human fossil record. Lake Nalubaale is also the source of the Nile River.

The ancient Egyptians referred to the lands south of the Nile Valley as *ta-kenset* or literally placenta land. Today, more than 100 million people live in the Great Lakes region, which consists of 14 major lakes and numerous smaller ones, such as Tanganyika, Malawi, Turkana, Edward, Kivu, Kyoga, Rukwa, Mweru, Mobutu Sese Seko (Albert), Haya, Naivasha, Ukerewe, and Nyassa.

Although many lakes are considered feminine, there are some whose spirits and deities associated

with it are masculine. Among the Buganda, Mukasa, the deity associated with Lake Victoria is male. Mukasa, the most important of all deities, dwells in the lake and is the lake itself. Mukasa is also the god of fishermen and is known throughout the region by his association with *Cwezi* cults, a group of hero gods who disappeared into lakes or holes in the ground made by Mukasa. Mukasa also has charge over rain, storms, increase in fish, as well as the granting of the birth of twins. His symbols include pythons, canoe paddles, and the canoe and he receives sacrifices. On the southern shores of Lake *Nalubaale*, the name of the high god is Ngassa, a possible variation of Mukasa, but with the similar attributes.

Lakes are a place of danger and mystery and are home to mythical creatures, numerous spirits, and quasi human beings. The people living on the mainland claim that the center of Lake *Nalubaale* is a dangerous place with islands inhabited by hostile natives. The Banyoro make offerings to the spirit of Lake Mobutu Sese Seko when a person wants to cross it. In Ghana, souls are said to say goodbye to God at Lake Bosumtwi. Therefore, it is forbidden to use boats on the lake. Fishermen must use flat boards or rafts, and during July and August, fishing is forbidden altogether because the spirit of the lake is resting.

Generally speaking, there is a deity, spirit, or spirits that reside in or are associated with most lakes in Africa. However, the geographical distribution of lakes in Africa varies, with an abundance of natural lakes in Central and East Africa and relatively few lakes in North and West Africa.

The lack of natural lakes did not stop the ancient Egyptians from creating man-made sacred lakes around temples from which to draw pure water, in which to raise aquatic animals, or on which to conduct ritual offerings to *neters*. They were called *she netjeri* or divine pool.

Denise Martin

See also Fertility; Rain; Twins

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LAVEAU, MARIE

Marie Laveau is one of the most legendary African figures of the 19th and 20th centuries. As Vodou queen of New Orleans, her reign of power extended throughout the southern region of the United States. As a matriarch, Laveau's powers included healing the sick, extending altruistic gifts to the poor, and overseeing spiritual rites. Marie Laveau was respected and feared by both black and white alike. Even after her death, her legendary powers persisted through her daughter, also named Marie Laveau. Her grave is the second most visited grave site in the United States. In St. Louis Cemetery No. 14, one can find the burial ground of Marie Laveau. Each year, thousands of visitors flock to her burial site and adorn her plot with spiritual regalia, candles, money, flowers, and assorted personal items. This entry looks at her early life, the Vodou/Vodou context in which she was raised, her rise to leadership, and her eventual demise.

Life in New Orleans

Born in 1800 to an African woman named Marguerite Decantale and the son of a white planter, Marie Laveau experienced a life more privileged than her enslaved brothers and sisters. Her father, Charles Laveau, made certain that she and her mother were provided for financially, although he often neglected Marie emotionally. Her father purchased an Igbo child named Louison from West Africa in 1814, who was close in age to Marie. It is possible that Marie acquired some of her knowledge of African ritual from Louison. Igbos were well known for the rituals and knowledge of herbs and medicine.

Marie was married to a Creole man, also the son of a white enslaver, from Santo Domingo, named Jacques Paris. Jacques reportedly disappeared and was reported dead 5 years later. Upon his disappearance, Marie began referring to herself as the "Widow Paris." After the reported death of her husband, Marie started a relationship with Jean Christophe Duminy Glapion. Because they were not allowed to marry in a church, Marie performed their matrimony ceremony herself. Together, they had 15 children, some of whom were victims of the various yellow fever outbreaks that plagued New Orleans due to the city's poor drainage system. Although Marie was a committed mother and wife, much of her priority in caretaking was extended to her spiritual children and the general community.

Marie became a hairdresser to create economic stability for herself and her family. Through interaction with her black clients who were house servants, she was exposed to personal information about her wealthy white clients, who often sought her counsel. Marie used this information to give informed counsel to the people who sought advice from her concerning their personal affairs. Many wealthy and politically affluent individuals, both white and black, paid Marie for personal advice, intervention in some situation, and protection against any evil energy that might have been placed against them.

VoduVodu in New Orleans

Since the establishment of early African civilizations, religion has sustained the well-being of Africans and

remained a central theme in their lives. To understand the complex nature of African religious traits and how they developed and were preserved in Haiti and Louisiana, one must first examine the traditional religions of West Africa that were originally practiced by enslaved Africans in America. The culture surrounding African societies was spiritual and holistic, focusing on the connection of mind, body, and spirit, which contradicts the individualist, competitive nature of European society. Although there existed some variances between communities based on specific ethnic particularities, most African religions share the same basic beliefs and practices. Some of these beliefs include the acknowledgment of one Supreme God/Creator, tribute paid to a pantheon of deities, ancestor reverence, and nature nurturance.

VoduVodu, as a religious system, derives from Dahomey, the old kingdom of Benin. *VoduVodu* is actually a Fon word that means “spirit” or “deity.” The religious system is based on a hierarchy that is centered on a Supreme Creator, Nana Buluku; a pantheon of deities that are associated with various elements of nature, *Loa*; and the ancestral spirits of the Dahomean people, the *tovodou*. VoduVodu was transported to the United States during the European Trade of Enslaved Africans. In particular, Africans who were brought to Haiti by way of Dahomey interacted with other groups, including the Yoruba and the Congolese. This interaction allowed for the continuance of VoduVodu traditions.

African religion was brought to New Orleans, first by the initial group of enslaved Africans from the Senegambia territories. After the African revolution of Santo Domingo, another wave of African people brought their religion to New Orleans. The Vodu tradition was strengthened and reinforced by the free and enslaved African community of New Orleans. It is important to note that the practice of Vodu in New Orleans is not the purest manifestation of Vodu as it was known in Dahomey. Also, it is not the same religious system that is observed in Haiti.

Vodu in New Orleans is a mixture of Dahomean religion, Congolese traditions, and some parts of Native American spirituality. New Orleans Vodu lacks some of the gods and traditions that existed in Haiti. New Orleans Vodu operates under a matriarchal system that is governed by Vodu queens

known as *vodoiennes*. Also, Marie underwent the tutelage of Dr. John Bayou, a well-known Senegalese conjurer (root worker). Once Marie rose to power, she commenced the coalescence of scattered Vodu communities.

Vodu in New Orleans also consisted of root work and *gris-gris* or *ju-ju*. People would seek out “conjurers” or other spiritualists for spiritual intervention or protection in their daily affairs. These favors ranged from those concerning love to political influence. Although most workers used their powers for positive forces, there were some who did not. It was probably the work of this small percentage of people that was sensationalized by people outside of the religion. This aspect of the religion became known as hoodoo and is often the basis for misconceptions that public society has about Vodu.

The Vodu Queen

The Widow Paris, as Marie Laveau was infamously called after her first husband’s disappearance, was a woman whose reputation has made her one of the most infamous figures of the 19th century. Some of the stories that have been passed down about her are true, although many of them are not. As the granddaughter of a powerful priestess in Santo Domingo, Marie had a familial background in African spirituality. She was drawn to religion after the death of her mother, and she did not take long to dominate the culture and society of Vodu in New Orleans. As a queen for several decades, Marie Laveau was mother to many. People sought her advice for marital affairs, domestic disputes, judicial issues, childbearing, finances, health, and good luck. Marie would in turn counsel her practitioners by supplying them with advice, often generated within the homes she served as hairdresser, or by supplying them with protective spiritual objects such as candles, powder, and an assortment of other items mixed together to create a *gris-gris*.

Although there were some similarities, Vodu in New Orleans differed from the Vodou of Haiti. Because of the successful revolution of Saint Domingue, the island was isolated, and religious and cultural practices were maintained and sustained. However, New Orleans had to adhere to strict European laws, codes, and

oppression associated with enslavement. Vodou was often under scrutiny by public officials and the law. Nevertheless, Vodou held a strong presence in New Orleans throughout the centuries. The two most significant figures were Le Zombi, which was the physical manifestation of Danballah, and Elegba or Papa Legba. Special attention was also given to Bon Dieu, the supreme God. These spiritual beings were worshipped through song, dance, ritual, and sacrifice.

Vodou ceremonies and activities took place at various sites around the city. As queen, Marie Laveau predominately orchestrated rituals at three main sites: her home on St. Ann Street, Congo Square, and Lake Pontchartrain. At her home on Saint Ann Street, Marie Laveau would converse with clients who would meet with her regarding any issues they were having. In her backyard, she would also have ceremonies that conjure the spirit of the Great Zombi, the deity Damballah who would manifest through a snake. The second major ritualistic space, Congo Square, was a public square that was set aside by city officials as a gathering space for both enslaved and free African people. This was the only place in the city where drumming and dancing was allowed. Marie Laveau would gather her followers here on Sundays to dance and worship. No major ceremonies would take place here, but it was a place of spiritual gathering and rejuvenation for Africans who experienced major oppression and hardships both on the plantation and as free citizens. The last place of significance that was presided over by Marie Laveau was Bayou St. John's, which was located on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It was here that major ceremonies took place among the initiated in the religion. Marie would often be accompanied by her "king" or a second-ranking male officiate. Singing, dancing, drumming, and spirit possession would occur in these gatherings. Curious white people would often sneak into the woods to witness these ceremonies. For sensationalism, they would often report extreme tales of what they witnessed.

Rivals

In a religious system of hierarchy, with a matriarch prominently situated at the top, there were often rivalries over who should rule the Vodou system in

New Orleans. Before Marie took reign, there were two women who preceded her as queen. The first was Sanite Dede, who was a Congolese woman who ruled for several years before she was usurped by Marie Saloppe. Marie Saloppe was a Creole woman from Santo Domingo who was familiar with Marie's grandmother. She introduced Marie to the intricacies of the religion and provided her with her fundamental tutelage.

After taking a prominent stance as Vodou queen, Marie reigned unchallenged until 1850, when another Creole woman named Rosalie attempted to challenge Marie's position. To create an aura of fear and awe, Rosalie placed a huge life-sized wooden doll in her yard that was said to have been imported from Africa. The statue was covered with beads and intricate carvings. When people in the Vodou community began expressing fear and respect for Rosalie because of the doll, Marie stole the statue. She was taken to court by Rosalie, but used her persuasive powers and influence to have the doll permanently removed. There were several other root workers and Vodouists who gathered mild attention during Marie's reign.

Survival of Vodou

During the latter years of her life, Marie Laveau had to move her practices across the Mississippi River to the area of New Orleans known as Algiers. Algiers was the first point of arrival of enslaved African people in New Orleans and also the birthplace of Vodou in New Orleans. Although Marie discouraged her daughters from becoming involved in her religious practices, her seven daughters continued the Vodou tradition and became known as "the Seven Sisters."

After the death of Marie Laveau in 1881, which occurred simultaneously with the integration of black people into society, Vodou in New Orleans lost a great deal of its adherents. As more people began assimilating economically and socially, the need to depend on the ancient rites and traditions of the old-time religion decreased. Vodou began taking on new forms, becoming incorporated into other religions.

A woman by the name of Leaf Anderson, commonly called Mother Anderson, a spiritualist from Chicago, arrived in New Orleans in 1920. She claimed that she had a connection with the

spirit of a Native American chief named Black Hawk. Her parents, who were black and Mohawk, passed down to her a multicultural and multispiritual background. Although she was not a Vodou priestess and her churches lacked some of Vodou's rites and rituals, the spiritualism she preached attracted many of Marie Laveau's followers, other religious black people, and poor whites. The spiritual churches of New Orleans became a product of the combination of Vodou, Catholicism, and Pentacostalism. Through New Orleans spiritual churches and ritualistic practices in the general culture, the spirit of Marie Laveau lives.

Shantrelle P. Lewis

See also Hoodoo; Vodou in Benin; Vodou in Haiti

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LELE

The Lele people are located in Central Africa in the southwestern part of what is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Lele live on the edge of the massive equatorial forest, and the latter, as could be expected, plays a major role in Lele life and occupies a central place in Lele religion. The Lele believe that the forest, and all that it hosts, was given to them by Njambi, the Supreme Being. It is from the forest that the Lele receive water, maize, firewood, manioc, salt, fish, oil, and animal meat, which are all necessary for their sustenance. The forest also provides them with medicinal plants. The Lele, therefore, hold the forest in great esteem. They see it as a primarily male sphere, from which women are often banned. On special occasions, such as the birth of twins, the advent of a death, or the appearance of the new moon,

women are allowed in the forest only after Lele men have performed certain rituals.

Although Njambi, the Supreme Being, is held responsible for the whole creation and is believed to remain ultimately in charge of that creation, spirits known as *mingehe* play a critical part in daily Lele affairs. Not surprisingly, the *mingehe*'s abode is the deepest part of the equatorial forest, where they like to dwell in streams. People believe that the *mingehe* are asleep during the daytime and fully awake and active at night, wandering around. It is therefore important not to make much noise at night to avoid attracting them. This is the case because the *mingehe* are feared by human beings because they have the power to bring misfortunes on the living if displeased.

They are believed to control two critical aspects of Lele life: fertility and hunting. Many animals and plants are closely associated with them and are, therefore, handled with great care. Such is the case of water pigs, for example, whose affinity with rivers marks them as spiritually charged animals. It is said that they are owned by the spirits. Other water-dwelling animals, such as fish, are also linked to the *mingehe* and are consequently approached with great caution. Pregnant women are not allowed to eat fish at all. Although fishing is usually done by Lele women, the latter must take certain precautionary steps before introducing recently caught fish: The latter must be touched by fire and then left outside and away from the village overnight. Only then is it considered safe to bring them into the village for consumption. Fish are often included in the preparation of medicine.

Plants such as bananas also provide a telling illustration of Lele regard for and fear of the spirits. Bananas, given their believed closeness to the world of the spirits, often occupy a central place in certain rituals. Water, either spring or rain, is also charged with spiritual energy. Finally and similarly, the moon is treated as a special spiritual entity associated with fertility. On a full moon day, sexual intercourse is taboo, and women should not, unless certain precautions have been taken, enter the forest. All these examples underscore the fact that the Lele people are careful about not upsetting the spirits because this, in turn, would upset the social harmony.

In fact, in addition to controlling fertility and hunting, the spirits are also concerned about social peace because they demand that peaceful relationships be maintained among the members of the village. Only when internal harmony and balance prevail, which in turn yields solidarity, can the whole community expect to prosper.

Ama Mazama

See also Rivers and Streams; Taboo

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LIGHTNING

In Africa, lightning carries an important symbolism and is often associated with the workings of the divine. Because much of Africa is covered by rain forests that depend on clouds and rain, the presence of lightning is not unexpected. However, in more arid regions of the continent, such as the Nile Valley or the southern tip of the continent, lightning is also respected. This entry discusses the natural phenomenon and then its religious significance in Africa.

A Natural Force

Lightning is ubiquitous. Each second, there are approximately 65 cloud-to-ground lightning strikes to the Earth throughout the world so that astronauts in space could see an ongoing display of the electrical energy hitting the Earth. As a phenomenon, lightning is a worldwide occurrence because there are no parts of the Earth where lightning cannot be found. Most strikes are about

2 to 3 miles long and carry a current of 10,000 amps at 100 million volts.

Africa experiences a substantial amount of lightning strikes. Many of them are of the “bolt from the blue” variation that hit the ground 10 to 20 miles away from a storm. These flashes are quite destructive and carry several times the electrical energy of the regular strikes. Most lightning is associated with thunder that can be heard up to 12 miles away from a storm.

There are other forms of lightning such as spider crawler lightning, which moves at the bottom of rain squalls sometimes as long as 35 miles away from the starting point. These crawlers are dangerous. Africans have known all forms of the lightning and therefore have managed to explain it in mythological or philosophical terms that make sense to their societies.

Africa has the greatest amount of lightning flashes on the Earth. Indeed, it is believed that the small town of Kifuka, Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Eastern region near the borders with Rwanda and Burundi, has the highest density of lightning flashes in the world. For example, out of the 1.4 billion times that lightning flashes over the Earth, a great amount of that energy is spent in the continent of Africa, where Kifuka receives 158 lightning bolts per kilometer per year. This compares with a European average of about 28 lightning bolts per kilometer per year. In Colombia, South America, one can have 110 lightning bolts per kilometer per year, making it the second most active place for lightning. North America, in Florida, is only about 59 bolts per kilometer in a year.

A Religious Explanation

What this means for Africa is that the people have had to develop ways of explaining the phenomenon within their religious frame of reference. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Shango is seen as the deity who controls thunder and lightning, and, as such, he is the Sky Father, a royal ancestor of the Yoruba, with strong presence among the African diaspora in South America and the Caribbean.

The energy of Shango has often been cited for its symbol of resistance to enslavement and persecution of the African by European enslavers.



A staff used by devotees of Shango, the Yoruba orisha of thunder and lightning, carried in dances when possessed by the deity. Nigeria, 19th–20th centuries.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

Shango's colors are red and white, and his sacred number is six. The main symbol of Shango is the *oshe*, the doubled-headed axe, which represents balance and justice. As the owner of the three double-headed Bata drums, the deity of lightning and thunder is quick, swift, and authoritative like the fiery elements of the Earth. Like the Yoruba, other African ethnic groups have a high regard for lightning.

The Banyaranda, who live not far from Kifuka, have developed an elaborate narrative about the power of lightning that is associated with their kingship. According to the Banyaranda, the Almighty God, *Imana*, *Amana*, and possibly *Amen*, is represented on the Earth by the king. Indeed, the king represents *Imana* on the Earth, and the king represents the Rwanda people before *Imana*. This gives the king a divine function. However, if the king survives, then the country is said to survive; if the king dies, then the country is said to have died. In many ways, this type of kingship is prevalent in Africa.

Among the Banyaranda, however, there is something more to the kingship based on the intensity of lightning strikes. The king is the holder of sacred power. He is not a personality, but a representative, and, as such, he is the keeper of the sacred drum, the maintainer of the sacred fire, the one who is entrusted with the robes and cattle of his ancestors. If lightning strikes a person, it is compared to the power of the king because both are dangerous. In fact, if a person is struck by lightning, it is said that it means that he or she has been visited by the king. One cannot escape the all-powerful authority of the divine king because he is to be honored as one honors the lightning and vice versa. Lightning should receive the honor as the king of Rwanda; this is because of the pervasive nature of the electrical charge in the environment.

Other African people have incorporated the natural elements into their religious experiences as well. It is how Africans take the environment and create out of it a seamless relationship between society and nature. Lightning, far from being a stranger, must be viewed in African terms as part of the regular occurrence of nature in the lives of humans.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Shango

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LOBI

The Lobi people reside in the Black Volta region, in what is known today as southwestern Burkina Faso and northeastern Ivory Coast. The Lobi migrated from Ghana to their present location in the 1770s in search of new uncultivated lands. Their primary activity is centered on farming: They grow millet, corn, sorghum, yams, beans, peppers, and some rice. They also raise sheep, goats, and chickens. The Lobi live in villages made up of compounds composed of circular houses with flat roofs. This entry looks at the religious beliefs and worship.

Religious Beliefs

According to the Lobi oral tradition, the world was created by *Tangba You*, the supreme God. However, *Tangba You* withdrew from the world because it was getting increasingly annoyed with the quasi constant fighting among men over women. Before retiring, nonetheless, God provided human beings with spirits known as *Thila* or *Wathila* (singular: *thil*) to assist them in their daily affairs. *Thila* are nature divinities closely associated with the land.

Thila play a critical role in the fabric of Lobi social structure and life. *Thila* protect the living and determine, to a large extent, their behavior. Indeed, *Thila* establish rules of behavior that are revealed to the living through divination. A diviner is known as *thildar*. In addition to performing divination, a *thildar* is a male (there are usually one or two *thildar* per village) who owns many *Thila*, whom he “controls” for the benefit of the whole community. The rules established by the *Thila* are known

as *soser* and may include many prescriptions and restrictions, such as food, hunt, sexual intercourse, or dress taboos. Although Thila are usually benevolent, violation of one of the rules established by them might result in severe punishment of a single individual or the whole village. As spirits, Thila are usually invisible. However, on occasion, they may appear to the living in the form of an animal or human being.

Worship Practices

People constitute villages based on their shared veneration of the same Thil. In other words, all inhabitants of a given village worship the same spirit and adhere to the same rules of social behavior, and this, in turn, allows them to function in an effective manner as a tight religious and political community. It is their common belief in and veneration of the Thila that provide the Lobi as a whole with a strong sense of cultural identity and unity that has proved quite resistant, over the years, to pressures from outside communities. Thus, although their close neighbors, the Wawa, have at least in part accepted Islam, the Lobi have maintained their own religious traditions.

Community rituals are organized every year at the village shrines (e.g., at the time of harvest). Ceremonies are also held to celebrate important life moments, such as birth, initiation, marriage, or death. Offerings and sacrifices are then made to the Thila. Each compound erects at least one shrine in honor of their Thil under the authority of a diviner. The shrine typically includes cooking pots, iron figures, and, quite important, *Bateba* (i.e., wood and stone sculptures), which are believed to house the Thila.

The *Bateba* (or *Batoba*), as eminently religious and spiritual objects, are quite significant and act as intercessors between the living and the spirits. Although *Bateba* may be made with the help of different materials, such as brass, clay, or ivory, they are most commonly carved of wood. By virtue of being placed on a shrine, the *Bateba* are said to literally become alive and to be endowed with the ability to move and fight against evil spirits such as witches.

As sculptures, *Bateba* are abstract figures, but they may emphasize a particular aspect of the Thil they house through a specific gesture or feature representative of the Thil's power. Thus, *Bateba*,

known as *Betise*, represent a man and a woman in the process of making love, with the man standing behind the woman. Such *Bateba* are often recommended for an unmarried man in search of a wife or for a woman who wishes to have children. *Bateba Yadawora* display quite sad expressions because they mourn the death of a beloved relative so that their owner will be spared such mourning. *Bateba Yadawora* keep their head down while holding their hands clasped behind their back. *Bateba Ti Puo*, in contrast, have one or both arms raised up in a gesture meant to protect a home from illness or witchcraft. A Thil *Dorka* is a figure with two heads, an unmistakable indication that they are capable of seeing in several directions at the same time. Such *Bateba* are regarded as quite powerful. Regular *Bateba*, known as *Bateba Phuwe*, usually hold their arms along their sides and look straight ahead.

Lobi carving is well known outside of the Lobi community because Lobi carvers have gained widespread admiration for their fine work. However, Lobi art, as elsewhere in Africa, is intimately linked with Lobi religion.

Ama Mazama

See also God; Spirit Medium

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LOMWE

The Lomwe people live in the northern provinces of Mozambique in a ribbon that stretches westward into Malawi. They are closely related to a

cluster of people called the Makhuwa who live to the north. According to their traditions, the Lomwe originated in northern Mozambique and have no further origin myths. Thus, they are not said to have emigrated from the North or the South. However, some scholars believe that they probably came from the Rift Valley regions farther north on the African continent sometime over the past 1,000 years.

Much of the Lomwe culture is dependent on the climate, environment, and animals found in their region. They are peasant farmers, for the most part, who do not have large towns or villages. Their villages tend to be based on the family compound and are related to the harvesting of food. The climate is tropical with hottest temperatures being in November–December and the lowest temperatures being in June–July. The rains come in October and last until March.

Given this type of weather and climate, the Lomwe have come to rely on the consistency of the weather for planting and harvesting, as well as for the construction of houses out of the mud bricks reinforced by grass. Having adapted well to the environment, the rural Lomwe usually cook in kitchens that are outside and not inside the house. They eat corn that can be pounded into powder and served as cakes once it is cooked. They usually season this food with greens and peanuts or chicken. The Lomwe have developed a stable approach to their natural environment through many years of political and social instability.

The Lomwe believe in a Supreme Being who is the creator of all things on the Earth. However, the ancestors and the spirits of the Earth are held to control their ordinary and daily activities. These are spirits that may be influenced by people's actions or inactions. They are not manipulated, as some Western writers have inferred, no more than the Western God is manipulated by humans praying or having worship ceremonies; the deities, spirits, and ancestors are appealed to on the basis of human needs and desires. They must be remembered in daily or annual ceremonies as a form of piety.

For example, children must be obedient to their parents, respectful of the rituals, and diligent in remembering the ancestors to be well thought of within the Lomwe society. All children belong to the matrilineal line because a child

belongs to his uncle and his mother's uncle, not to his father or his father's family. In this way, the Lomwe retain the matrilineality that one sees in a majority of African families.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Harvest

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LOVEDU

The Lovedu, a Bantu people, live in the Transvaal, an area in northern South Africa. According to their oral traditions, they settled in that particular location as a result of the migration south of a small number of Karanga people, from Zimbabwe, in the 17th century. The Karanga people, who were great traders, had created a great empire from about 1000 to 1600 AD. They smelted gold and traded it on the shores of the Indian Ocean for glass beads and porcelain from China. When they settled in the Transvaal, however, the Karanga, now Lovedu people, developed a subsistence economy primarily based on agriculture and cattle-rearing.

There are several stories about the reason that the Lovedu came into existence. According to one, the King's son took with him some people as he was fleeing his father's kingdom after receiving rain charms. In another version, it is the king's daughter who, having engaged in incestuous intercourse with

her brother, fled out of shame with rain charms and some of her people. In a variant of this story, it is her father, and not her brother, who would have made her pregnant to pass onto her the knowledge of how to control rain. In any case, rain making obviously plays a central role in the Lovedu mythical narrative. This entry looks at the Rain Queen, the role of ancestors, and the ethical or moral imperatives in Lovedu religion.

The Rain Queen

Indeed, the Lovedu people have become famous for their Rain Queen. She is the only queen to combine the functions of a monarch and a rain maker. The Rain Queen, indeed, is believed to have the mystical power to control rain. In a community where agriculture and cattle-rearing play a critical role in the sustenance of its members, as it is the case with the Lovedu people, the importance attached to the falling of rain cannot surprise. Furthermore, rain, generally speaking, is linked in African life and religion to the fundamental notions of fertility and life transmission. Through her spiritual control of rain, the queen is therefore assumed to have control over the welfare of her society.

The Rain Queen of the Lovedu people is therefore much respected and feared. She is seen as the embodiment of the divine and cosmic order on which harmony and balance rest. In fact, due to her ability to control rain, she is thought of as the Rain Goddess. She must have children by someone of royal blood. Her passing away always provokes a major disruption of the natural order because drought, famines, and complete devastation seem inevitable.

The Ancestors

As sacred and powerful as the Rain Queen may be, however, her ability to control the rain is ultimately under the authority of the ancestors. Indeed, the latter remain the most powerful and conspicuous actors in Lovedu religion. The Lovedu believe that the world was created by a Supreme Being named Khuzwane. However, Khuzwane remains a remote supreme deity, as it is so often the case in other religious traditions in Africa, and therefore plays little if no role at all in daily human affairs.

The ancestors, in contrast, are deeply involved in the daily tribulations of the living. The ancestors are believed to be able to neutralize all evil and prevent all misfortunes. They certainly preside over fertility, as manifested in the birth of children and cattle, as well as plentiful crops. The ancestors assist the living because they want to be remembered. Neglect of the ancestors may cause the living to experience great misfortune and sickness. Thus, offerings, sacrifices, and prayers are made to the ancestors to appeal to their benevolence and generosity or their forgiveness. Ancestors are also honored collectively, at a yearly offering of beer, as a token of gratitude for the harvest. Messages from the ancestors are deciphered through divination primarily performed with divining bones.

In the veneration of ancestors, *dithugula* play a major role. Dithugugula (singular: *thugula*) are ritual objects closely associated with the ancestors and ancestral energy, such as beads that once belonged to them, objects made of iron, or a protective amulet made by a doctor. Every lineage has its own dithuluga. The Rain Queen also has dithuluga, which belong to the lineage of royal ancestors. Her dithuluga, along with the other sacred objects in her possession as queen, are the ultimate symbols and tools of her divine power. The Queen's ability to use her dithuluga and tap into their power to bring about rain, however, depends on the ancestors' good will and cooperation.

The ancestors also control *vungaga*, that is, the power of medicine and magic. By tapping into the intrinsic energy of certain objects and people, *vungaga* help defeat witchcraft, an omnipresent possibility in Lovedu life. But, again, the ancestors preside over the *vungaga* and must therefore give their consent.

Moral Values

The Lovedu people pay much attention to human relationships because they believe that evil stems from people's hearts as they experience envy and jealousy. This, in turn, might lead them to engage in witchcraft, which is much feared by the Lovedu. This explains why accumulation of wealth beyond the norm, or the desire to be different or better than others, is much discouraged. Likewise, aggressiveness and competitiveness are much frowned upon.

Instead, members of the group are expected to cooperate through mutual and reciprocal exchanges. Rather than engaging in excessive behaviors of any kind, one is praised for one's moderation, humility, and respect for others in the community. In a similar fashion, one must avoid negative feelings and emotions because these can only bring about more negativity in one's life. In the end, it is a strong Lovedu belief that smooth relationships between people will ensure a peaceful and harmonious society.

Ama Mazama

See also Rain; Rain Queen; Rituals

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LUGBARA

The Lugbara religion is practiced by the Lugbara ethnic group of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This ethnic group is specifically located in the West Nile region of Uganda and in the adjoining area of the DRC. They speak a central Sudanic language that has its roots deep in the Nile Valley. This entry begins with an overview of their religious beliefs, followed by a closer look at invocations and shrines, two important parts of their religious practice.

Religious Beliefs

The Lugbara believe that the living and the Dead of the same lineage exist in a permanent relationship

with each other. As a result, the Dead are aware of the actions of the living and care for them because they consider the living to be their children. However, in some circumstances, the Dead may send sickness to the living to remind them that they are the acting custodians for the Lugbara lineages and their shrines. The people conceive of the Supreme Deity (Adroa, the creator of the universe) as containing elements that lead to either good or bad; that is, either in a guise that is remote and far off, but benevolent (good), in which case he is termed *Onyiru*, or in a guise in which he is close to people (such as in the streams) and is dangerous and bad, in which case he is known as *Onzi*.

Adroa is considered to have created the universe and the world and then initiated the Lugbara society by creating the super-human Hero-Ancestors Gboro-Gboro (male) and Meme (female) and some domestic livestock as the first step. Many of the Lugbara traditions focus only on Meme, whose womb was filled with all living things of the world. A gazelle was the first creature to leave Meme's womb, when it ruptured it with its hoof. After this, all the animals come out, with man being the last. The first human beings are said to have been twins: Arube, a boy, and O'duu, a girl. These twins, unlike their parents Gboro-Gboro and Meme, were believed to be ordinary human beings. Meme died immediately after giving birth to these twins. It is said that when these twins grew up, they married each other and produced children who, through successive generations, multiplied to produce the Lugbara society.

Ancestors are important in the lives of the Lugbara people. For them the ancestors communicate with the living, influence their luck, and can be appeased by those in authority. As such, the authority figures in the Lugbara community, who are known as lineage elders, play an integral part in the lives of the rest of the Lugbara. A lineage elder is said to "own" an ancestral shrine, and this ownership serves to reinforce his power to communicate with the ancestors. The elder can invoke a curse on a relative, and people with illnesses often consult diviners to interpret the conditions of their lives and determine which elder might have caused the illness.

These ancestral shrines are of many kinds. However, the most prominent ones are those

erected for a spirit of an ancestor (an Orijo or spirit house). These are usually pieces of granite formed into a house. Because a spirit is believed to be capable of creating serious trouble for the living, several shrines are often made for them, at which sacrificial food and beer can be offered by his descendents. Other types of shrines include shrines for the spirits of mother's brothers, shrines for those who did not leave sons behind, and shrines built for the ancestors as ancestors.

For the Lugbara, then, the living and the Dead of the same lineage are in a permanent relationship with each other. The Dead are aware of the actions and even the thoughts of the living (their children effectively), while the living act as temporary caretakers of the prosperity, prestige, and general well-being of the lineage (on behalf of their ancestors who did the same during their lives). The ancestors are ultimately seen as good people who set an example that men should follow and who did their part in maintaining the ideal of social order and social behavior simply by having lived as they are said to have lived by the community. In this way, we see that inherent in the Lugbara religion lies an African cosmology that is present in most African religion generally: an embracing of the notion that the ancestors and the living are in a mutually edifying and beneficial relationship with one another.

Of important note is the distinction that is made between the two major types of ancestors. There are the *A'bi*, a term used for all the forebears of a person, through whatever lines of descent. Then there are the *Ori*, who are the more important ancestors. These ancestors are individual ancestors who are in personal and responsible contact with living descendents; in certain situations, they are significant in relation to responsible kinship behavior and authority. They possess a distinct soul, which may be considered to be a representation of the socially responsible persona of a living person. The *A'bi* as ancestors and the *Ori* as ancestor spirits are keys to understanding the Lugbara religion. For example, the spirits are those ancestors who are remembered in genealogies or at least the more important of these, whereas the ancestors include all the ancestors regardless of whether their names are remembered.

Invoking the Ancestors

The Lugbara come into contact with the Dead primarily at the rite of sacrifice. The Dead can affect men by sending sickness to them. They do this largely to express their displeasure at actions of the Lugbara men, which can be considered as damaging to the harmony and unity of the lineage. These actions are considered to be sins. As a response, the living make offerings to the Dead at shrines erected for them.

Because the *Oris* are the more important ancestors in Lugbara ritual, sacrifices to them are more frequent than to the *A'bi* or ordinary ancestors. Also, live animals are sacrificed to the *Ori* ancestors, whereas dried meat or grain is sacrificed to the ordinary ancestors. Additionally, the Lugbara talk more often of the *Ori* than they do of the ordinary ancestors when discussing ritual, and they build the spirit shrines at the center of their homesteads as opposed to the peripheral areas where the *A'bi* (ordinary ancestors) shrines are located.

Olero Invocations

There are two distinct processes in which an *Ori* ancestor may affect the living. The first process is *olero*, which refers to *Ori* invocation by an elder. The other is *orika*, which refers to orily vengeance, an action initiated by the *Ori* ancestor independently of any living Lugbara. Literally, *olero* is the bringing of sickness through the invocation of *Oris* by an elder to one of his kin or dependents because of feelings of indignation. *Orika*, by contrast, is where the *Ori* brings sickness on its own account without prior invocation.

In the case of *Ori* invocation, the affected party usually consults the oracles to discover the identity of the agent/elder concerned and the cause of his anger. The oracles also state whether sacrifice is to be made and of what it should consist. The sacrificial object for spirits is usually a living animal; as such, an animal is usually consecrated and dedicated to the *Ori* ancestor with a promise of sacrifice if the patient recovers. If they do not recover, however, then it is assumed that the oracle is mistaken, and there is no point in making the sacrifice. If the sacrifice occurs, it is made at the appropriate shrine. Once the animal has been killed, the meat is shared among the members of

the congregation, the patient is anointed and blessed, and the matter is regarded as closed.

An elder invokes the ancestors against a Kinsperson whom he considers to have betrayed the community through an act or an omission. He thinks the necessary words to himself, whereas in his own house in the evening or by the granaries during the daytime he does not say them aloud. For an elder to invoke the ancestors is a serious and secret affair and is part of the expected role of the elder. He generally conceals his actions until sickness seizes the offender and only acknowledges his part in the affair when oracles reveal it.

The Lugbara do not specify what constitutes the actual power of invocation or how it develops, except that the elder who is responsible for the invocation should be without a father. In fact, his father should be dead. Although in principle even a child may have the power if his father is dead, it is mainly older men who exercise it. This may be seen to be akin to spiritual powers that are reserved for older people. Thus, the older men are more likely to have this power than younger men. The man whose status is such that to insult him is seriously disruptive to the family cluster is the one who can carry out the invocation. In other words, an elder invokes because he is outraged, in his role of head of the kin group and not as an individual, at the antisocial behavior of the offender. His authority has been challenged or flouted, and the kinship relationship of which he is a part has been threatened and must be repaired.

The specific actions that may lead to *olero* (invocation) are

1. striking or fighting a Kinsperson that is older than oneself;
2. swearing or shouting at a Kinsperson;
3. deceiving a close Kinsperson by stealing, cheating, or lying;
4. quarreling with an older Kinsperson;
5. a woman quarreling with or striking her husband; or
6. denying her husband the exercise of conjugal relations, for a man to fail to carry out the duties of a guardian or heir.

These may all be considered offenses that violate the fundamental social relations that are at the basis of orderly community and family life.

The Range of Invocation

Typically, it is the elder of a family cluster who invokes ancestors against certain of his close kin and dependents, especially against a disobedient son. The elder must erect a shrine and thus acquire the power to invoke ancestors as part of his newly acquired status as head of a family segment. The range of invocation is limited by kinship; unrelated persons living under a man's protection are controlled by the threat of violence and not by mystical means.

Sickness is directed against an individual, not against a group as a whole. In some cases, the offender may not suffer sickness at all; rather, it may fall on a member of his family who is junior to him—his son, daughter, wife, or junior sibling. If the offender is a woman, however, sickness may fall on her, her child, or a sibling, but not on her husband. A man rarely invokes against agnates who live outside his own family cluster. He may do so against female agnates and kin traced through blood, but to do so is to invade the sphere of authority of another elder and is not done without ample justification.

Orily Vengeance

This is the bringing of sickness by the ancestors on their own account, without invocation, if their living kin neglect them by not placing meat and beer at their shrines for a long time. According to the Lugbara, the Dead are said to murmur together: "Our child is bad, he does not care for us now." As a result, the ancestors cause sickness to be visited on the relevant living kin. The Dead are also thought to watch over one another's sacrificial offerings jealously. This is how the Lugbara describe the process.

An alternative way of considering ancestral vengeance is in the context of disputes over lineage authority. If the living talk or grumble among themselves about the behavior of a Kinsperson, the Dead, on secretly hearing this discussion, may take it on themselves to send sickness to the relevant party. The distinction then is that in Ori invocation,

a man (usually an elder) takes responsibility for causing sickness, whereas in ancestral vengeance, it is the Dead who are believed to be directly responsible for the sickness. An important thing to note is that the Ori ancestors are the only ones who can be invoked by elders to bring sickness to one of their kin, whereas both the Ori and the A'bi ancestors may be involved in orily vengeance.

Shrines

The shrines of the agnatic (patrilineal) oris are called Ori houses (*orijo*) or merely Oris (Ori). Their construction varies considerably, but they are always made of small granite slabs. These may be placed flat on the ground so as to form a kind of paving, or each shrine may be built as a "house" of five stones carefully fitted together to form four walls and a roof. Sometimes they are built as miniature round houses with roofs of stone or even thatch. The differences in the shape of these shrines are not significant except as an index of the degree of cultural variation among the Lugbara people.

Usually each shrine is for a particular Ori. Often especially in the Southern Lugbara region, one shrine may house two Oris, either brothers or a father and son. The actual means by which the Ori ancestors use their shrines and take the sacrificial offerings made to them there is not considered important by the Lugbara and not known. An Ori is always considered to be at the shrine, in the sense that he is believed to know what goes on near the shrine at all times. An Ori may have more than one shrine in different compounds so that no single one is considered to be his exclusive home.

Oris are also considered to live in the ground, but they may be contacted at their shrines. These Ori shrines are placed for lineage ancestors that rarely go back further than the inner lineage founder; in other words, the recently dead, the fathers, the grand-fathers, and their brothers. More distant Ori ancestors are not so troublesome and do not bring sickness. As such, these more remote ancestors have other shrines—the external lineage shrines outside the compound.

More orily sickness is said to come from a man's own dead father than from other dead kin. The father's Ori is preminent. Just as a living

elder is the living representative of his juniors and an intermediary between them and the Dead, the father's Ori represents the youngest dead ancestor and thus acts as an intermediary between the Dead and the elder. Additionally, the more senior Oris are said to bring less sickness than the junior Oris because they delegate to their juniors the task of watching over the living.

Collective Shrines

Besides the internal Ori shrines placed under the main granary, there are other shrines that are erected for ancestors as collectivities. These are found in all compounds and are known as *a'biva* and *anguvua*. *A'biva* is the name for both shrines and their incumbents and literally means "the ancestors beneath." This refers to the ancestors who live beneath the houses of their descendents. The *A'biva*, who are considered to be a collectivity of the souls of male ancestors who have begotten children, stay in or near the dwelling houses of their descendents and at night are said to be heard grunting as they talk with one another. A special shrine is placed for the *A'biva* on the veranda of the senior wife's house. It consists of two flat stones, one upright and the other flat. It is said to bring sickness of its own account in the form of swellings to the body.

Those who die childless become neither Ori ancestors nor *A'biva*. They join a collectivity of childless ancestors known as the *anguvua*. *Anguvua* are similar to *A'biva*, and the Lugbara usually speak of them being together. They usually bring sickness to children because they wanted children and had none. There is no actual shrine for the *anguvua*, but they are assumed to be in the ground. The offerings for them are placed just inside the doorway of the senior wife's house (on the ground).

Other Types of Shrines

A third type of shrine associated with the dead is the *tali* shrine. These shrines are placed for the collectivity of personalities of those male ancestors who have left male children. Although in reality every man has his own personality, only one *tali* shrine is placed under one granary. Thus, the collectivity of personalities of the lineage comes into contact with the living at a single shrine. If an

offering is made at the Ori ancestor shrines, then food must also be placed within the tali shrine.

Another type of shrine is the abego shrine. This is placed for a man or woman who had been dead about a year and who died old and helpless. This shrine consists of one small flat granite stone and is placed under the main granary for the case of the agnatic ancestors and under the veranda of the senior wife's house for the case of the mother's lineage ancestors.

An important category of shrines that must be considered in any study of Lugbara religion are the matrilineal shrines. These consist of the adroori shrines, which are for the mother's brother's lineage ancestors and usually are located under the veranda of the senior wife's house. Then there are the okuori shrines, which are utilized by women to contact the souls of the recently dead and are also located under the veranda of the senior wife's house. There are also the matrilineal tali and abego shrines, which are located in the same place. Last are the ridi and tiri fertility shrines as well as the eralengbo fertility shrine and the ambao matrilineal shrine, all of which would be located in the compound hedge or cattle kraal of the Lugbara settlement.

Last but not least are the external lineage shrines, which are the biggest (and perhaps the most sacred). These are hidden away in the long grass and bushes at the periphery of the compounds, where only the elders who hold rights in them may see them. There are a variety of names for these shrines. They are known as *rogbo* or *rogboko* in the south, as *kurugbu* in the west, and as *orijo* in the north and east. Unlike an internal shrine, which is erected for a particular Ori and remains his over several generations (until it is finally discarded), an external shrine may change its incumbent ancestor within a comparatively short time.

Generally speaking, the rituals connected with the Ori ancestors are large, whereas those to do with the ordinary (*A'bi*) ancestors are smaller. The congregation that attends the Ori sacrifice is larger and consists of a wide range of kin, whereas those at the *A'bi* ancestral sacrifices are smaller, with the lineage-kinship element being a lot less important.

Shrines and Their Associated Status

In the Lugbara societies, there are few distinctions of rank and wealth, and there are little differences of

authority other than within the family cluster. Thus, men actively compete for the ownership of shrines because a shrine is a symbol of status, as well as a mark of ancestral approval for exercising the authority associated with that status. The status of the owner of a compound therefore is assessed not so much by the size or the number of houses he may have, but by the number of shrines that are located on his compound. Signs of material wealth, especially if predominant, may enhance one's status, but ultimately count for little compared with the number of shrines that one has. The more numerous one's shrines are, the more contact that one has with the Dead (it is presumed). The more contact one has with the Dead, the greater will be one's status. In other words, the ownership of a shrine confers certain rights and obligations on the owner toward both the Dead and the living.

Most Ori ancestor invokers are heads of family segments. To put it another way, it is mainly the owners of senior shrines who invoke; conversely, invokers are seen as having some accepted right to the ownership of these shrines and, thus, the headship of a family segment.

Michael Antonio Barnett

See also Ancestors; Invocations; Shrines

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LUO

The Luo (Jaluo and Joluo) are an important ethnic group in Kenya, eastern Uganda, and northern Tanzania. They were once called Nilotic Kavirondo. However, the people refer to themselves as Luo. They are the third largest ethnic group in Kenya, after the Kikuyu and the Luhya. The Luo constitute about 11% of the population, compared with 22% by the Kikuyu and 14% by the Luhya. The total population of the Luo

approaches 5 million. This entry looks at their history and religious beliefs.

Historical Background

The Luo have a long history as pastoralists, but they have become agriculturalists who maintain large cattle herds. They are found in many of the large cities of Eastern Africa as urban workers. They speak the Dholuo language, which is similar to Lango, Acholi, Padhola, and Alur spoken in Uganda. This cluster of languages means that the Luo have close relations with other ethnic groups that share cultural commonalities.

According to history, the Luo migrated from Sudan near the confluence of the Sue and Meride Rivers near Wau. It is from this area of vast plains where scores of ethnic groups have gathered for thousands of years that the Luo are said to have begun their travel to the south. From this region, they migrated to Uganda and then to Kenya about 1400 AD.

The Wau region is known for being a crossroads of culture. The Dinka, Luo, and other people are known to have met on these plains, and in the midst of wars and conflicts many groups were dispersed. At least five waves of Luo came from this area before they became a firm, concrete, stable group identified as a separate linguistic family. They migrated as the Joka who came from Achoiland, the people from Alur, the Owiny from Padhola, the Jok'Omolo from Pawir, and the Abasuba who are now found in southern Nyanza. Thus, the contemporary Luo group consists of many subgroups that may, in turn, consist of many subclans.

One can say that by the mid-19th century, the Luo identity was well established as a society consisting of *ruodhi* or regional kings. These kings resisted the British intentions to remove the people from their territory. In 1896, the British sent an expedition with the Maxim machine gun to fight against King Gero and his Umira Kager clan. Allying themselves politically for advantage with Mumia, the Wanga ruler, the British quickly murdered 200 Luo.

Three years later, another British expedition was led against the Luo, in which 2,500 cattle and 10,000 sheep and goats were captured. Subdued by the British superior weapons, the Luo king

Odera was forced to supply 1,500 porters for the British army as it fought against the Nandi people. Many Luo objected to this capitulation to the British because they saw it as the end of their own culture. When the British sent Odera Akang'o, the ruoth of Gem, to Kampala, he was so impressed by the British settlement that he initiated a process of forcing his own people to adopt British dress, language, and styles. The Luo rapidly came under the influence of British culture. By following the British pattern of life, they avoided the wholesale loss of their land that befell other pastoral people in the Kenyan Highlands.

Religious Beliefs

According to Luo belief, the Supreme Creator is called Nyasaye or Nyasi. Like other African societies, the Luo traditions are grounded in the relationship of the living with the ancestors. There is a strong belief in the idea that the ancestors can impact the life of the contemporary person. Thus, the rituals and ceremonies of the people are related to this belief. The *juogi*, which is the naming ceremony, is the first official act of receiving the person into the society.

The child is usually named between birth and age 2 after an ancestor appears in a dream to an adult member of the family. Actually this means that the person who does good deeds and is well respected will return in a dream to the living and thus begin the process of reincarnation again. When the child is named, he or she will take on some of the characteristics of the returned ancestor. Thus, if the ancestor was kind, the child becomes a kind person in life; if argumentative, the same. The named ancestor becomes the individual's guiding spirit throughout his or her life.

Those who have been evil will never be accepted as reincarnated beings. It is believed that those who are evil are destined to a world of non-being. The Luo are among the few groups in East Africa that do not practice ritual circumcision of males as initiation. However, in the past, children have had their six lower front teeth removed by expert initiators.

Although the Luo have become more Western in contemporary times, they were traditionally polygamous and deeply entrenched in the idea of family. Matchmakers from families usually

assisted in marriage arrangements, and everyone in the traditional community had to be married because to be a spinster or an old bachelor was considered anathema.

The Luo are known for their music, and their traditional music is functional. Nothing is done just for the sake of doing it. People make music for ceremony, religion, and political reasons. Music has to be performed for all occasions. For example, during funerals, one has to praise the departed, comfort the bereaved, and cleanse and chase away spirits. Music was played during beer parties welcoming visitors, during wrestling performances, and so forth. Music was also used for rituals like chasing away evil spirits (*nyawawa*).

The Luo retain in their ordinary lives many useful components of the traditional philosophy and cultural mythology.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Naming

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LWA

The Lwa (the word is also often spelled *Loa*) are the secondary divinities of the Vodou religion as practiced in Haiti. The Lwa are also referred to as *Les Mystères*, *Les Invisibles*, *Mistik*, or, simply, *Vodou*. They are spirits of human or divine origin who were created by Bondye or Granmèt, the Supreme Being of Vodou in Haiti, to assist the living in their daily affairs. Indeed, as in most other African religious traditions, the Supreme Being withdrew from the world after having created it. Management of the world was left in the hands of spiritual entities—more particularly of the Lwa. However, God remains the ultimate arbitrator and supreme master of all things in the universe. This entry looks at the characteristics of the Lwa and how they are worshipped.

Describing the Lwa

There are more than 1,000 divinities, or Lwa, in Vodou. The Lwa are grouped in 17 pantheons, or *nanchon*, the better known ones being the Rada, the Petwo, Nago, Kongo, Juba, and Ibo pantheons. The Rada and Petwo pantheons are arguably the most important, in terms of both size and the role played by Rada and Petwo Lwa in Vodou. In fact, many of the other groups have been integrated into the Rada and the Petwo pantheons. For example, the Nago and the Juba Lwa are often thought of nowadays as Rada, whereas the Kongo and Ibo are commonly subsumed under the Petwo Lwa.

This fusion underscores the difficulty one may face when adhering to too strict a classification. There are constant overlaps between the different pantheons of Lwa. The same Lwa may appear as Rada and as Petwo. What seems to distinguish the Rada pantheon from the Petwo pantheon is, above all, the general character, attitude, or persona of the Lwa. Rada Lwa are often associated with a peaceful demeanor and benevolent attitude. However, this is not always the case. When displeased or offended, they may also turn out to be quite vindictive. In contrast, Petwo Lwa are commonly thought of as forceful, aggressive, and dangerous. Yet they may also be protective of the living and quite generous. Thus, one must resist the easy temptation of a simplistic classification.

Although the Lwa are quite numerous, there is a hierarchy among them, with some Lwa being held in special esteem by Vodou followers. This is the case, for instance, of the powerful Lwa Legba, the master and keeper of crossroads, without whom communication with the spirits is impossible and can never take place. Other Lwa of particular significance include spirits such as Agwe (also called Agwe Taroyo), the Lwa of the sea, and his female counterpart, Lasirèn; Danballa Wedo, and his wife, Ayida Wedo, who are represented as two snakes and stand for the power and eternity of life; Ezili Freda, known as the “Lwa of Love”; Loko, the spirit of trees and vegetation in general, and the patron of Mambos and Houngans and of the Vodou temple, the oumfò; Ogu, the symbol of strength and power; the Marassa, the sacred twins; Ayizan, the Lwa of market places and protector of merchants; and Azaka, the Lwa presiding



A table of offerings set up for the Lwa in Haiti in preparation for a wedding ceremony between several Lwa and a Vodou devotee. The Lwa must know that they are loved, respected, and appreciated.

Source: Ama Mazama.

over agricultural work and life. One must also mention the important Gede, the Lwa of death.

Although Lwa are frequently associated with natural elements—Danballa Wedo, Ayida Wedo, Agwe, Lasirèn, and Ezili Freda are classified as aquatic sprits, for example, and Ogu is the Lwa of fire—Lwa are nonetheless more commonly defined and identified in function of the character that they display. In addition to having their own distinct personality, Lwa, especially the main ones, have a specific day of the week, a favorite color, favorite foods, drinks, songs, and dances. As an example, Ogu's color is red, his day is Wednesday, his favorite sacrificial food is pork, and his favorite drink is rum. In contrast, Ezili Freda likes sky blue, perfumes, refined foods such as cakes and other delicacies, and champagne. Her day of the week is Thursday, the typical day of Rada Lwa.

Worshipping the Lwa

Given their high position in the Vodou ontological hierarchy, the Lwa play a major role in the lives of Vodou devotees. In fact, the relationship between the Lwa and the living is intense, demanding, and yet one that is reported to be quite fulfilling.

Human beings *serve* the Lwa, whom they love, respect, and fear. In fact, Vodou practitioners always, out of respect, use the prefix *Papa* (“father”), *Manman* (“mother”), or *Metrès* (“mistress”), while referring to a Lwa. Danballa is never called Danballa, but Papa Danballa, and Ezili Freda is *Metrès Ezili Freda*. In return for their devotion and piety, the living expect blessings, protection, and favors from the Lwa.

The intense nature of this relationship is made quite obvious during Vodou ceremonies, which are held for the Lwa. Such religious services take place within the confines of a Vodou temple, an *oumfò*, under the auspices of a Vodou priest (Houngan) or priestess (Mambo).

The central part of the perystil, the semi-open space usually located at the entrance of the *oumfò*, where public rituals actually take place, is occupied by a potomitan. The potomitan (which literally means “pillar in the middle”) is a pillar usually decorated with a beautiful spiralling snake, and connecting the ground to the ceiling. The Lwa are believed to ascend or descend

through the potomitan, which is therefore seen as a magical axis. Given this, the potomitan plays a critical role during Vodou ceremonies. The potomitan is associated with the Lwa Danballa and with the Lwa Legba, the keeper of the crossroads.

Through appropriate songs, dances, the tracing of *vèvè* (spiritual drawings), prayers, and drumming, the Lwa are invited to join the living, partake in the ceremony, and accept whatever offerings or sacrifices that may be presented to them. Upon arriving, the Lwa will mount one of the attendees, often times the Houngan or Mambo presiding over the service, and through them the Lwa may communicate with the living. The living may also take advantage of the presence of a Lwa to ask questions or present requests. While mounted by a Lwa, a person finds themselves in a different state of consciousness and may be able to do things that defy common physical laws, such as climbing a tree feet up, eating pieces of broken glass, or walking in fire without sustaining any physical injury. While being mounted by a Lwa, a person is also believed to lose consciousness of themselves.

Marrying the Lwa

It is also common for Vodou followers, regardless of whether they have been initiated, to marry a Lwa as part of a ritual known as *mayaj mistik* (“mystic marriage”). The whole affair is reminiscent of a wedding ceremony between two human beings because it involves special attire, a wedding cake, a wedding ring, and a priest. The purpose of *mayaj mistik* is to enter a special relationship with a Lwa, thus further securing their protection. One of the taboos associated with this type of marriage is sexual abstinence on the day of the Lwa to keep oneself receptive to messages from one's spiritual spouse, primarily through dreams, on that particular night.

People will often choose to marry their *mèt tèt*, that is, the Lwa who has been identified, either through divination or consultation with the spirits, to “walk” with that person. The personality of the devotee and of his or her *mèt tèt* is often quite similar. For example, a person whose *mèt tèt* is Ogu is expected to be brave, bold, and sometimes quick tempered. On the contrary, someone with

Ezili Freda as their *mèt tèt* will be expected to be a bit frivolous and yet quite generous.

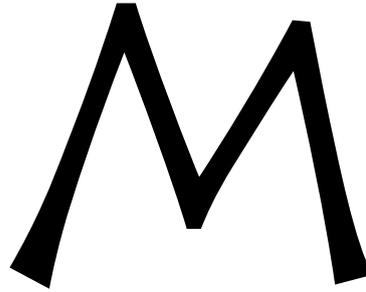
The dynamic relationship between the living and the Lwa underscores the depth and extent of the Vodou religion in Haiti because the Lwa are truly an intricate and constant part of the Vodouists' consciousness and reality.

Ama Mazama

See also Petwo; Rada; Vodou in Haiti

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MAASAI

The Maasai people live in East Africa. They may have separated from other Nilotic groups as early as 1,000 years ago and moved into what is known today as the countries of Sudan and Uganda. This split was followed by two major migration waves, one that might have occurred 300 years ago or earlier and the second one in the 18th century. These migratory movements account for the Maasai's present-day locations in Kenya and Tanzania. The Maasai are primarily a pastoral people, although a few among them devote their time and energy to agriculture.

The Maasai believe in one supreme God, *Ngai* (also named *Engai* or *Enkai*). That supreme God is androgynous—that is, both female and male. Ngai's primordial dwelling, the *Ol Doinyo Lengai*, literally "The Mountain of God," is located in northern Tanzania. Ngai created the forest, mountains, lowlands, and highlands. Natural forces, such as rain, thunder, drought, and lightning, act as gifts or punishments from God.

The Maasai God appears in two manifestations: *Ngai Narok*, characterized by goodness and benevolence, is black, whereas *Ngai Nanyokie*, the angry one, is red like the British colonizers who disrupted Maasai life. Ngai Narok is associated with the north and presides over rain, fertility, the sun, and love matters, whereas Ngai Nanyokie is associated with the south and a vengeful attitude and behavior.

According to Maasai mythical narratives, in the beginning, the sky and the Earth were one. All the cattle of the world belonged to Ngai. However, it happened that the sky and the Earth separated, and Ngai and its cattle were no longer living on Earth. However, given that the cattle's subsistence depended on the availability of grass, Ngai decided to send all the cattle down to the Maasai, asking them to look after the animals. The cattle descended by means of a long rope made of the wild fig tree's roots, thus making that tree a sacred plant among the Maasai. That tree, known as *oreti* (or *oreteti*) in the Maa language, consequently plays an important role in Maasai ritual ceremonies because it connects the living to God. That connection was disrupted when a hunter of Torrobo (a neighboring people) descent, jealous of God's gift of cattle to the Maasai, took it upon himself to cut the rope, thus creating a gap between the sky and the Earth and interrupting the flow of cattle from God to the living.

Grass has also acquired a great deal of religious significance and prestige, as God's gift, among the Maasai. Grass held in the fist is a sign of peace, and it is also used for blessings during rituals. Another quite important and common agent of blessing is spitting. To spit on someone, especially children, is a sign of reverence and approval. Newborn children are generously spat upon by adults as a way of wishing them a good life.

However, cattle, as the ultimate gift of God to human beings, are most sacred. The cattle possess the qualities of God and attest to God's greatness and

generosity. Through the consumption of meat and the drinking of milk, God and human beings become one again. Thus, meat eating and milk drinking, through their re-creation of this primordial unity, are religious experiences of the highest order and, quite predictably, occur at the most important times in Maasai life, such as birth, initiation and circumcision, marriage, and death, and on all critical occasions like rites of passage from one age set to the next. Animals are ritually killed, and the meat is blessed by the elders and shared and eaten publicly.

In addition to Ngai, who gave all the cattle in the world to the Maasai, the latter also believe in protective spirits. Each person receives one such spirit at the time his or her birth ceremony. The spirit's role is to protect a person during his or her lifetime from all evil and danger. When a person dies, two scenarios are possible depending on his or her behavior while alive. If the person was a good and constructive member of his or her community, his or her soul will be taken by the protective spirit to a beautiful place, filled with cattle and grass. If the person was bad, his or her soul will be taken to a desert place with no water and no cattle.

The central figure in Maasai religion, as far as human beings are concerned, is the *Laibon* (plural: *Laiboni*). Laiboni intercede between God and the living. They are diviners. They organize and preside over ceremonies involving sacrifices and offerings. They heal both physical and spiritual illnesses. They cure physical ailments with herbs because their herbal knowledge is vast and widely respected. They tackle spiritual illnesses with spiritual means. Some scholars have suggested that they can be sorted into three categories: those Laiboni dealing only with illness and private domestic issues; those Laiboni preoccupied with war, adequate rainfall, and so on; and, finally, those Laiboni concerned with issues of importance to the community at large. One becomes a Laibon through inheritance within one's lineage.

Ama Mazama

See also Ngai

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MAAT

Maat represents the personification of a cluster of concepts that introduce the world to abstract ideas of philosophy, such as order, truth, balance, harmony, justice, reciprocity, and propriety. Represented in ancient Egyptian literature as a goddess, Maat is unlike the familiar goddesses of Hathor, Nebhet, and Auset, in that she was more a concept than a goddess to be worshipped. It was believed by the ancient Egyptians that Maat existed as long as Ra existed and that when the universe was created it was only Maat with Ra. Without Maat, chaos would reign, evil would conquer, and injustice would be the state of the world; thus, it was necessary that Maat exist from the beginning of the universe and come into being as the food of Ra.

Because Maat was harmony and order, she was what was correct, and she represented the way things had to be done. Once humans understood the fundamental aspects of relationships, they also understood the essentiality of Maat because the only method for preventing chaos was to do Maat.

The early Africans accepted the fact that the universe was balanced, ordered, and right. However, this correctness could be maintained only by vigilance or else the rationality that existed would disappear. The aim, therefore, of all societies was the maintenance of Maat. When Maat was not maintained, then the universe became unpredictable, chaotic, and irrational. In the realm of morality, discipline, order, reciprocity, and propriety were to be honored and encouraged, but isfet, evil, and disorder were to be discouraged and confronted to bring Maat back to her rightful place at the center of human society.

Nothing came into place by chance with the ancient Egyptians, who understood that the pattern and plan of the universe was order. Africans would later find this concept emerging in Greek thought as logos, meaning essentially order, pattern, and rationality. However, it should be clear that the African concept of Maat antedated the Greek concept by thousands of years and was richly embedded with illustrations, examples, and anecdotes from the literature and language of the people.

For example, it was understood and believed that the most solid and authentic grounding of natural reality was Maat because it made the stars shine, the sun give life, the river overflow, and the king the great representative of the divine on Earth. In the mind of the African, the universe was neither moral nor immoral, but existed as transcendent of those human terms. The universe is, and because it is that is enough to call its existence the action of Maat.

In the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day and Going Forth by Night*, Maat was seen as a judge in the underworld in the halls of Ma'ati, where she was symbolized by a Feather of Maat. The heart of the dead person was placed on a scale, supervised by Maat, and weighed by Tehuti to see whether it was lighter than the Feather of Maat. If the heart was heavier than the symbolic ostrich feather usually worn on the head of Maat, the person's heart would be eaten by a demon called Ammut. She was also known as the devourer of the Dead. This would be when the person would die the second and final time. If the heart weighed the same as the Feather of Maat, the deceased was allowed to enter eternal life.

The duty of the per-aa or pharaoh was to uphold Maat, and one of the principal responses made to the people was that "I have done Maat." The per-aa lived to be considered loved by Maat because of the stability and prosperity of the kingdom.

Clearly, Maat was one of the most important deities, if not the most important, in all of ancient Egyptian religion. She was claimed as the wife of Tehuti, the god of wisdom and language, as well as the daughter of Ra. It is certain, however, that the ancient Africans believed her to be the glue that held back chaos. Without Maat, chaos would definitely overtake the society. Therefore, for African

societies, the presence of Maat is fundamental to the working of civil and spiritual institutions and is at the base of all normal operations of the universe.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Iwa; Iwa Pele

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MAGIC

Magic happens when someone appears to cause something to occur that seems to be outside of the known principles of normal human perception. Thus, when a law such as that of gravity is broken or when a person is cut in half or disappears, we usually say that it is because of magic. But African magic also works in ways that annihilate the known or understood law and generate a new perception. Magic is the understanding of concealed laws in relationship to what is known. Since the earliest of times, Africans have been using these usually hidden laws to convince the masses of some divine intervention in the lives of the people.

There are several ways of viewing magic. From the standpoint of an African philosophy, it assists in the psychologizing of another person to feel, say, or see whatever one wants him or her to experience. You may also see magic as a social agent where people actually see what is taking place because a priest-magician controls the forces of nature. This means that the priest-magician must study the forms of energy in the universe, understand the nature of climate, recognize the functions and forms of material objects, and appreciate how the manipulation of these forces impacts the human mind. Thus, as the intellect of a divinity or spirit, the operator becomes a priest serving the purposes of the spirit.

Every conceivable human emotion and capability is open to the priest at the moment of his highest intensity. This energy and control over materials

and minds is not limited to males; many of the most powerful operators of this form of magic are women. Each African ethnic group appears to have someone who has special spiritual insights capable of leading them to the possession that brings with it the ability to be rainmaker or otherwise agent of the transformation of material conditions. The longevity of a person with such magical powers would be nothing if the person could not perform the deed. Thus, in actuality, the priest-magician or priestess-magician had to demonstrate the ability to repeat the miracle of rainmaking each time it was needed or be discredited before the people.

European missionaries during the 18th and 19th centuries invented fanciful tales about African magic based on their own Christian beliefs. Many thought that the Africans simply waited until they saw the rain approaching and then held ceremonies to make it come. However, this is an example of cultural arrogance and the ignorance of African philosophy. Most kings would be able to detect any approaching rains, and indeed, the people would question the priestly magic if they saw an easily detectable ruse.

However, the magicians, as wise and intelligent beings, could know something about nature that was not readily visible to the ordinary, untrained, and uninitiated person. This is definitely so in the case of personal experiences of people who have witnessed the operation of magic in various societies. For example, among the Susu, Vai, Fon, Ijaw, Asante, and other West African people, one finds many examples of magicians who are actually specially trained priests who have powers to transform reality. There are eyewitnesses to priests being seen in two places simultaneously. A priest can be seen in one place, according to an eyewitness, and be talking to a person in another place, 50 miles away. Some priests have exhibited feats of invisibility, levitation, walking on fire, pulling snakes from their throats, and being cut with knives and recovering from the bloody wounds within minutes.

These activities are not done to impress or for show; they are integral parts of the pattern of the religious philosophy of African people. As it was in the days when people understood that Africans were masters of the material universe, for example, even in the Old Testament when it was thought that the Egyptians practiced magic, so it is in many traditional African societies. Christians' and Muslims'

magic is based on the ability of their religions to make old things new or to transform a person's life; therefore African religion has the ability to transform all material things.

This is the source of the discourses on African magic. Almost all traditional societies speak of these forces and energies with awe because they relate to the ability of the ancestral and other spirits to make themselves manifest on the Earth if certain incantations, ritual fires, ceremonies of purification, and appeals are made in earnest.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Seers

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MAKANDAL

François Makandal, an African brought to Haiti from Africa, is the first formerly enslaved African to have openly criticized and launched an assault of great proportion on the institution of slavery. Although rarely credited for his efforts and his vision, this Hougan or Haitian Vodou priest single-handedly laid the foundation not only for the Haitian Revolution, but also for the eventual abolition of slavery. To this day, charms, amulets, and poisons are called "makandal." To his credit also, a subgroup of Vodou practitioners is named after him. This entry looks at his life and legacy.

The Slave Years

Makandal is generally believed to have been born in the Guinea coast of Africa, which in the 18th century referred to the entire western part of the continent. His birth name, birth place, and exact birth date are unknown. Some scholars, however,

have suggested that Makandal may have come from the village of Makandal, which is located in the Loango region in what is now the Republic of Congo, which should not be confused with the DRC (formerly known as Zaire). This assumption is based on two facts. First, enslaved African were sometimes named after their hometowns. Second, it is on record that Makandal had a close friend named Mayombe, which is also a village in southern Congo.

Makandal is believed to have been captured at the age of 12 and taken to St. Domingue, now Haiti, between 1745 and 1750, and sold to a French colonist named Le Normand de Mézy. Makandal is alleged to have told some of his confidants that his father was a figure of authority in Africa. In fact, Makandal's ability to speak, write, and read Arabic fluently lent credence to the view that he was born to an affluent family. Usually, only privileged families could afford to educate their children in the 18th century in Africa.

He is believed to have been a Muslim when he was captured into slavery. Makandal is also said to have possessed an incredible knowledge of herbs and medicine. In fact, his vast knowledge of herbs and medicine was sought after by blacks and whites alike, making him a popular figure. Makandal treated illnesses among the enslaved Africans, the French, and the livestock. He became the *gardien de bêtes* or caretaker of the white man's animals after he lost a wrist in a farm accident.

Makandal is said to have been held in quite high esteem by Le Normand de Mézy until he had an affair with an enslaved African woman. Makandal was subsequently sentenced to 50 lashes, but he ran away because such a sentence usually and ultimately meant death. He settled in the mountains, where he became the leader of the Maroons, that is, of those Africans who had managed to escape the plantocratic environment.

A Fugitive Leader

Makandal became even more famous and legendary for his magic and ability to poison during his years as a fugitive. After his escape, he became determined to liberate the Africans from white oppression. He was so successful in recruiting additional Maroons that it is believed that he had agents in all of the colonies. At the height of his

operations, it is estimated that Makandal had more than 20,000 maroons who belonged to ethnic groups that, hitherto, did not coexist, working for him. More than any group of people, Makandal relied on the *pacotilleurs*, the free blacks who visited the white plantations to sell cheap goods to the enslaved Africans. Makandal used them as conduits to relay information throughout the plantations. Well aware of the military might of the French, Makandal sought the financial assistance of the free blacks who benefited from the colonial economy.

Most of the free blacks were, however, too content with their positions in society and did not want to risk their livelihood by joining Makandal's course. Without the needed help from this group, Makandal resorted to his easiest resources: magic and medicine. Although it is not known exactly when he became a Vodou practitioner, it is safe to assume that this most probably occurred during this period of his life because he was free to practice the religion.

He and his agents were alleged to have fatally poisoned more than 6,000 people, both blacks and whites. Because his plan was to cause the collapse of the colonial economy, he is believed to have poisoned enslaved Africans who refused to participate in his plan. It is estimated that some plantations lost as much as 90% of their labor force through his poisoning schemes. The animals on the various plantations were not spared either as their work and sale contributed to the colonial economy.

Makandal's grand plan was to annihilate all white people in St. Domingue. To this end, he commissioned his agents to poison the water system of the second-largest city, Cap François, now Cap Haitien. However, he was betrayed and captured during a dance festival at a plantation owned by a white man named Mr. Dufresne. Knowing the difficulty of capturing Makandal because of his manipulations, Tafia, a locally made rum, was abundantly distributed, and this made his capture easy after he was inebriated.

His Death and Legacy

Makandal was able to escape from his cell, but he was recaptured and eventually sentenced to death at the stake. He was burned at the stake on

January 20, 1758, but not without drama. Although he had only one wrist, he is said to have broken free at the stake, but was captured and retied and burned. Selected enslaved Africans were brought from all around the colony to witness Makandal's death so as to deter future black rebellions. The enslaved Africans, however, believed that Makandal did not die in the fire, but rather turned into a fly and flew away as he is alleged to have promised. He also promised to return to win freedom for the Africans still held in bondage.

Even after his death or disappearance, the legend of Makandal continued to impact the lives and activities of many enslaved Africans. Another Hougan, Boukman, in particular, continued the work of Makandal. He incited the uprising that eventually led to the Haitian revolution, in which Vodou played a significant and successful part. Interestingly, another weapon for the blacks was the malaria- and yellow fever-carrying mosquitoes. It is estimated that thousands of French and British soldiers either died or suffered from malaria and yellow fever. Remembering Makandal's last words, the enslaved Africans saw the mosquitoes as a fulfillment of his promise.

David Amponsah

See also Vodou in Haiti

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MAMBO

The term *Mambo* refers to a high priestess of the Vodou religion as it is practiced in the Republic of Haiti in the Eastern Caribbean. Along with Houngans, their male counterparts, Mambos thus occupy the highest position in the Vodou hierarchy,

at least as far as humans are concerned. This entry looks at the initiation process, the role of the mambo, and her worship community.

Initiation Rites

How does one become a Mambo? This happens often through blood lineage, that is, as a spiritual family inheritance and charge passed from a mother or father to their daughter. However, one may also become a Mambo as result of having been called—that is, chosen by a *Lwa*, a Vodou divinity, to serve him or her. The *Lwa* typically makes his or her wish known through divination, recurrent dreams, or a series of misfortunes that are later interpreted as a spiritual call.

Vodu, like all other African religious traditions, is an initiatory religion. Thus, to become a Mambo, one must undergo initiation. In addition to the period of isolation and seclusion typical of African initiation, and known as *Kouche Kanzo*, initiation into the Vodou priesthood includes, most significantly, a “visit” to Papa Loko, the patron of Mambos and Houngans. It is indeed from Papa Loko that Mambos (and Houngans) receive their *Ason*, a sacred beaded calabash used as a rattle and as the mark of the priesthood. When they take possession of their *ason*, the women become known by the full title of Mambos *Asongwe*. These are the only true Vodou priestesses. Mambos and Houngans also receive from Papa Loko a spiritual name, which they will use to identify themselves while in the company of their spiritual brothers and sisters, that is, other Houngans and Mambos.

Initiation into the priesthood is always an expensive proposition, and many may have to delay it until they have raised the necessary funds. Indeed, many sacrifices will have to be made and numerous items will have to be purchased; for example, the *Lwa*'s favorite food and drinks to be presented to them during the initiation rituals; food and drinks for the visitors and other participants; and special clothes for the different ceremonies, which must be sewn. The drummers, who will be playing for several nights in a row, until sunrise, will also have to be paid. Until one is financially ready, they may undergo the first part of the initiation known as *Lave tèt* (“the washing of the head”), a ceremony during which one's hair will be

washed seven times with a special mixture made with plants, as one cleans oneself spiritually in order to be able to receive the Lwa.

A Servant's Role

To become a Mambo means that one agrees to act as an intermediary between the Lwa and the people. In actuality, being a Mambo equates with being both a servant of the Lwa and a servant of the people. One of the functions of a Mambo is to perform divination. This allows the living to find out what may be going on or going wrong in their lives. It also allows the Lwa to inform the living of what they need to do to restore harmony and peace in their lives, if necessary. It is the Mambo's responsibility to assist the living in following the Lwa's recommendations. Thus, they must be willing to organize and lead whatever formal ritual may be required.

They must, for instance, hold ceremonies aimed at feeding the Lwa, or they may have to preside over the wedding of a Lwa and a human being if the situation demands it. Mambos must also be healers. They must prepare medicines, often following recipes dictated to them by the Lwa, to restore someone's health or good luck. They may also have to give purifying baths. They may also have to prepare amulets to protect someone, or they may be asked to perform magic to attempt to change the course of things. All this, however, they will do with the assistance of the Lwa.

Another important and obvious responsibility of Mambos is initiation of new members into the Vodou religion and the teaching of the tradition. For this, they must seek the assistance of other Mambos and Houngans.

Community Leader

Whatever ritual a Mambo may perform, it will most likely take place within the confines of her *oumfò*, that is, her Vodou temple or spiritual center. However, in addition to being a place where spiritual ceremonies are held, an *oumfò* also functions as a commune. Indeed, attached to the Mambo who presides over the *oumfò* are a number of persons who were initiated by her or who have come to gravitate toward her, that is, *Hounsis*. The latter owe total respect and complete devotion to the Mambo, whom they call Manman ("Mother"), out of respect.

In fact, they form a society with clear rules centered on the Mambo. They usually spend a significant amount of time at the *oumfò*, may even sleep there at times, and certainly must come when called for help, especially during ceremonies, when dancers and singers are needed. They may also be called on to cook for the Lwa or the Mambo, to clean the peristyle, and, generally speaking, to get things ready for ceremonies.

In return for their loyalty, the Mambo must act as their counselor and protector and is ultimately responsible for their needs. If necessary, she must feed them and help pay for their hospital bill or children's school tuition. In other words, the Mambo is at the center of a network providing spiritual, social, and psychological comfort and support to all attached to it. Indeed, the Mambo, with the assistance of the Lwa whom she serves diligently, is ultimately responsible for the welfare of the members of her society.

Furthermore, Mambos are known to have played a critical role during the Haitian Revolutionary War in the 19th century. Mention is made, for instance, of the participation of Mambo Cécile Fatiman in the famous ceremony of Bois Caiman held on August 14, 1791. In conclusion, it must be remarked that African religion in general, and Vodou in particular, seems to be the only religion that allows women to reach the highest positions of authority. In Haiti, as a matter of fact, there are more Mambos than Houngans.

Ama Mazama

See also Houngan

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MAMI WATA

Mami Wata stands for a pantheon of water deities found primarily in the Vodun tradition practiced in Benin and Togo. However, manifestations and variations of Mami Wata, particularly as a female water deity, along with her devotees, are found in at least 20 African countries, the Caribbean, and North America.

Among the Igbo, she is *Ezenwaanyi* (“Queen or Chief of Women”), *Nnekwunwenyi* (“Honorable Woman”), *Ezebelamiri* (“Queen who lives in the Waters”), *Nwaanyi mara mma* (“More than Beautiful Woman”), or *Uhamiri*, “which has *mmiri*, or water as its root.” In parts of former Zaire, she is *Mamba Muntu*, “Crocodile Person.” In the diaspora, she is known as Watramama in Suriname and Guyana; Mamadjo in Grenada; Yemanya/Yemaya in Brazil and Cuba; La Sirène, Erzulie, and Simbi in Haiti; and Lamanté in Martinique. This entry offers a description of the Mami Wata and looks at their impact.

Descriptive Background

The name Mami Wata is thought to derive from the English word *mommy* or *mammy* and *water*, or “mother of the waters.” Devotees in this ancient tradition trace the origin of the name back to ancient Egypt: *ma* or *mama*, meaning “truth” or “wisdom,” and *uati* for “water.” Also, in many Sudanic languages, *wat* or *waat* is “woman.” The spread of the specific name Mami Wata has been attributed to the Kru of Liberia who, at the end of the 18th century, traveled extensively along the west coast of Africa on behalf of European traders and took Mami Wata with them.

Mami Wata deities are both male and female, but are nonhuman and have never been human. Mami Wata spirits are born of Nana Buluku, the great mother of the mountain, and head a sub-pantheon of deities known as Vodun. Other interpretations place Mami Wata deities below the rainbow serpent pair of Dan Aido Wedo. As part of a pantheon, each Mami Wata deity has a specific ceremony, food, drink, taboo, color, and sacred day. In addition, there are beads for each deity, called *danmi*, or “excrement of the rainbow

serpent.” The color, order, and material of the bead indicate a specific deity. Those worn on the left hand represent a male spirit, and those on the right are a female spirit.

Mami Wata deities are the source of Earthly wisdom, human creativity, genius, divine inspiration, and sacred paths to enlightenment. Priestesses are *mamisii*, *mamissi*, *mamaissii*, or *mammisi*. *Mammisi* means “motherhood temple” in ancient Egypt and could indicate a relationship with Isis. People enter into a relationship with Mami Wata by having an encounter as described earlier or through Ifa divination or dreams. In recent times, future devotees often experience a crisis that requires the assistance of a *mamisii*. In the past, villages would initiate a young girl who would then be responsible for maintaining their shrine to Mami Wata.

As a specific deity, Mami Wata appears as a beautiful creature, half woman, half fish, with long hair and a light brown complexion, and she lives in an exquisite underwater world. She is often depicted with a snake around her waist or across her shoulders or with a comb and a mirror. The snake is the immortal messenger of deities and a symbol of divination, which is important to devotees and *mamisii*. The comb and mirror are symbols of her beauty or vanity. Mami Wata’s colors are red and white, which reflect her dual nature as aggressive and yet healing and nurturing. She kidnaps people who are swimming, riding in boats, or walking along the shore and takes them to her underwater world. If a man walking along shore comes across, she will quickly return to the water leaving her comb and mirror behind. She will return to the man in his dreams demanding her items. If he returns them, promises to keep their encounter a secret, and swears to be a faithful lover, she will make him rich. If he does not, she will bring misfortune or death to him and his family. Mami Wata can also appear among humans disguised as a beautiful woman. Hence, her most popular associations are water and beautiful women.

Impact of Worship

The deities’ association with water was a major influence on the manifestation of Mami Wata

during the enslavement of African peoples. The transatlantic voyage left a traumatic impression on enslaved Africans, and often their most difficult task was to work in the swampy lands, particularly in the coastal areas in Suriname and Guyana, where devotees to Watramama were documented during enslavement. Water also provided a source of food to supplement the often scant food rations of the enslaved, and it was often the best means to escape. This multifaceted relationship with water created a powerful water deity that was both celebrated and feared.

In Suriname, the first mention of Mami Wata by name occurs in the 1740s, where the observer noted that if proper rituals were not performed, “Watermama” would harm her husband or child. Both Africans and Indigenous peoples feared the Mother of the waters. Thirty years later, dances to Watermama were banned in the country because of the “dangerous effects” they were having on the enslaved Africans. Over time, as Suriname society shifted to a land-based system, the prominence of Watermama gave way first to Earth spirits.

Because of the inclusive and fluid nature of indigenous West African religious practices, Mami Wata has incorporated perspectives and iconography from Hindu, Muslim, and European traditions, as well as modern urban living. In the Vodou of coastal Benin, images of the Hindu Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, beauty, and happiness who emerges from seafoam, appear in shrines to Mami Wata as do Islam’s al-Buraq, the winged horse with a woman’s head that the prophet Mohammed rode from Mecca to Jerusalem. An image of a Samoan snake charmer girl from a traveling German show made in 1887 arrived in coastal Benin and was quickly appropriated into Mami Wata iconography. Artist renditions of this picture have since come to be the dominant image of Mami Wata.

Also during this time, the popularity of many local and regional versions of female water deities increased as urbanization severed ties to a distinct rural geographical community and fostered a sense of individualism. In this new urban environment, the desire for community still exists alongside distinctly individualistic aspirations for beauty, wealth, and well-being. Mami Wata meets these

needs. New Mami Wata deities emerged that deal with prostitution, birth control, and abortion. In the diaspora, Mami Wata offers a way to reconnect with African ancestral spirituality, and it also provides personal healing.

Denise Martin

See also Spirit Medium; Water

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MAROON COMMUNITIES

Maroons are groups of formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants who gained their freedom by fleeing chattel enslavement and running to the safety and cover of the remote mountains or the dense overgrown tropical terrains near the plantations. Many of the groups are found in the Caribbean and, in general, throughout the Americas—Central, South, and North. In Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, Suriname (the former Dutch Guiana), Cuba, Puerto Rico, St. Vincent, Guyana, Dominica, Panama, Colombia, and Mexico, and from the Amazon River Basin to the southern United States, primarily Florida and the Carolinas, there are well-known domiciles of the Maroons.

The word *Maroon*, first recorded in English in 1666, is by varying accounts taken from the French word *marron*, which translates to “runaway Black slave,” or the American/Spanish *cimarrón*, which means “wild runaway slave,” “the beast who cannot be tamed,” or “living on mountaintops.” The

Spanish used the word in reference to their stray cattle, with cattle being the root of the word *chattel*, which is of course the descriptor of the “peculiar institution” called slavery in the Americas. It is further believed that the word *cimarrón* is from *cima* or “summit.”

It is important to note that most Africans did not refer to themselves as Maroons. They usually opted for liberatory, powerful names such as “Nyankipong Pickibu,” which means “Children of the Almighty” in Twi, a language widely spoken in Ghana, West Africa. The Jamaican Maroons tend to prefer the monikers “Koromanti,” “Kromanti,” or “Yungkungung” to denote their culture and history. This entry looks at the origins of Maroon communities in Africa, their history of struggle and revolt in the New World, and their contemporary representation.

African Origins

According to legend, the Koromanti name continues to ring in the Maroon communities for one of two traditional reasons. The first is that it memorializes and pays tribute to one of their last visions of home, the West African coast of the same name that was traversed by the newly enslaved Africans en route to the ship that would transport them to the West. The alternative explanation is that the appellation represents the memory of the Koromanti clan, a subgroup of the Asante people of Ghana. (These two groups, along with the Congo, are the three African ethnic groups that comprise the Jamaican Maroons.)

In 1717, the Koromanti are said to have famously rebelled against Asante paramountcy and killed their hallowed King, Osei Tutu I, whose body is said to have fallen into the river, never to be seen again. This inspired the Asante people to take a sacred oath that empowered them to rise up and put down the Koromanti uprising. Legend has it that the thwarted Kormantis were exiled and sold into slavery for their abomination. It is said that only their memory resides in Ghana. To this day, the Koromanti designation is commonly used by the Maroons to describe their rituals, languages, dances, and songs, which are sung to bury the dead and accompany healing rituals.

There are divergent accounts as to the earliest Maroons, with some even indicating that the first Maroon was a solitary African who escaped from

the first slave ship to dock in the Americas in 1502, just 10 years after Columbus’s arrival. He is said to have escaped to the jungle-like interior of Hispaniola, or “Little Spain” in Spanish (present-day Haiti), blazing a trail that many of his African brethren and sisters would follow. Most reports, however, start the timeline at 1512, when a steady stream of enslaved Africans began escaping from Spanish and Portuguese slavers and “disappearing” into the hinterlands.

A Continuing Struggle

The Maroons strategically teamed with indigenous peoples or survived from sheer will and have maintained a continuous presence in the Western hemisphere. Faced with monumentally hostile conditions, they tactically established armed settlements because they were in constant danger of being recaptured or killed by European tyrants. Moreover, there was always the perpetual battle to physically sustain themselves because they were often left to forage for food, especially on the smaller islands of the Caribbean. To this, one must add the challenge of reproducing and multiplying their numbers.

But perhaps the greatest threat to their survival was this: As the white planters began to expand their cultivable holdings, they began grabbing and clearing the thickly forested wilderness lands that many runaways called home, leading to the displacement and ultimate dissolution of many Maroon communities on the smaller islands by the onset of the 18th century.

On the larger islands, however, the Maroons were able to hunt, grow crops, and, in a word, thrive. As increasing numbers of Africans escaped and joined their ranks, they took guerrilla warfare to new heights, burning and raiding plantations as well as poisoning slavers. Needless to say, they struck fear in the hearts of the white enslavers, causing the British and U.S. governments to pass dozens of acts against them and spend millions of pounds and dollars to conquer them. This was often for naught because the Maroons were led by fearless warriors who would stop at nothing to throw off the insidious chains of chattel slavery.

Indeed, dozens of Maroon wars and revolts are reflected in the historical record, with the first one

in 1519, led by Henriques against the Spanish in Hispaniola. In Brazil, the Africans set up settlements known as Quilombos. The most famous of such settlements was Quilombo dos Palmares, in the northwestern part of Brazil. It functioned successfully as an independent republic of the Maroons in the 17th century, following an African pattern of social organization. At its apex, it was the home and refuge of more than 30,000 African men, women, and children who had managed to escape the dreadful experience of plantation life. Its most famous and last leader was Zumbi dos Palmares, who was born in freedom in Quilombo dos Palmares.

The Jamaican Rebellion

It is the Jamaicans, however, who hold the distinction of waging the most slave rebellions in the West per capita. Historically, two major groups inhabited either side of the Caribbean island, the Windward Maroons of the East and the Leeward Maroons of the West. They were led by Queen Nanni (Nanny) and Kojo, respectively. Some accounts even indicate that Nanni and Kojo were siblings, whereas others discount that notion. Whatever the case, they no doubt shared a blood bond forged in the crucible of the Maroon Wars. Although they both fought valiantly, and although the written history of the Maroons is almost totally dominated by male figures, it is Queen Nanni who is arguably the most consequential military figure in Jamaican Maroon history, in that she successfully united all the Maroons of the island.

So monumental and superhuman were the accomplishments of the Obeah woman, Grande Nanni, that some even believe that she is more a mythical than a historical figure. Nonetheless, it is believed that Queen Nanni was born in present-day Ghana in the 1680s. The Akan Queen Mother was the religious, military, and cultural leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons from around 1725 to 1740, during the acme of their amazing resistance against the British, who outnumbered them exponentially and, at that time, were the world's greatest military power.

Queen Nanni, known as "The Mother of Us All," was able to successfully evade capture for many years, even during the height of the British

effort to exterminate her from 1730 to 1734. During this time, they raided and destroyed Nanni Town, the bunker town she established at Jamaica's highest vantage point, atop the Blue Mountains, with the Stony and Nanny Rivers flowing through it. The town was guarded by armed sentinels, who used the abeng, the side-blown horn that came to symbolize the Jamaican Maroons, to communicate with the troops.

After 83 years of armed warfare, the Leeward Maroons, led by Captain Kojo, and the British entered into the Peace Treaty of 1739. The Windward Maroons signed the Land Grant of 1740, after which Queen Nanni founded New Nanni Town in 1740. It is believed that she died in the 1750s, and in 1976 she was named a National Hero of Jamaica. Even now, Maroons continue to believe that Queen Nanni was sent by the Almighty God to lead the Jamaican people to freedom.

Her brother Kojo is equally celebrated among the Leeward Jamaican Maroons based in Accompong. Each year at 10 a.m. on his birthday, January 6, the Maroons meet at the Kindah Tree to renew their traditional rites and to honor their ancestors. The Kindah Tree is said to be sacred and symbolic of family unity in the community. There they prepare unsalted pork and ritually make their way to the Peace Cave, the site where the Treaty was signed.

Perhaps this rich tradition is what has made the Jamaican Maroons the most widely known around the world, fueling the global love affair with Reggae music and Rastafarian culture. The Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey, the father of black nationalism, and the renowned poet Claude McKay, a giant of the Harlem Renaissance era, both are direct Jamaican Maroon descendants. Contemporaneously, there remain four viable Jamaican Maroon communities: Moore Town (formerly New Nanny Town), Accompong, Scott's Hall, and Charles Town.

The Haitian Insurrections

Of course, this was not the end of the pitched battles of the Maroons. Haiti was home to two of the largest such insurrections. One such was the 6-year rebellion led by François Makandal, a Guinean *Vodun* priest. Before being captured and

publicly executed by the French in 1758, he and his army killed up to 6,000 whites during what the Maroons consider his divinely inspired reign.

In fact, the creation of present-day Haiti (and the end of chattel enslavement on the island) was the result of another Maroon uprising led by Boukman, another *Vodun* priest who, on August 14, 1791, organized a traditional *Vodun* ceremony in Bois Caiman in the northern mountains of Hispaniola. During this ritual meeting—which was conducted under a rainy, overcast sky—the congregants commenced lamenting their treatment at the hands of the whites who continued to hunt them like animals. Their frustration and righteous indignation began to cascade like the rain from above. Legend has it that the spirit of the Lwa possessed a woman in the crowd, moving her to slit the throat of a pig and distribute its blood to all in attendance. At that time they made a blood pact to exterminate all the whites on the island colony.

A week later, on August 22, 1791, the northern Maroons set their plan in motion and killed all whites whom they encountered, setting fire to many of the plantations on the island. Boukman would meet his demise when the French captured and beheaded him. In an effort to convince the Africans of their mortality, the French displayed his head on the square of Cap Français (modern-day Cap-Haïtien), but by this time the die was cast. The Maroons were undaunted. The Haitian Revolution was on.

Toussaint L'Ouverture soon entered the historical stage. With his military and tactical genius—from 1791 until 1800—he pitted the French, Spanish, and British against each other. By 1801, his European opponents had been vanquished, and he held the reins of power, becoming the self-appointed governor of Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Alarmed to no end, Napoleon Bonaparte sent 82,000 of his finest French troops, armed to the teeth—with guns, canons, dogs, and other sundry munitions—to the now autonomous French colony, which had drawn up its own constitution that abolished slaveholding.

The two armies fought to a draw; however, the French acted in bad faith and arrested Toussaint during a meeting in June 1802, after which Dessalines became the new leader of the

Revolution. L'Ouverture was exiled to France, where he died in April 1803, within a year of reaching the frigid Alpine mountain city of Jura. However, his memory lives on, and the Haitian Revolution is arguably the most compelling grounds for belief in the otherworldly power of the Maroons.

Contemporary Communities

Many of the Maroon communities are now extinct, but several continue to exist. Most notable are the Saramacca, the Surinamese Maroons, who have singularly managed to remain politically and culturally viable and self-controlled from 1690 to the present. Some other celebrated Maroon communities/leaders were Bayono of Panama, Yanga of Mexico, Benkos Bioho of Colombia, Bondi of Suriname, and John Horse of the southern United States and Mexico.

It is widely believed that the Maroon spirit has sustained African people's willingness and ability to resist and revolt against all forms of oppression, then and now.

Pamela D. Reed

See also Bois Caiman

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MARRIAGE

It is an understatement to say that marriage is of utmost importance in African religion. In effect, marriage is widely acknowledged throughout the African continent as one of the most critical moments in a person's life, along with birth, puberty, and death. Marriage is a sacred rite of passage. This is the case because marriage is intimately linked with procreation. In fact, the main, if not only, purpose of marriage is procreation. In most African societies, marriage is not deemed complete until a child has been born. Likewise, a man is not a full man or a woman a full woman until they have given birth to a child. Marriage is an important institution in Africa because the survival and thriving of the whole community depends on it. It is sacred, cosmic drama in which all normal members of the community are expected to participate. This entry looks at the link between marriage and procreation, examines the role of the family, and follows the course of the institution from preparation and negotiation through ceremonies and separation.

Link to Childbearing

Thus, to thoroughly grasp the significance of marriage in African religion and life, one must fully understand the meaning of childbearing for African people. Many scholars have noted that the preservation and transmission of life may well be the highest African cultural value. Within the context of the African worldview, the birth of many children is consequently seen as an imperative and a blessing because those children will ensure the continuation and strengthening of the family lineage and the community at large. Also, the children will be responsible for ensuring that their parents receive proper burial rites and for performing commemorative rituals that, in turn, will maintain the deceased in a state of immortality through their continued connection with the world of the living.

Marriage creates the context within which children are conceived and born, hence its critical significance. Getting married and having children is a social, moral, and, ultimately, spiritual obligation

and privilege. Likewise, one's refusal or failure to get married and have children is largely incomprehensible, and certainly quite reprehensible, as far as African religion is concerned. It signifies that one is rejecting God, whose original creative and continuous power manifests itself, among other things, through the uninterrupted birth of human beings; it is as well a rejection of humanity because the latter depends on human fertility for its perpetuation.

The Family's Role

Marriage, from the standpoint of African religion, is never simply an affair between a man and a woman, but an event that involves at least two families. African families are normally quite large because they include several subunits. In a matrilineal context, for example, a family will include at the minimum a woman, her husband, their daughters, their daughters' husbands, and their children. In addition, there may be other relatives sent to live with them, servants and their children, who become an intricate part of the household.

Furthermore, families also include not only the living, but also the ancestors of the lineage, as well as the children yet to be born. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that marriage provides a unique and dramatic opportunity for all the members of a particular community to meet: the deceased, the living, and the unborn. All have a stake in marriage. In the case of an exogamous marriage system, that is, when the wife must come from another lineage or clan, marriage involves not only two families, but also two clans as well.

Also, in patrilineal societies, men may marry more than one woman, provided that they have the financial means to support them and their children, and marriage then becomes a multiple marriage, involving an even larger number of individuals, families, and clans.

Preparation and Negotiation

Marriage being a most serious affair, young men and women are thoroughly prepared for married life. Indeed, in most African societies, one can get married only after having been initiated. When no initiation rites are followed, young people nonetheless receive instruction regarding marriage,

sex, family life, and procreation. Among the Mende people, for example, there exist two societies, the *Poro* Society (for young men) and the *Bondo* or *Sande* Society (for young women), whose main raison d'être is educational: Their primary goal is indeed to socialize the males and the females according to Mende norms. Thus, whereas the Poro society initiates young boys into Mende manhood, the Sande society introduces girls into Mende womanhood. The initiation covers a 7-year period and usually begins at the time of puberty. Only at the end of the initiation process are the initiates deemed ready for marriage.

Similarly, among the Lamba people, a mother will always start looking for a wife for her son among initiated girls from neighboring villages and would never consider any uninitiated girl because such a person would not be qualified for marriage. Initiation indeed breaks one's bonds with childhood and prepares one for integration into the adult community. Among the Wolof, where no such initiation rites exist, the elders meet with the bride to give her advice and gifts.

Although there is not one single pattern to initiate marriage, it is common for the parents and other close relatives of a young man to contact the parents of a young woman and start discussing the possibility of their getting married. If the girl's parents should agree, after consulting their daughter, then marriage negotiations will start. Of course, quite often, the young man and woman already know each other and may have expressed interest in one another.

For example, among the Namwanga people, a young man in search of a wife will offer an engagement token (called *Insalamu*), such as beads or money, to a woman of his liking. If the woman accepts the *Insalamu*, this means that she has accepted his proposition. The matter is then brought to the attention of the man's parents, who, if they agree with their son's choice, will approach the girl's parents. Good character, an excellent reputation, an industrious nature, and a respectful stance toward the elders, rather than physical appearance and attractiveness, are the qualities sought after and valued by the parents while selecting a mate for their son or daughter. In addition, marriage between close relatives is not permitted. When endogamous marriage is the norm, the man and woman are carefully

scrutinized to make sure that they are not closely related. It is feared that if two closely related people should marry, their children would die.

One of the most important issues to be addressed and resolved during the negotiations period is the payment that the man's family will make to the woman's family. Payment is not made to purchase the woman, but simply as a token of appreciation for the good care given to the woman by her parents. While negotiations go on, the future husband and wife are encouraged to spend time together, although they are not expected to engage in sex prior to their wedding. Payment would often be made in the form of cattle, chickens, and other animals. Once payment has been made, the wedding may take place. Some African communities, such as the Yoruba and the Krio, organize a prewedding ceremony: When her fiancé comes to visit her, the bride is kept hidden by her family. Instead, the man is presented with several women, usually old. As he recognizes the trickery, he keeps asking for his fiancée until the latter appears in the midst of great excitement and joy.

Ceremony and Separation

Wedding ceremonies may be simple or complex affairs, lasting several days. A wedding, when the cost of the payment made to the bride's family is added, may therefore turn out to be a quite expensive proposition to which all the family members contribute. In general, many rites and rituals are performed as part of the wedding ceremony. Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices are made to the ancestors on behalf of the groom and the bride to ensure that their union be blessed with many pregnancies and safe deliveries.

Among the Yoruba people, for instance, the oldest woman in attendance will spray gin (which is closely associated with the ancestors) on the couple and other relatives to bless the new marriage. Among the Bemba people of Central Africa, a woman about to get married is given a clay pot by her father's sister. Because the main purpose of marriage is procreation, the clay pot stands for the womb that is expected to be filled and blessed with many pregnancies. A similar ritual can be observed among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, when the paternal aunt hands a clay pot full of water to a bride to bless

her with a fertile marriage. Water is intimately associated with fertility in Africa. Among the Hutu, on the day of her wedding, a woman's body is smeared with milk and herbs to cleanse her from her previous life and make her pure and ready for her new life as a married woman.

Marriage is a binding contract, not to be broken lightly. One of the most common causes of divorce is sterility on the part of women and men. This is easy to understand given that the only non-negotiable requirement for marriage is fertility. Thus, among the Luo people, for instance, a woman may divorce her husband if he is sexually impotent, and therefore incapable of getting her pregnant, and also if he suffers from gluttony. However, special arrangements, such as sexual and reproductive duties being performed by a close relative or another woman, may prevent divorce.

In some communities, in the case of death of one of the spouses, it is the responsibility of the family of the deceased to provide a replacement. This has often been referred to as *wife inheritance* and is grossly misunderstood. The brother of a man who just died does not inherit his sister-in-law per se as much as he lives up to his obligation to provide for his brother's widow and their children, thus sparing them a life of misery. Likewise, when a woman dies, her family must provide a replacement for her in the form of another woman who will be responsible for the children and husband of the deceased wife. This is because, in the African tradition, marriage is often a levirate union.

The death of one's spouse is nonetheless always followed by a period of mourning, which may last for a while. Thus, among the Luo people again, a man who has lost his wife must wait until he can sleep in their conjugal room or be around other women. It is not until he has dreamed of making love with his wife, which may take quite a long time (sometimes several years), that he is allowed to use the conjugal bedroom again and live a normal life. Until then, he must sleep in another room and sometimes even outside on the veranda.

Ama Mazama

See also Children; Family; Fertility; Infertility; Initiation; Procreation; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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MAWU-LISA

African deities are generally grouped as primary deities, secondary deities, and tertiary deities, the latter group including clan spirits, local divinities, and personal gods. In the Dahomean Vodun pantheon, Mawu-Lisa (also spelled Mahu-Lisa, Mahou-Lissa, or Mahu-Lissa) is the first on the list of primary deities. In other words, in the hierarchy of powers, Mawu-Lisa comes at the top and assumes the role of commander-in-chief.

Mawu and Lisa are the creator couple of Heaven and Earth. Mawu, the female principle, corresponds to the moon and is associated with night, fertility, motherhood, gentleness, forgiveness, rest, and joy, all characteristics that one sees in women. Lisa, the male principle, corresponds to the sun and is associated with day, heat, work, power, war, strength, toughness, and intransigence, all things that characterize typical male persons. Hence, Mawu and Lisa are the sky gods who absorb the nature of the Supreme Being or God Almighty in the Fon Cosmology.

Indeed, Mawu among the Fon of Dahomey (now Benin Republic) is the same spiritual principle or entity as Odoudouwa (also known as *Olou Odawa*) among the Nago and the Yoruba of Nigeria. In the same vein, Lisa among the Fon corresponds to Obatala (also called *Orisha N'la*, *Itchala*, or *Itchala Mon*) among the Nago and the Yoruba. These and many other similarities between the Dahomean Vodun and the Nigerian Orisha are so clearly discernible and striking that

eminent Benin scholar, diplomat, and African traditional religion critic, Dr. Joseph Yai Olabiyi Babalola once suggested that one refer instead to this important religion as Orisha-Vodun. Of course, one could well say Vodun-Orisha had there not been a need for alphabetical order in Babalola's formulation of the compound word.

One Force

Mawu-Lisa, the Supreme Entity, is often seen as a complementary sexual pair that is merged into one force and referred to as *Mawu*, that is, God in a general sense among the Fon of Dahomey and the Ewe of Ghana and Togo. For example, to swear to God, the Fon people say *N'xwulé Mawu* (*N'xwulé* = I swear to and *Mawu* = God), and the Ewe of Ghana and Togo and the Mina of Togo would say *N'ta Mawu* (*N'ta* = I swear to, *Mawu* = God). This Supreme Entity, Mawu among the Fon and the Ewe, is called Olodumare, Olorun, or Oluwa among the Nago and the Yoruba and is known as Bondye or Gran Met among the Haitians of the Caribbean Islands.

Mawu is the Omnipotent Father whose commands all world creatures must obey at all times. In his role as the patron saint of the universe and all things and creatures in it, Mawu-Lisa is surrounded by his children or creatures, that is, all Vodun who serve as intermediaries or emissaries between human beings and him. Indeed, the Vodun being the creatures or children of Mawu is clearly evidenced in the Fon saying, "*Mawu wè do Vodun lè*" (It is Mawu who created and owns all Vodun).

Offspring Gods

Some of Mawu-Lisa's children and their respective roles, as delineated by Mawu-Lisa, are as follows:

Sakpata: the oldest child of Mawu, to whom the Earth was entrusted. He is the god of smallpox and the Vodun of wealth or prosperity. He is also known as Ayivodun (god of the Earth) or Ainon (proprietor of the Earth).

Heviosso or *Hebiosso* (also spelled *Xêviosso* or *Xêbiosso*): Mawu's second child, who is in charge

of the sky, thunder or lightning, and rain. He is the Vodun of Justice who punishes criminals and evil doers, as well as anything, including trees and animals, that is considered harmful, by striking them down, especially during rain. He is also known as Jivodun (*Ji* = sky; hence Vodun of the sky).

Xu or *Tovodun*, also known as *Agbé* or *Avlékété*: god of the Ocean.

Gu or *Ogu*: god of iron. Gu is considered the god of blacksmiths, warriors, and hunters. This god does not condone evil-doing insofar as he kills accomplices of wrongdoing when he is appealed to. A famous phrase among the Fon of Dahomey is *Yé da Gu do me* (to call on Gu to deal with someone, or to send Gu onto somebody).

Aguê: the fifth child of Mawu, who is responsible for overseeing agriculture and the forests. This is the god that reigns over birds and all animals.

Jo: god of invisibility, the Vodun of the air.

Lègba: Mawu's youngest son barely received any endowments because all had been divided up among his older siblings. This accounts for his jealous nature. He is, however, considered the town or country protector, but only on condition that offerings are regularly made to him. In other words, if not cared for, this god can be a destroyer, exemplifying thus the Good and Evil. *Lègba* is a professional agitator, provoker, aggressor, or instigator who is somehow against the deeds of the Providence. He is otherwise called a trickster god. To avoid falling into his trap or getting into his troubles, people regularly give him offerings.

Dan Ayido Huèdo or *Dan Aidowèdo*: god of the rainbow, fertility, and wealth. This is the god who serves as the link between Heaven and Earth.

Dan or *Dangbé*: the serpent-god, whose ancestors are pythons. He is famous among the Xwéda of Gléxwé or Ouidah, a historical city in Benin where the most sacred python temple is housed.

Tohossou: god of the waters and of monsters. He dwells in lagoons, rivers, and wells.

Hobo Vodun or *Hobovi*: god of the twins who are worshiped as well.

Kinnessi or *Kinlinsi*: goddess of witchcraft. Her home is believed to be in Abomey-Calavi, Benin.

Atinmèvodun or *Lokovodun*: god of the trees.

Zo Vodun: god of fire.

A Complex Idea

Among the Fon, Mawu-Lisa, the Creator God, is called by many names that not only express his omnipotence and omniscience, but also give him the highest reverence due to him. These names are *Mahu* (The Unsurpassable, the Transcendental Force in comparison to whom none is bigger or higher), *Gbèdoto* (Creator and Owner of the Universe), *Dada Sègbo* (Greatest Spirit, King of the Kings), *Sègbo Lisa* (Greatest Spirit Lisa), and *Sèmèdo* (Great Spirit, Maker of Humanity).

All in all, the concept of Mawu-Lisa is difficult to comprehend and is subject to all sorts of confusion, in the sense that when Mawu and Lisa are seen separately, which they occasionally are, it is only Lisa who becomes a separate deity that is worshiped. Like all other Vodun, Lisa has shrines, priests, and priestesses, as well as rituals dedicated to him. Thus, the adepts of Lisa are known as *Lisassi* (wives of Lisa). Conversely, there is no separate Vodun called Mawu, who is worshiped and has shrines, priests and priestesses, and rituals dedicated to her. Likewise, there are no Vodunsi (adepts of the Vodun) known as *Mawusi*. People do bear the name Mawusi among the Fon, but it is pronounced differently as *Mawusii* (meaning “all power belongs to Mawu”).

However, when Mawu-Lisa is viewed as a two-in-one force, the entity becomes Mawu, not a deity, but the Supreme God. Hence, it is all the other Vodun or divinities who are worshiped in that they constantly intervene on behalf of human beings before Mawu-Lisa. Their divine interventions, however, are within the strict limits of the power that Mawu-Lisa has conferred on each of these divinities in the domain that is exclusively reserved to them. Each Vodun operates within the realm that Mawu-Lisa has carved for him or her. In other words, Mawu-Lisa delegates some of his

power, as a division of labor, to the Vodun, his children, who exert their powers on all things and on humanity.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Vodou in Benin

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MEDICINE

African medicine is the health practice involving the application of indigenous resources, spiritual and material, in providing mental, psychological, social, and physical well-being and wholeness to a human being and his or her environment. It addresses the well-being of the individual and the community, the fertility of the soil, and animal production. The material resources include the use of elements from plants (roots, leaves, and barks), animals (blood, intestines, flesh, bones, and shells), and minerals. Spiritual resources involve interaction of the human with spiritual entities, including the use of words—symbols employed to invoke the power of spiritual beings.

Medicine involves the triad practice of explanation, prognostication, and control (treatment and/or prevention) of disease or illness. The African conception of wholeness and well-being goes beyond a simplistic perception of the soundness of body and mind and the stability of mental and physical conditions only; it also expresses harmonious relationship with the spiritual and physical environments. Africans conceive of disease and illness, in a holistic manner, as having a deep spiritual and metaphysical nature and causation.

Traditional medical practices therefore include nonempirical and empirical means to heal human beings from spiritual, psychological, social, physical, and political dislocations, and to restore cosmic balance. The different peoples of Africa, in varieties of culturally constructed ways, express their notion and understanding of the means through which disease and illness are communicated, diagnosed, and treated. All these are closely linked to and connected with mythic narratives and ritual practices, the dimensions through which the peoples offer explanations for the causes of disease, prognosticating into the possible cure and control, and removal or prevention of disease in some ways different from Western medical practice.

The similarity in their understanding of disease and illness, and approach to healing notwithstanding, African medicine provides indigenous resources for maintaining and restoring of health by the use of spiritual and material elements that are available in their different environments. This entry looks at the African view of disease, its health and healing practices, the people who employ them, and the spread of African ideas to the larger health community.

Disease and African Worldview

The worldviews of the Africans are wrapped up in myths describing the vertical (spiritual) and horizontal (social) dimensions of the complex relationships of human beings to other universal entities. The origins, causes, diagnosis, prevention, and cure of disease are embedded and enshrined in cosmological myths. Diseases or illnesses are usually attributed to two main agents: the spiritual and social.

Spiritual Causative Agents

This spiritual dimension explains the African universe as possessing an array of deities with hierarchical structures and pervasive vital powers or forces. Spiritual causative agents, who populate the seen and unseen, visible and invisible spaces, and the animate and inanimate, are believed to be actively instrumental in primordial origin of diseases. These agents include the Supreme Being, lesser deities, ancestors and ancestresses, and humans' personal

spiritual duplicates. By nature and functions, they could be categorized mainly into two, the benevolent and malevolent, a few of them ambivalent.

Although most African communities hold the Supreme Being as the creator or source of other beings, only a few of them ascribe to him the primary spiritual agency of disease causation as expressed in the myth of the Akan of Ghana and the practice of the Lugbara. To the Lugbara, disturbances and virulent diseases resulting from mental afflictions are believed to be caused by the Supreme Being. Others attribute the causes of disease to the weak characters of the first created deities as we have in the myth of the Edo of Nigeria; although a few others attribute the cause to the weakness of the first created human beings, as expressed in the myth of the Yao, a Bantu-speaking people of Malawi and Mozambique; and misbehavior of the first created beings as revealed in the myths of the Mende of Sierra Leone and Dinka of southern Sudan, at a primordial time.

The Yoruba, Basoga, and Gisu attribute some disease to deities who represent the Supreme Being's aspect of the wrath and judgment on human beings who contravene important rituals or violate communal taboos. Yet several of the peoples who maintain the joint responsibility of disease causality by deities and humans offer destiny or predestination as an explanation.

Social Causative Agents

Most Africans see human beings as the primary social agent of disease causation, which concerns interactions, relationships and activities that result in disharmony and disturbance in the social world, and cosmic imbalance. Some human beings are believed to be capable of assuming extra-human positions to afflict and harm their alleged offenders, enemies, and rivals through mystical means; they often take vengeance on behalf of those who solicit their assistance. Witches, sorcerers, and evil eyes are in this category. Of particular note, witches are a commonplace and most dreaded phenomenon among most African peoples. Misbehavior and other social vices, desecration of some sacred spaces, a breach or violation of a community's taboos, and disregard or contempt for culturally constructed rituals are also social causes of illness or disease.

The spiritual and social dimensions, however, interact because both are claimed to have originated from the same source; they always have on them the stamp of spiritual beings. Illness or disease includes all forms of human discomfort and suffering (mental, social, and physical), misfortunes, ill luck or bad luck, failure, and barrenness; environmental crises including drought and famine and their unpleasant effects on such phenomena as animals and land; and natural disaster and calamity.

Healing and Healing Practices

Healing concerns the mental (psychological), social, and physical aspects of human life, as well as a harmonious and peaceful environment. The diagnostic and healing techniques, the kind of healing agents to consult, prescription and application of medical elements, and material contents of the medicine are determined by the cause and nature of disease and illnesses, the courses and duration of episodes, and the effects on victim or patient and the community.

Myth is the primary source of African peoples' understanding of healing practices. Ritual practices constitute the centerpiece of diagnosis, explanation, control, and treatment of disease. Ritual practices aim at returning human beings and the environment to a normal state or condition and preventing unseen influences of evil spiritual forces and soliciting the support of benevolent spirit forces.

Sources of Healing Power

The nonempirical and empirical resources both constitute the sources of African healing power in sustaining their universe. The nonempirical involves the tapping of the power, by therapeutic specialists, from the Supreme Being, lesser deities, ancestral spirits, and living individuals who are believed to have been endowed by spiritual beings. Also, certain statements, expressions, and invocations that embody spiritual references are strong and potential sources of enhancing and enforcing healing.

The empirical resources include biotic elements including animals, plants, and water, which enhance healing and wholeness. Other material

elements including natural phenomena and objects that are spiritually strengthened by ritual activities are potential sources of medicinal efficacy. In both cases, the sources are claimed to have been revealed to the forebears of medical practice who continued to pass them on to generations after them in a conscious manner, through training of their offspring or those divinely chosen, or in an unconscious way through normal daily uses.

Methods

Africans employ a comprehensive approach in their methods of healing. These nonexclusive categories include psychotherapy, somatherapy, metaphysicotherapy, and hydrotherapy. Psychotherapy involves the use of symbolic elements, actions, and words that could affect calmness and physical and spiritual upliftment. Ritual specialists engage patients with diverse health problems in collective domestic activities in their backyards. Sometimes patients jointly perform some dramatic socioritual activities where the ritual specialist ecstatically invokes blessings on individuals.

Somatherapy deals with the application of some physical measures like incision, chaining, or tying of consecrated thread and chains on wrists, necks, and waists. Objects are also symbolically used to counter the activities of perceived enemies of the victim to remove misfortunes and command success and harmony. The ritual specialist may tell the victim or community to provide ritual elements for human beings or spirit forces to share; the victim or the community may also be instructed to carry ritual elements to a particular sacred place or shrine to restore health or affect ontological equilibrium.

Metaphysicotherapy deals with the application of nonempirical means to affect healing. In this sense, the ritual specialist plays an active role in private consultation of the Spiritual Being, whose nature and function are associated with the illness, and the spiritual being whose responsibility it is to affect the healing. The ritual specialist uses incantations, spells, and other invocatory statements to bring order into chaos. Hydrotherapy, the use of water for healing, has its strong effect and efficacy not only in African ethnocosmology, but also in several creation myths of the other peoples of the world. There is the universal belief

in the importance of water, first as the foremost element in the cosmic order. Some myths claim that water is a female deity who characterizes coolness and ubiquity, and is thus available for all purposes and cures. However, no method is used in exclusion of the other.

Traditional Medicine Specialists

It is difficult to make a clear classification of healing agents or traditional medicine specialists who could be male or female. Their functions overlap in most cases because what Africans define as disease or illness covers a wide range of personal and communal problems of life. Some of the indigenous languages of the different peoples lack such distinctions as those the scholars make. It is important to note that they could be classified, roughly however, in relation to their main and primary functions. There are herbalists, diviners, and priest- and priestess-healers. All of these could also be designated as mediums because they serve as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual. One other kind of medium of special recognition among some African peoples are the rainmakers. These healers are made through family inheritance, deity chosen, or voluntary decision. A conviction of the individual is, however, crucial to the practice.

All of these groups require some processes of initiation or formal and informal training with different and varied duration. The initiation usually requires the candidate to swallow some ritual ingredients for empowerment to be able to see beyond the ordinary so as to be able to deal with all spiritual forces and with visible and invisible cases. The training of herbalists, diviners, and priests and priestesses takes a relatively longer time, up to 7 or 9 years, because they have to learn the mechanisms of dealing with all cases relating to diseases ranging from personal to communal, from domestic to economic, in matters relating to life and death.

Herbalists

Mostly women, herbalists could be described as medicine men and women par excellence because they possess the science and art of making use of several substances from animals and plants, as well as supernatural forces, in therapeutic activities.

They acquire as much knowledge as they can from their masters and mistresses. The competence of an herbalist depends greatly on the depth of the knowledge and skill of his or her tutor, the vegetative materials available in the training environment, the duration of the apprenticeship, the kind of diseases that are addressed during his or her apprenticeship, and his or her own level of intelligence, as well as his or her attitude (patience, endurance, faithfulness, painstakingness, etc.) to the teacher.

A successful herbalist possesses knowledge of and skill in using medicines, animals, insects, eggs, and shells; the nature of physical objects; the nature of spirits and the living-dead; and many other secrets. All of the materials derive their efficacy, power, and use from primordial origins, with the effect that, as the practitioners would claim among the Yoruba, the existential power and names that they symbolically apply in their practice command healing on their clients.

Herbalists deal primarily with individual problems, paying much attention to each client to be able to deal with such a case spiritually, psychologically, and physically. They cure and prevent diseases, and they intervene between the client (victim) and the witches. They solicit the assistance of spiritual forces who maintain ontological equilibrium in the universe.

Herbalists, after their formal initiation and having been known by several clients who patronized their master or mistress, already gain their own clients from those who are acquainted with their skills while with their master or mistress. Because Africans' gregarious nature allows the people to share in the experience of persons who have one disease or the other, they are familiar with those specialists who perform those duties. They introduce such herbalists when needed.

Herbalists diagnose patients primarily through information by either the client or the relatives. Herbalists also observe the client and subsequently make consultation with spiritual beings on the cause and possible remedy. Regardless of whether the disease or illness is known by name, consultation with the spiritual world is common to the users. During the consultation, herbalists plead on behalf of the sick for the materials to be used to be efficacious.

They then prepare the specific herbs from plants, animals, and barks that have curative properties for such a disease or illness. Several words or incantations are chanted on the herbs.

Sometimes a whole living animal is used. In a case of protracted illness, a whole living animal like a goat or a hen may be provided. The illness on the client is symbolically transferred on it by laying hands on it, dragging and beating it to death, or pursuing it until it becomes weak and tired, caught, and killed. Some of these may be cooked for the client to eat all alone. Such activities are believed to be capable of expelling the illness from the body of the client.

Among the herbalists are the bone-setters who also use animals like chickens. They break the legs of such animals and begin to care for them, the effect of which transfers to the client. In a case of contagious disease, some roots, leaves, seeds, and barks are sometimes burned and ground into dry powder and rubbed on the body of the client for a number of days. Specific precautionary instructions are given to the client on how to use it, usually followed by taboos. These taboos may include seclusion or restriction from movement at a particular time of the day or night or to a particular place of ritual significance. The instructions may also include making a feast for a group of persons and giving some gifts to a specific group of people.

Diviners

People who engage in divination occupy important and prominent positions in the public life of Africans. Most of them are priests and priestesses who are connected with certain deities. Diviners serve heuristic purposes in mysterious and hidden matters. They reveal hidden matters, foretell the future, and interpret mysteries relating to individual human beings and their community.

Systems of divination among the Africans include the Ifa oracle, with its main forms (the use of palm nuts, divining chain, and the 16 cowrie shells) being kolanut, water gazing, mirror gazing, star gazing, palm reading, sand cutting, necromancy, spirit possession, vision, and so on. Some of these practices, like the use of palm nuts and divining chains as we have in Ifa, are peculiar to men among the Yoruba of Nigeria while the others could be used by both, particularly priestesses and priests.

Each African group has specific types of divination that are peculiar to them. It is important to note, however, that the most developed and technical type that is common as a reliable means of revelation among the West African people and the African diaspora is the 16 cowrie divination. The use of kolanut is prominent. Diviners acquire their knowledge through memorization of thousands of primordial stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Their initiation into the training comes in stages. Pretraining is when the candidate is ritually confirmed mentally and emotionally fit to enter the training. He or she is given ritual ingredients to swallow that will stimulate and enhance memorization of the stories that are orally delivered by the trainer. These stories, which are connected to certain deities, are structured mostly in prose, retelling the primordial incident of the disease or illness that the client brings. The diviner chants and explains the story, revealing the origin of the disease, what (in most cases, ritual) was prescribed for the original client, the reaction of the client to the prescription, and the effect(s). It is believed that every disease or illness has its primordial occurrence to which a healing solution was proffered.

Unlike the herbalists, the diviners deal primarily with hidden matters of high spiritual significance, such as interpreting dreams, revealing the divine wish in matters of rites of passage, revealing the mystery behind a protracted illness (even those that are not treatable by the herbalists), and proffering solutions into explicable and crisis situations and matters, all of which are considered as ill health to individuals and the community.

Dream is perhaps the most dreaded and terrible experience for which people consult diviners. The reason is that dream experiences affect the mental state of most indigenous peoples, which in most cases cause psychological disorder, leading to misbehavior and maladjustment. Dream covers a wide range of human affairs. A few cases will suffice. Persons with illness often claim that they have a dream before they fall sick; a pregnant woman who dreams is filled with dread by the experience whatever the content, or a suitor is afraid of getting into a relationship with the one who is not his or her destined fiancé or fiancée.

At the political level, a community wants to enjoy the blessing and continual healing of the spiritual beings that are associated with the people; hence, the choice of the ruler, the chief, engages the people's mind. It is the duty of the diviners in some of the communities in Africa. Furthermore, whenever there is communal crisis that arises from the wrath of some deities who are offended, the diviners are called on to find out the cause of the disease or illness and to inquire of the solution to the problem.

When the diviner is consulted, he inquires through his divination instruments. He goes into a period of recitation of the verses of what the signature of the divination reads until the matter is revealed. He then confirms from the client whether the divination is correct. He prescribes the necessary rituals. The rituals prescribed usually include blood and food items to be shared by human, spiritual, and natural entities. Certain designated places are prescribed where the rituals are to be laid. Some items may be instructed to be shared by a group of people so designated by spiritual beings according to the oracle. Such cases that are brought to diviners include barrenness, seeking the divine will on marriage, the cause of premature death, causes and cures for protracted diseases, divine will for the town, bringing order into communal chaos and crisis, and so on.

Priest and Priestess Healers

The third category of healing specialists includes priest and priestess healers, who also serve as mediums between the human and spirit beings as well as *the living dead*. In the Akan community, for example, priest healers who handle various health needs can be classified into three main categories: herbalists, diviners, and birth attendants. As some scholars have aptly noted, their assistance is sought out as soon as a crisis or trouble erupts in the community. They provide not only physical relief, but also emotional and spiritual assistance and comfort.

Healers are connected to cults of deities. They address similar cases as herbalists and diviners, but within the function of the cult. Each deity has a unique and specialized function among the Africans. There are deities connected with certain needs and certain diseases. Certain deities focus

on childbearing and child-nursing cases, some on farmland and for proper crop yielding, and some with important seasons such as rain. These priests and priestesses also use certain instruments of revelation to be able to prescribe solutions to the needs of their clients. They offer their clients special foods that are claimed to be the food of the deities to which they are attached. They instruct on the taboos to observe for restoration of health. However, there are some special classes of mediums who are distinguished from priests and priestesses. One of these is the rainmakers.

Contemporary Appropriation

The practice of African medicine, particularly herbal medicine, has found relevance in global medical discourse. Most herbalists have botanical gardens where herbs and roots are plucked and processed to heal diseases. Western medical practitioners, pharmacists, and those concerned with human well-being have discovered beyond a doubt that indigenous Africans have the material resources, spiritual sensibility, and competence in terms of indigenous knowledge of the contents and uses of medicinal plants.

It has been suggested that Western biomedicine had a strong historical connection to religious beliefs and practices. The attempt at dealing with medical issues without recognizing the relevance of indigenous knowledge and religious sensibility of the diversity of people around the globe to the Africans is obnoxious to holistic therapy. This recognition is why some African peoples have found it necessary to engage the twin practices, that is, side by side, of Western biomedicine and African medicine. This does not suggest incorporation, but recognition and compromise.

Furthermore, the intensity and sporadic influence of African indigenous medical practice on a new form of Christianity (the Pentecostal and Evangelical) explains the resilience of African medical practice. Biomedical practice, however, needs to be appreciated as scientific improvement helps to unearth and advance the somewhat secret, hidden, and private knowledge to public space and utility. Rather than continue to describe African medical practice as *alternative*, a term derogatorily used to show that it is inferior to Western biomedicine, and engage in

debate on the perceived and self-labeled conflict between science, which Western biomedicine represents, and religion, wherein African medicine is located, an engagement of complementary efforts could be made.

Recently, practitioners in the field of medical sciences in some African universities have begun to discover and engage an intersection in the practice of the two systems of therapy, lending credence to holistic medical practice. Western biomedical practitioners now collaborate with practitioners of indigenous medicine to find out the plant and animal materials that they use for the cure of certain diseases. They test such materials in laboratories to discover the therapeutic power in them as used by African medical practitioners.

A reconsideration of the old preconceptions about medicine, science, and religion is now being done in Africa, as is being done elsewhere, in places such as India and New Zealand, where indigenous medical practices involving the use of herbs help in procuring holistic health and healing. African medicine is one of the many incredible varieties that are made use of throughout the world.

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See also Medicine Men and Women

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MEDICINE MEN AND WOMEN

From the earliest of times, Africans have conceptualized a special class of individuals (men and women) as having evolved to interpret, address, and eradicate the experience of disease. These communally based individuals worked in pursuit of optimal health. They were responsible for protecting people from physical and spiritual harm. They are known as traditional healers or priests, shamans—medicine men and women. Traditional healers come from a wide variety of ethnic/national backgrounds and often cultivate specific areas of expertise. They are the professional doctors within communities who are guided by God through the orishas (divinities) and the ancestors. They are often believed to channel the spirit of the ancestors for assistance. This entry looks at their training and practice, as well as their role in different African societies.

Preparation and Practice

Because of the great responsibility within the role of traditional healer, medicine men and women were wholly accountable to the communities they served. They performed healing, divining, and counseling. The process of becoming a traditional healer varied among ethnic groups and nations; however, the common underlying factors of training included

1. some quality or attribute that identifies the individual as one for service;
2. an expectation as part of a family or occupational tradition;

3. a reflection period involving initiation and meditation on service;
4. apprenticeship and training in diagnoses of disease and in the uses of healing tools, foods, animals, rituals of sacrifice, libation, spiritual literature, and proscriptive behaviors;
5. a thorough knowledge of the corpus comprising medicinal plants and botanicals that constituted an herbal pharmacy; and
6. leadership in the social discourses surrounding dance, drumming, and trance.

Training rituals and ceremonies are conducted, and sometimes the initiate takes a new name, but all possess a title indicating their status as healers. After completing a usually arduous initiation ritual, the candidates emerge as people transformed to serve as spiritual arbiters of the community's religious beliefs. In certain cultures—especially those with secret healing societies—those accepted to the profession will bear a body mark (tattoo cicatrization) of acceptance.

In addition, the traditional African healer, more often than not, possesses sacred attire and a collection of divine tools and implements. In addition to hosting curative rituals and ceremonies, in some cases, traditional African healers may preside over guilt or innocence hearings. Traditional African healers have customarily accepted fees or in-kind payments for their services, indicating a form of divine reciprocity within the community.

Some Examples

The traditional African healing system is filled with a diverse array of practitioners given titles that indicate their specific function in society. A medicine man or woman may be a midwife, spiritual healer, or medical herbalist, for example. Among the Ibo people in West Africa, the Dibia serves as the herbal medicine man. In the lower Congo, among the many meanings of the term *Nganga*, it also refers to the individual who is the “healer of diseases.” Swazi traditional healers are known as Tinyanga, who are primarily responsible for herbal medicine, while the Tangoma are those who serve as spiritual intermediaries.

Females have always possessed important roles as traditional healers in many societies. In South-west Africa, the Ondudu is the female healer of the Kuanyama Amba. The Ndebele Igosos are elder priestesses who are mediums on behalf of the ancestral spirits and humans. The ancestors then translate the messages from the Igosos to God, Nkulunkulu. Of note are some of the high priests of traditional African healing, including the Ifa priests of the Yoruba in Nigeria and the Sangoma in South Africa. In addition, the Kikuyu have a wide variety of healers known as Muraguri or Mundumugo.

There are also considerable discussions about the mystery (called secret) societies of African healers in Africa. They model the closed network associations of lineages devoted to the occupation of healing. An example of this kind of group is the Ndako Gboya society of the Nupe in Nigeria. Also in Nigeria, among the Yoruba, the Babalawo—whose paradigm survived the holocaust middle passage—is the traditional healer through orisha divination, while the Onisegun focus on curing physical and emotional dysfunction. They both combat arun (disease) and ese (generalized human affliction). Furthermore, among the Lango people of Uganda, the Omara serve as authorized medicine men.

Traditional African healers were interested in all aspects of optimal health. In addition to treating disease, they used plants to increase good fortune, balance energy, reconcile emotional problems in personal relationships, and prevent generalized events of misfortune. They also used ancient symbols, amulets, and talismans to assist the transformation of the individual from sickness to good health. The traditional African healer represents one of the oldest and strongest examples of continuity with the past for the African diaspora. They orally transmitted medical knowledge and prescriptions.

As powerful as the traditional medicine men appeared in the process of curing disease, they became exceedingly potent after death. Medicine men and women are an essential component within the larger traditional African medical system, which seeks to address the challenges of disease.

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See also Divination Systems; Healing; Medicine

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MEDIUMS

Mediums are individuals, most often females, who become possessed with powerful spirits that give them the ability to cleanse the land, make rain, cure illnesses, and eliminate incest from a community. They may function as priests or priestesses who are the caretakers of the spirit. Men or women might be chosen, often by divine intervention, to be mediums for either male or female spirits. There is no firm gender rule as to how mediums are selected in a society.

Although this practice reaches back to ancient Kemet, it is still found in numerous communities in contemporary Africa. Many mediums become famous for their ability to channel the spirit's energy and power for the absolute

protection of their communities. This has been demonstrated in the lives of mediums who lived in southern Africa during the past two centuries. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, for instance, the great spirit is *mbondoro*, and the mediums who serve *mbondoro* are able to resolve issues that are the results of a failure to obey the ancestors, incest, or evil deeds.

Some of the women mediums are referred to as spirit wives of the High God, and, as such, they hold a special place of privilege and respect within the society. In Malawai, among the Chewa people, the women who are mediums are also *mbona*, that is, spirit wives, who are the principal rain-makers. In ancient Kemet, women with special abilities and skills were called the “god's wife” in much the same way. They were the ones who possessed the most intimate knowledge of the spirits and could convey that knowledge and wisdom to the community.

The medium functions as one who is able to hear and understand the word of the Supreme God and then translate that message to the people. In most instances, the medium arrives at her or his state of receptivity through music. Once ecstasy is reached, the medium is capable of speaking the words of the Supreme God to the masses. In some cases, the medium priestess might be in charge of political decisions and actions as well. This is usually the case where the people believe that the medium is in direct contact with the Supreme God. For example, among the Chewa, the Supreme God is Chauta, but this name could also be used by the priestess rain-maker, who is directly responsible for the productivity of the community. If there is a problem of incest, evil, famine, sickness, or drought, then it is Chauta, the priestess, who is the physical, on-Earth representative of Chauta, the Supreme God.

According to Shona history, during the 16th century in northeastern Zimbabwe, the main rain-making shrine was a lake surrounded by beautiful cypress trees managed by priestesses. Dzivaguru, the Great Pool, was venerated by the spirit wives of the Supreme God. They were appealed to for sacred seeds that would grow despite the drought in the territory. Later, the priestess Chapo was named as the great keeper of the rain charms in much the same way as the priestesses among the

Chewa in Malawi had held the power of rain. In effect, the priestesses or mediums were really the protectors of the social, physical, and moral life of the people. They were not rhetorical analysts or theologians, but rather defenders of the true faith of the people in the power of the Supreme God to bring about order and harmony in the midst of chaos. The pattern of medium intervention in society is a religious one because the aim is to reorient the society toward balance.

Zimbabwe grew out of the Mutapa Empire, which was steeped in the traditions of mediums. Indeed, in its history, there is the story of a great king, Matope, who found his army cut off by the forces of the priestess Chikara. He had to discover the source of her genius and strategy. Once he was able to detect the source of what was considered her magical powers, Matope was able to protect his soldiers, and the priestess Chikara vanished in the Great Pool.

No medium has ever reached the significance or importance of Nehanda, who was the daughter of the founding king of the Mutapa Empire. Her ritual marriage to Matope gave supernatural powers to the Mutapa Empire. After her death, she became a mhondoro spirit who could be appealed to by mediums, *masvikiro*. When the *svikiro* was possessed by the spirit of Nehanda, she was said to be the personality and voice of Nehanda, and thus she was able to sanction the actions of the traditional state.

In the 19th century, the greatest of these mediums was Charwe, who led the battle against the British colonial settlers in the First Chimurenga in 1897. She refused to convert to Christianity and struggled against her enemies even as she was being hanged by the British. This established a long line of Nehandas in the country, making it universally understood by the traditional Shona that the people are never without their medium.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Chaminuka; Nehanda

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MENDE

The Mende people, who number about 1 million, are found in West Africa, more precisely in the southern and eastern parts of the country known today as Sierra Leone. However, the presence of a small Mende community is also attested in the western part of neighboring Liberia. The Mende oral tradition, as well as linguistic evidence, indicates that the Mende migrated from western Sudan, probably in several waves, between 200 and 1500 AD. Their language is also called Mende (sometimes spelled Mande).

Mende cosmology is based on the belief in one Supreme Being and a multiplicity of spirits. The Supreme Being, commonly called *Ngewo*, is also known by the more ancient name of *Leve*. *Ngewo* is thought of as the supreme force and power responsible for the creation of the universe and all that it contains: human beings, animals, plants, medicine, and so on. Although omnipresent in daily Mende life and thought, *Ngewo* is, as in most other African religious traditions, withdrawn from the world, having retired in the heavens above. Thus, *Ngewo*'s direct involvement in human affairs remains minimal.

Instead, *Ngewo* is assisted by the ancestors and other spirits. Spirits act as intermediaries between the living and *Ngewo*. As such, they are venerated and receive prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. Some scholars divide Mende spirits into two broad categories: ancestral and nonancestral spirits.

Ancestral Spirits

The ancestral spirits refer to the spirits of departed family and community members. Ancestral spirits are the object of much care. Upon dying, and to access the ancestral world, a person must embark on a most critical journey that involves the successful crossing of a river. To assist the recently deceased individual, the living must perform certain rituals, known as *tindyamei*. Of particular

relevance here is the sacrificing and offering of a chicken at the gravesite, 4 days after burial for a man, 3 days for a woman. Failure to perform *tindyamei* funerary rites properly or at all would have extremely dire consequences for the Dead, who would then be condemned to the unenviable fate of a wandering spirit, as well as for the living on whom it would assuredly take revenge.

The relationship between the living and their ancestors is a dynamic and reciprocal one. It is not uncommon, for example, for ancestral spirits to visit their living relatives, to whom they appear in dreams. Ancestral spirits might pay a visit out of care and protection, but also out of displeasure if they feel neglected or offended. When a person or a family experiences misfortunes (e.g., death, illness, or barrenness), the ancestors are immediately suspected of being responsible. Whatever offense or wrong was committed must be identified without delay and expiated to restore harmony and balance.

Ancestors are also frequently included in ceremonies at the beginning of harvest times. The first rice harvested (rice is the main staple of the Mende people) is prepared with palm oil by the medicine man or woman and offered collectively to the ancestors. The purpose of such offerings is to acknowledge the ancestors' critical role in bestowing blessings on the community of the living, such as plentiful crops.

Other Spirits

The nonancestral spirits include spirits related to certain aspects of the natural world (e.g., forests, rocks, or rivers). Such spirits are known as *dyinyinga*. Although *dyinyinga* are not limited to any particular site, other nature spirits are strictly associated with a particular site (e.g., a specific mountain, rock, or river). Interestingly, nature spirits often appear in human forms. Thus, *Ndogbusui*, the best-known nature spirit, appears with white skin and a long white beard. It is believed to dwell in the forest at night, while resting on the top of a mountain during the daytime.

Furthermore, there are spirits associated with secret societies, the Poro Society for men and the Sande Society for women. Such societies are said to be secret due to the fact that membership is through

initiation. Only to the initiates can certain truths be revealed. Their main purpose, however, is educational: Their primary goal is indeed to socialize the males and the females according to Mende norms. Thus, whereas the Poro society initiates young boys into Mende manhood, the Sande society introduces girls into Mende womanhood.

Both societies, therefore, make explicit community standards and expectations, such as leadership and service to the community, thus reinforcing the social and cultural order and stability. People who have not been initiated are called *kpowa* (literally "fool, insane, deranged"), whereas members of the Poro and Sande societies are known as *halemo*. An initiate in training is referred to as a *mbogdoni*. The initiation covers a 7-year period and usually begins at the time of puberty.

The spirits of secret societies are represented in the form of carved wooden masks. For example, at the time of her initiation into the Sande society, a female receives a mask that was carved specially for her by the woodcarver following specific instructions received during a dream. As a sacred object, a mask must be kept in a hidden place. When it is worn, such as during initiation ceremonies, the rest of the body must be covered with rafia fibers, with the mask resting over the head and shoulders. Sande masks (also known as Bondu masks) usually have the shape of conical helmets. They represent the only case known in Africa of masks exclusively reserved for women.

Ama Mazama

See also Societies of Secrets

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MIN

Min is an ancient Egyptian deity of fertility. As far back as the Badarian Period (5000–3400 BC) along the Nile River, there are stone and terra cotta figures of naked women and men representing fertility. During that period, it appears that

agriculture and human procreation were inseparable in the concept of fertility.

The deity known by the name of Min was a principal fertility spirit. Min's representation was of a man with a large phallus. Whereas Hapi and Ausar were also considered to be fertility deities who ruled over all the farms and meadows, Min was different in that he represented male fertility



Relief from the White Chapel of Sesostris I. The chapel was built to celebrate the Sed Festival, the festival connected with the royal jubilee during which rituals of renewal and regeneration took place. The king pays homage to Min, the god of fertility. 12th dynasty, 1971–1926 BC.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

and was therefore looked on as one who could grant to the per-aa (pharaoh) or ordinary men the power to father children.

Fertility was at the heart of the Sed Festival (the Jubilee), where the per-aa had to demonstrate his vigor and vitality by running around a course set out by the priests, with different types of objects in his hands, on his back, or on his head to be symbolically rejuvenated. “Long live the per-aa” was first spoken in Kemet by those who sought the blessings of the god of fertility, Min, who presided over the event. There are representations of the per-aa watering the fields, hoeing the Earth, and tending the crops while the patron god of fertility looked on. Scenes representing Min in his role as the deity of fertility in charge of the Min festival can be seen on the walls of tombs. A special fertility festival called the Min Festival was held each year, where the per-aa participated as the one who reaped the grain. Usually when an heir was born, the Egyptians would have a festival dedicated to the deity Min.

Min was originally an agricultural deity, as can be seen in the paintings on the walls of Medinet Habu, where Ramses III is presented as one cutting a sheaf of wheat for the Festival of Min. The association of fertility with agriculture and with reproduction, however, is quite old. In fact, a virgin was sometimes spoken of as one whose field had been unplowed. It should also be noted that Min was painted black in his representations as the deity of fertility.

Min was usually represented in the Egyptian writing as a barbed arrow or thunderbolt. A palette from the Gerzean era called the Min Palette shows an image of a double-ended arrow on a hook. An ivory statuette of a human being with an erect penis was another early example of the deity from the El Amrah area of Egypt. Actually, there are many representatives of Min as a mummiform man standing with both legs together and an arm raised holding a flail and wearing the twin plumes of Amen. The Scorpion King, the predynastic ruler, may have worshipped the deity Min at the cult center at Gebtu (Koptos). Later one discovers Min being associated with the cult center at Akhmim (Panopolis).

During the New Kingdom Era from the 14th to the 21st dynasties, Min was portrayed as the Bull of the Great Phallus. Thus, Min as the deity

of fertility and sexuality extended throughout most of the dynastic history of Egypt.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Fertility

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MONTU

The ancient Egyptian god Montu was the chief god of Waset, called Thebes by the Greeks (modern Luxor); he appeared as early as the Middle Kingdom (11th dynasty). The most significant literary evidence referring to Montu was “the story of Sinuhe,” when he was praised by the tale’s hero after he defeated “the strong man.” His name was associated with the name of the founder of this dynasty, Mentuhotep II, whose name means “god Montu is in peace.”

King Mentuhotep II, who was from Waset, succeeded in unifying both Upper and Lower Egypt after a period of chaos known as the First Intermediate period. Upon ascending the throne, he moved the capital from Middle Egypt to Waset, and he chose the local god of the area by that time, Montu, as the chief god. The position of the god Montu as a supreme god did not last for a long period because the god Amen, who originated as well in Upper Egypt, started to gain more power in the 12th dynasty, a process that would culminate with Amen being known later on as “the king of all gods.”

Nevertheless, Montu had temples in four different places in the Theban area: Armant (southwest of modern Luxor on the western bank of the Nile), Medamud (northeast of modern Luxor), Tod (southwest of modern Luxor, on the eastern bank of the Nile), and Karnak (northeast of modern Luxor, adjacent to the northern side of the great temple of Amun Amen).

Montu was the god of war, and his traditional form was the human body with the head of a falcon surmounted by the solar disc and two plumes

holding a curved sword or spear. In later periods, he was associated with the bull at Armant. This explains the reason behind some representations of this god with the head of a bull, especially in areas such as Armnat and Medamud, where the cult of the bull was the most dominant. Some of the important pharaohs liked to compare themselves to the “eager bull” in the battlefields.

During the New Kingdom, the role of Montu in war is clearly mentioned on some of the archaeological documents such as the Stela of Thothmose III, discovered at Gebel Berkel, which describes the king as “a valiant Montu on the battlefield.” From the 4th century BC, black and white bull statues were kept in the Montu temple at Armant. These “Buchis Bulls” symbolized the twin souls of Re and Osiris. Besides his main role as the god of war, Montu was also known for being a protector of the happy home.

Like many other gods, he was identified with the sun god Re in the form of Montu Re, while also being identified with Atum in his solar guise. His cult survived for a long period of time, and, as was the case with many other Egyptian gods and goddesses, he was identified with the Greek god Aries, god of war. Montu has been depicted in the company of three consorts: Tjenet, Iunyt, and Rettawy. He was also mentioned in some texts with “Seth,” perhaps as a contrast between controlled and uncontrolled power or to keep the balance between the power of good and the power of evil.

Shaza Gamal Ismail

See also Sekhmet

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MOON

The moon is held to be the origin of life. Its seemingly magical ability to undergo metamorphosis

from a thin sliver to a full orb, to disappear completely only to return and continue the process all over again, made it a natural symbol for cycles of life and the basis for the reckoning of time. “Months” are typically counted from new moon to new moon, with 13 months occurring in a year. The predictability of this 29½-day cycle made the moon the celestial body of choice to mark religious ceremonies, with many being held at the new moon.

The moon’s cycle is linked to the seasons, agricultural phenomena, and the menstrual cycle of a woman because of her seemingly “magical” ability to cause blood to appear at intervals that closely correspond to the moon’s cycle. For this reason, the moon is considered to have feminine attributes. Among the Akan, Bambuti, Dorobo, Luo, and Sandawe, the moon is a feminine deity. Other cultures perceive the moon as a companion of God or the mother (or sister of the sun). In some areas of the continent, women track their pregnancy in terms of lunar months.

The connection between the moon and women as the origin of life could factor into creation stories that hold the moon to be connected to life and death. Among the San, the moon decreed that people were to die and come back just as the moon dies and returns, but the hare contradicted the moon’s proclamation by saying people will die and stay dead. The quarrel was settled by decreeing that men and women will die, but are to have children, increasing the number of the San. In a similar story from the Congo, a toad quarrels with the moon over creating humans. The toad creates humans first, but the moon is outraged, descends to Earth, consumes the toad, creates humans who are more intelligent and live longer, and ascends back into the sky. In Zimbabwe, the first human created was Mwuetsi, the moon. Tore, the creator god of peoples of the DRC, also used the moon to create the first man. In ancient Kemet, the origin of human souls and the Nile River was the moon. In addition, Hathor and Isis were identified with the moon.

The moon was not always figured as feminine: Khonsu and Djehuty of ancient Kemet were lunar deities with masculine attributes. Heru, the consummate neter (god) of masculinity, was associated with the moon as the night version of the sun. Perhaps the Nuer echo this when they say God shines through the moon. The Zulu maintain the moon has two wives.

The moon is also used to time religious ceremonies. The Katab and Nuer hold ceremonies at the new moon in which they ask for god's prosperity. Others wait for just the presence of the moon to chase away spirits associated with epidemics. Some Ewe believe that the land of the spirits is in the moon.

Denise Martin

See also Earth; Space and Time

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MOSSI

The Mossi, Moshi, Mosi, or, according to recent orthography, Moose (pronounced MOH-say), are an ethnic and cultural group of farmers who live mainly in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and northern Ghana. The total number of Mossi is difficult to determine because they have a history of emigrating for work to other regions in West Africa, a history that predates colonialism. The Mossi also are known historically for their staunch resistance first to Islam and later to Christianity. However, this is changing in Burkina Faso, where Mossi are approximately 40% of the population. The number of Mossi in this country who are Muslim is 50%, and the number who are Christian is 10%.

Although some reject or condemn traditional religious beliefs and practices, many still participate in varying degrees, making traditional Mossi religion a dominant factor in the daily lives of most Mossi in Burkina Faso today. Religious expression consists mainly of following *Rogo Miki*, the way of the ancestors, which includes performing rituals to acknowledge and propitiate ancestral spirits and natural forces, all of which emanate from *Wende*, the Supreme Being, and all of which, the Mossi understand, impact every aspect of their lives. This entry looks at their traditional religion, its ancestor worship, and its beliefs about gods.

Ancestral Spirits

Rogo Miki involves constant communion with the *keemse*, the spirits of the ancestors. The ancestral spirits of the Mossi dwell in *keem koulogou*, the land of the dead, and are active and concerned with the daily lives of their descendants as if they are living elders in the community, but *keemse* also have the power to protect or punish according to whether tradition is followed. However, they can only protect Mossi who are in Yatenga or Mossi land. The most powerful ancestral spirits are those of the founder of the clan or lineage, the *kikirigo*, which means twin. Out of respect for their power, the names of these ancestors are not used. Those who have died after achieving advanced age also receive attention in ancestral ritual. Children receive little attention because they will be reborn at some point.

The *rokyengo*, or ancestral shrine of the founder of the lineage, is located in the residence of the elder of the head family of that lineage. *Keemse rogo*, or house of the spirits of the dead, are located in other families' houses of the lineage. The shrines are domes of hardened earth that contain earthenware pots that receive sacrifices of chickens, millet beer, millet flour, and water, and, on rare occasions, goats and sheep. Generally, the more significant the request is, the more valuable the sacrifice.

Sacrifices to ancestral shrines can occur at any time and are made as offers of thanksgiving and requests for protection, to affirm birth, puberty, marriage, and death, before journeys and economic endeavors, and to thwart illness. Husbands can offer sacrifice on behalf of their wives and children. Young people request the permission of a lineage elder for a sacrifice to be made on their behalf. Women can ask that sacrifice be made to their husbands' lineage.

Mossi Deities

The spirits of the ancestors and powers of nature all originate in *Wennam*, which is a manifestation of the life force of *Wende*. *Wende* is aloof from humanity, but through these specific manifestations, *Wende* impacts the lives of the Mossi, and, in turn, the Mossi direct their efforts toward these manifestations. The first major manifestation is called *Tenga Wende* or the Earth deity and is



Mossi mask; the personage represents a family ancestor. Such masks were kept in a family shrine and received prayers and sacrifices.

Source: Manu Sassoonian/Art Resource, New York.

responsible for general climatic conditions and fertility of the soil. Another is *Tido Wende*, the plant deity, the source of plant growth. *Ki Wende* is the Millet deity and reflects the importance of millet as the main staple in the Mossi diet. *Saga Wende* is the aspect of Wende from which the rains come. Many ceremonies involving these manifestations mark key moments in the agricultural year—field preparation, planting, cultivation, and harvest—but they also intertwine with social obligations.

It is the responsibility of *Tenga Soba*, or the Earth priest, to ensure that all rituals are done and prohibitions are observed in honor of Tenga Wende. Before any seed is planted, a sacrifice must be made to Tenga Wende. Sexual intercourse on the bare ground outside of the house is prohibited. A violation risks the withdrawal of the fertility of the land and must be propitiated by a personal sacrifice to Tenga Wende at the Earth shrine, which is officiated by Tenga Soba.

When an object of value is found on the ground, it is to be returned to the Earth shrine, where it can be retrieved by its owner. If not, it stays on the Earth shrine because all objects on the Earth belong to Tenga Wende. If this is not done, the thief's relationship with the Earth is damaged. The Earth shrine, *tenga*, is located outdoors, away from living compounds. In the center is a pile of large stones, atop which is a *tensaare*, or a clay pot. Inside this are *teense*, things of the Earth—stones, broken pottery, unclaimed items—that receive ritual offerings and sacrifices of beer, flour and water, and blood made by the Tenga Soba.

Earth priests inherit their office by being an elder male in one of the indigenous Savadogo lineages. If the priest dies and leaves no heirs, his sister's son occupies the role of Earth priest. The priests of Tido Wende are called *Bogaba* and are responsible for maintaining the relationship with plant growth as well as with the millet deity, Ki Wende. *Bogaba* also assist women in conceiving children. The shrines that they maintain, *Tido Rogo*, are located outside the walls of their residence with an altar of raised Earth to receive offerings and sacrifices. Like the Tenga Soba, *Bogaba* descend from the Savadogo. However, they trace their lineage through the indigenous metal workers. They assume their roles by both

succession and subsequent changes in personality of supernatural origin that occur shortly after the death of their predecessors.

The rituals conducted by the priests and elders on behalf of the community to ancestral spirits and manifestations of Wende are learned by observation and participation. Formal teaching does exist for those who are seers and healers.

Denise Martin

See also Egungun

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MOUNTAINS AND HILLS

Mountains and hills are landforms with distinct summits, in limited areas, that extend above the surrounding terrain. The distinction between a mountain and a hill is culturally relative. The majority of Africa is composed of moderately elevated tablelands, broken occasionally by higher peaks and ridges. Thus, Africa possesses fewer extremes of elevation than other continents, with notable exceptions in the Mahgreb, Ethiopia, the Great Lakes region, and southern Africa.

In African religions, the landscape was considered to be part of the divine realm. Given the relative rarity of hills and mountains in many parts of Africa, and their glaring height above the surrounding landscape, it is little wonder that mountains and hills are generally viewed with awe and reverence. For some groups, mountains play a role in their origin myth. The Chewa believe that humankind was created by Chiuta and set down atop Dzalanyama Mountain. The Kikuyu believe that their first ancestor was awarded his terrestrial home by Mogai, Divider of the Universe, from atop Mount Kenya (Kere-Nyaga).

Rising above the African landscape, mountains and hills thrust upward into the domain of the "above," the sacred realm over humans. In the

“above” live those gods, goddesses, and spirits in charge of the sky, rain, and thunder. For some peoples, mountains and hills are thought of as the homes or resting places of these entities. Among many peoples of the Great Lakes region, mountains are viewed as the home of the creator god. For example, the Kikuyu believe Mount Kenya to be the home of Mogai, who told humans that if they sacrificed toward the mountain and raised their hands in prayer, he would come to their assistance. The Barotse (Lozi) hold that Nyambe, the creator, retreated atop a mountain to find refuge from destructive humans. The Barotse pray toward the mountain in an effort to get close to Nyambe again. In Yorubaland, the spirits of hills are prayed to for fertility in the surrounding region, such as Olúmọ in Abẹ̀òkúta and Orósun in Ìdànrè. Similarly, the hero Mbona is worshipped on the site of his deification, by many ethnic groups in the Matundu Hills of southern Malawi, to provide fertility to the region. Some holy sites involving mountains and hills, like the shrine to Mbona, have the ability to transcend ethnicity.

In other cases, mountains and hills serve as ritual spaces, a means of getting closer to the deities of the “above,” even if it is not considered their dwelling place. Among the Zulu, a hill might be known as *inthaba encwele yeNkosi yamazulu* (the holy hill of the Lord-of-the-Sky), where priests might pray for rain or healing. Numerous peoples of the Upper Nile, such as the Nuer, Dinka, and Lou, construct sizable artificial earthen mounds or hills. The mounds are designed to pull the might of a divinity to Earth and empower the prophet who spoke for him or her.

In summary, many followers of the African religious traditions believe mountains and hills to be home to divinities, whereas others use them as ritual and sacred spaces.

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See also Earth

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MOUNT CAMEROON

The sacred Mount Cameroon is the tallest mountain in Western Africa, and it rises straight from the ocean through tropical rainforests to a cold, windy summit. Indeed, snow sometimes falls at the mountain’s top, a rare occasion in the tropics. Because of its uniqueness, the people around the mountain have considered it to be holy, sacred, a living mountain that has to be treated with great deference. In the town of Debuncha, the second wettest place on Earth, at the southwest corner of the lower slopes, there are many stories of the mountain’s miracles. Indeed, the Bakweri people have told narratives of power about the mountain for years. When the Germans, English, and French visited the area, they discovered a heightened awareness of ancestral forces among the people.

Mount Cameroon is a formidable physical presence. The mountain has no water above the forest line and is fairly barren and humid above the clouds until one reaches the top, where it is cool. Mount Cameroon is a volcano, and it is the only volcanic mountain outside of the Mediterranean area to have had a documented eruption before the birth of Jesus Christ. It is an active mountain, having erupted 14 times since 450 BC. The first one to record its eruption was the African navigator Hanno, traveling from Carthage around West Africa. No African mountain has been as active as Cameroon. The last major eruption was October 16 to November 12, 1982, when a lava flow went down the mountain for 12 kilometers.

The people who live at the foothills of the mountain are the Bakweri, who have been living in the region, according to their traditions, for 4,000 years. The Bakweri have a long history of relating to the green hills, drenched by rain and often covered by fog, as the abode of many spirits. Because the Bakweri are a patrilineal people, the religious leaders are mostly men. These men are trained to communicate between the almighty deity and humans. The Bakweri people practice ancestral rituals and believe that the Bakweri are protected by spirits who dwell on Mount Cameroon. Inasmuch as they have inhabited the same territory for thousands of years, the Bakweri have created numerous traditions based on the rich agricultural

experiences of the people. They are the guardians of the sacred power of Mount Cameroon.

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See also Mountains and Hills

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MOUNT KENYA

Mount Kenya, the highest mountain in Kenya and the second highest in Africa after Kilimanjaro, lies just south of the equator in central Kenya, approximately 95 miles (150 kilometers) from Nairobi. It is variably referred to as “The Mountain of Mystery,” “The Place of Light,” or “Mountain of Brightness.” It is also sometimes denoted as the “Mountain of Whiteness” because of its snow-capped peaks. Mount Kenya National Park has been designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site. The Gikuyu (or Kikuyu—the British spelling of the word) of Kenya have a beautiful creation story that incorporates how Kere-Nyaga or Kirinyaga, the extinct volcano commonly called Mount Kenya, came to be. After a brief discussion of the sacred character of mountains around the world, this entry describes that creation myth and the continuing importance of the myth and the mountain in Gikuyu religious belief.

Symbolic Mountains

Mountains have long been regarded as sacred and mystical stations. Perhaps it is their proximity to

the firmament and its life-sustaining rain clouds that has inspired such awe and reverence in the hearts of many people around the world from time immemorial. This is no exception in the African tradition. For instance, the Bavenda and Shona revere the Matoba (or Matopa) mountains as a divine manifestation of God, while both the Ga and the Tumbuka recognize divinities of the hills. The Akamba, for their part, attest to seeing “fires of the spirit” on the hillsides in the dark of night.

Be it Mount Sinai in the Judeo-Christian faith, Mount Arafat in the Islamic tradition, Mount Fuji within the Shinto system of belief, or Mount Kailas in Hindu and Buddhist teachings, for example, mountains are considered by many around the world to represent the pinnacle of spiritual liberation and elevation.

The Gikuyu Myth

According to the Gikuyu creation myth, in the beginning, Mogai (God), the “Divider of the Universe and Lord of Nature,” summoned Gikuyu, the founder of his ethnic group, and gave him his share of the land, replete with rivers, rain, forests, vegetation, and diverse animals. At the same time, the Mogai (sometimes spelled *Ngai* or *Mungai*) made a gargantuan mountain, Kere-Nyaga, which is said to be his chief Earthly dwelling—although he is said to also occupy the four other lesser, sacred mountains visible from Gikuyu land. Some say that he inhabits the sky just beyond the mountain and that he frequently visits the Earth to mete out blessings and punishment. Above all, however, Mogai was known to regularly inspect and admire his creation—the beautiful, bountiful Earth.

Legend has it that on the day of creation, Mogai took Gikuyu to the top of Kere-Nyaga, with its panoramic view, and pointed out a place called Mokorwe wa Gathanga, a locale said to be the geographic center of Kenya and where there was a profusion of mogumo—sometimes called *motamoyo*, *Mikoyo*, or *Mokoyo*—(wild fig) trees. God commanded that Gikuyu should build his homestead there. Mogai then told Gikuyu that whenever he was in need, he should make a sacrifice under a mikoyo (fig) tree and raise his hands toward Kere-naya and Mogai, the Lord of Nature, would come to his assistance.



Kenya's highest mountain, and the second highest in Africa after Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya lies just south of the equator in central Kenya and is variably referred to as "The Mountain of Mystery," "The Place of Light," or "Mountain of Brightness."

Source: National Geographic/Getty Images.

It is worth noting here that the word *Mogai*, if not the sacrosanctity, originated with the Maasai word *Enkai* and was appropriated by both the Gikuyu and Kamba. The Supreme Being is also known as *Mungu*, *Murungu*, *Mwene-Nyaga*, or *Mulungu*, a variation of a word meaning God, which is known to be in use as far south as Zambia among the Zambesi and is sometimes dubbed *Mwathani* or *Mwathi* (the greatest ruler), derived from the word *gwatha*, meaning to rule or reign with authority.

At any rate, Gikuyu proceeded to the designated spot, where he found a stunning woman who Mogai had provided as his wife. Gikuyu named her Moombi, which means *molder* or *creator*, and together they had nine daughters. When Gikuyu expressed his desire that his daughters have husbands, Mogai instructed him to sacrifice a lamb

and a kid under the homestead's big mokoyo tree, pouring the animals' blood and the fat on the trunk of the tree. Then the family was to make a bonfire under the great fig tree and burn the meat as a sacrifice to God—and sacrifices and supplication were always the purview of the family because no individual could petition the Almighty. Gikuyu did as directed. Then, per Mogai's decree, he took the womenfolk home. Subsequently, he alone returned to the mokoyo tree, where he found nine handsome men for his daughters. They married and procreated, and this is how the Gikuyu people multiplied and filled the land.

Ongoing Impact

For the Gikuyu people, the question of land tenure is singularly vital to the people's existence

because it guarantees a domicile to peacefully and safely cultivate the precious soil, which supplies their material needs and permits them to seek out a “high place” to perform their “magic,” traditional ceremonies and, perhaps most important, to burn ritual herbs and offer sacrifices in undisturbed tranquility under a mokoyo tree facing Mount Kenya.

The mokoyo tree, which is sometimes called the “strangling tree” because the sacrificial lambs are strangled underneath one of them, is considered divine, and it may be compared to the Christian conception of the church because the Gikuyu traditionally had no “temple made with hands.” The Gikuyu call them *moti wa Ngai* or *moti wa igongona*, or, respectively, “God’s tree” or “ritual tree.” That is, the mokoyo is no less than the “House of God.” It is said to symbolize the Mountain, and the Gikuyu customarily worship in its shade. Jomo Kenyatta even posits that the name Gikuyu is rooted in the tree (i.e., *mokoyo*: the tree; *mogekoyo*: a Gikuyu person). The trees are no longer plentiful in Kenya because the early European “settlers” routinely cut down most of them after confiscating the Gikuyu land.

The Gikuyu, even today when many have converted to Christianity, continue to offer sacrifices on monumental occasions, such as the beginning of the planting season, rites of passage (i.e., birth, death, marriage, etc.), before crops ripen, at ceremonial purifications after an epidemic, during droughts, and at the harvest of “first fruits.”

Last, but not least, Kikuyu people traditionally constructed their homes with the main entrance facing the mountain. In addition, they buried the dead with their heads turned toward this most sacred site.

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See also Mountains and Hills

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MUMMIFICATION

Mummification is the name given in ancient Egypt to the preservation of a corpse for eternity. Although it appears as a practice in several other African societies, mummification remains most identified with the Egyptian society. The Egyptians left no detailed descriptions of the mummification process, although there are enough fragments of pictures to give contemporary readers an understanding of the complex process. Almost all written descriptions of the details of mummification derive from the writings of the early Greeks, who visited Africa and recorded what they saw or were told. Greek writers such as Diodorus, Herodotus, Plutarch, and Porphyry provide enough detail to allow us to reconstruct the process of mummification.

Usually the process began right after death and could last for 70 days. The body was moved to a special funerary house for purification where the preparation for eternity began. Among the first actions of the priests responsible for the mummification was the laying of the body on an operation table, where the brains were removed. Then the specially trained surgeons, the ones who dissected the body, would select one of their number to make an incision in the left side of the cadaver with a knife made of flint. This was a ritual incision that would be used to allow the priests to remove the organs. Each of the organs was treated separately and with great respect. The organ was embalmed, drained of blood, wrapped in cloth, and then placed in specially prepared vessels. These viscera jars were first found in the funerary cache of Queen Hetepheres, the mother of Per-aa Khufu.

These viscera jars, often erroneously called canopic jars, were placed alongside the Neb Ankh, often called the sarcophagus. Here they were protected by the Four Sons of Heru, Imsety, Hapi, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuf, who guarded the liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines, respectively.

The heart and the kidneys were most often left inside the body because of the difficulty of removing them.

Next, the priests began the process of salting the body by placing it in natron for about 35 days. The priests often used henna or ochre to dye the limbs of the corpse after the application of the natron. Thus, the male corpse appeared red and the female corpse yellow after this process. One can see this pattern reflected in some of the paintings on the walls of the temples and tombs. They would then pack the chest and abdomen with pieces of material provided by the family of the dead person. Relatives might bring their special fabrics to be placed inside the corpse for the journey to eternity. It was important that the priests soak the wads of material in various gums, herbs, and unguents so that the body could be molded and shaped to its original form. Then the opening in the left side of the cadaver was covered with a plaque that was protected by the Four Sons of Heru.

Once the officiating priest was satisfied that the body had been properly restored, cleaned, and purified, and all of the rituals had been strictly observed, the body was wrapped in linen bandages. This process had to be carried out according to the ancient codes and strict regulations handed down by generations of Africans. There were several stages to this process. It was neither easy nor quick. In the first instance, it was necessary that the entire body be wrapped with sheets of linen. Each individual part of the body had to be wrapped separately, including the phallus, the fingers, and the head. Subsequently, a large piece of fabric, like a shroud, was placed around the entire body. The entire abdomen was bandaged and neatly wrapped according to the discipline of the priestly practice. If a ritual was missed or a step violated, the priests would have to start from the point of the infraction and start over in the process.

It did not make any difference whether the body was that of a king or a private individual; the same process had to be carried out. It is believed that the only difference between the mummification of the kings and others had to do with the value of the amulets that were placed in the wrappings surrounding the body. At a certain period, especially around the New Kingdom, the practice began of including certain texts from the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day, and Going*

Forth by Night in the wrapping fabrics. This text was inserted between the legs of the mummy or on the chest. Additionally, jewels were sprinkled on the linen as well.

After the priests had assured themselves that the mummy was ready for the eternal journey, they would outfit the face of the mummy with a mask. Sometimes this mask, depending on the rank of the person, was made out of gold and lapis lazuli; at other times, it might be made out of cartonnage. Furthermore, it was not unusual to see mummies that had the entire body covered with a sort of board covering.

The mummy was then placed in a coffin, a kind of rectangular box, as the house of the deceased, decorated with texts, a façade of a palace, and a false door. Coffins were usually decorated with texts, offering sayings, and libation texts. Once the coffin, eventually designed according to the shape of the mummy, was placed inside of the Neb Ankh, usually made out of stone or carved out of rock, the deceased, properly mummified, was on the way to eternity.

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See also Reincarnation

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MUNTU

See BUMUNTU

MUSIC

Music is a central part of the lifestyle in most traditional African cultures. Beginning with ancient African civilizations, music was considered sacred. The sacredness of music remains a key concept in

traditional African societies today. The African's concept of music is unlike that of Western societies, and therefore those unfamiliar with the African concept of music often misunderstand it. Specifically, in creating music, Africans do not strive to put sounds together so that the end result is a pleasant sound. The African musician is not trying to reproduce sounds in nature through musical instruments. Instead, the African musician takes nature's sounds and integrates those sounds into the music. The goal is to express life through sound. Each sound has a meaning fully understood only by those familiar with African life.

The use of music for its supernatural powers is the chief function of music in traditional African societies. In a general sense, music for the African allows humans to connect with the invisible deities that control their lives and destinies. Many Africans believe that music contains magical powers that produce specified results, and sound is a key vehicle through which deities and humans communicate with each other. Musicians must understand and play certain rhythms for certain gods. In addition to inviting the gods, music is believed to direct the flow of these supernatural powers.

For example, in West Africa, drumming facilitates ceremonies during which participants are possessed by the gods. In Akan society, a bell attached to a sacred blackened stool is used to call the spirit of the ancestors. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, for the Shona performers, music is a process or power that promotes spirit possession and ultimate healing. Throughout Madagascar, music is used to inform ancestral spirits that they are needed, and it then facilitates *tromba* spirit possession, where the body is essentially a vessel for the spirit and music mix.

For many Africans, music, as the conduit for communication between humans and ancestral spirits, has substantial healing qualities. For example, the Shambaa people of the Usambara Mountains in northeastern Tanzania refer to *nguvu* as a force of health, wellness, and power that is obtained through *ughanga*, which is considered a song, a prayer, a spirit, a way of life—of healing. It is through music and ritual that *ughanga* is called into being. In northern Malawi, the Tumbuka-speaking people believe that music, such as the sound of the drum beat, the clap of the hands, and the clank of metal objects, is the link

that allows patient, healer, and spirit to connect, and it is this connection that plays a significant part in bringing about healing.

The people of Africa use a variety of musical instruments, including drums, harps, harp-lutes, lutes, lyres, and zithers. Often these instruments are considered much more than mere objects; rather, they are endowed with human and superhuman characteristics. These instruments may have names or be given special sacrificial food, and they are believed to supply a certain power. The musician and the instrument develop a kinship, almost humanlike.

For example, the Yoruba of Nigeria, when making a drum, first engage in a ceremony to pacify the spirit within the tree that is to be used to make the drum. The Yoruba also believe that a good drum must be made from a tree near a village of people so that the drum is familiar with human voices. Otherwise, the Yoruba believe, the wood is unacquainted with human voices, and therefore will not make an adequate drum. Each drum also has an altar carved on it where the drummer and the deity of drumming connect spiritually. For the Yoruba, regular communion with the patron deity of drumming is essential to effective drumming. The sacredness of musical instruments is also demonstrated by the important function these instruments play in traditional African political systems. In a number of societies, like the Ankole of Uganda and the Lovedu of the Transvaal in South Africa, a sacred drum is a mythical symbol of office.

Not only is the musical instrument important, but, according to the Yoruba, words also have magical power and are used to achieve specified results. The specific sentence structure is not as important as the magic in the sounds of the words.

Although African music takes on many forms, it does have common characteristics. Repetition, polyphony, and call-and-response are three such characteristics. The Mbira music of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, for example, is a repeated pattern. African music also is participatory and involves both spectators and leaders in a dynamic exchange. One of the most common characteristics of African music, typical in music of the African diaspora as well, is the call-and-response, a method whereby a group repeats a refrain in response to a leader's prompting.

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See also Ceremonies; Rituals

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MUTWA, CREDO VUSAMAZULU

Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa is one of the most powerful and respected traditional healers in South Africa. In this role, he has provided harmony between the living and the dead and serves as a vital source to help people achieve their full potential in a divinely governed, harmonious universe.

The word for water in Ki-Zulu is *amanze*. It means the fluid of creation or the thing that causes something to be. In a real way, Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa is the water (*amanze*) of African sacred traditions. His life's work represents the "fluid of creation" or, more precisely, the fluid of the preservation and continuation of the sacred in African culture and traditions.

Early Years

Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa was born in the Natal area of South Africa on July 21, 1921. The name given to him at his infancy was Vusamazulu. It is a Zulu honorific, meaning "awakener of the Zulus." It was an appropriate name, in that he would take on a greater responsibility of reminding the Zulu people of their heritage and rightful place in the world. Vusamazulu's mother, Numabunu, was the daughter of the shaman warrior Ziko Shezi, who had survived the great battle of Ulundi, which ended the Zulu Wars. His grandfather Shezi was a *Sangoma* and custodian of Zulu relics.

At the insistence of his father, Vusamazulu received his early education in mission schools, where he was taught English, Western history, and civilization; he was also confirmed as a Christian. There was conflict between his parents, one Christian and the other Sangoma. This battle between Christianity and the calling of his life's path tugged at Vusamazulu's heart because he loved his family and did not want to be at the core of disputes between them. He simply wanted to be a teacher of children, which he considered to be a respectable and invigorating profession. After some time, his mother's family removed him from his father so that he could begin his training as a Sangoma.

A *Sangoma* must receive a call from the spirits. It is believed that Sangomas are called to heal by initiation through illness. At around 22 years of age, Vusamazulu experienced a time of sickness and disorientation. This strange malaise, characterized by dreams and visions, would often come over him. His grandfather told Vusamazulu that his illness was a sacred sign for him to become a Sangoma. At the urging of his mother and grandfather, Vusamazulu underwent purification ceremonies, renounced formal Christianity, and began his life as "the water (*amanze*) of African sacred traditions." He received his initiation as a Sangoma from his Aunt Myrna, a young Sangoma, and, in so doing, took his place among a strong family of Sangomas.

His Calling

Sangomas serve many different social, psychological, spiritual, and political functions. They direct rituals, find lost cattle, protect warriors, narrate the people's history, recite the ancient myths, and guard and preserve the Umlando: tribal history and traditions. Sangomas are keepers of traditional stories and explain philosophical and cosmological beliefs. In addition, they fight illness and social pollution while maintaining immediate and constant contact with the ancestors.

A Sangoma is a healer who performs holistic (spiritual and physical) as well as symbolic forms of healing that are embedded in a profound and deep understanding that the ancestors from the spirit realm give instructions, guidance, and

advice for healing illness and the elimination of social disharmony and spiritual degradation. Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa is *Sangoma* and *High Sanusi*. He is one of only two Sanusi left in Africa. Sanusis are the highest level of African healer. They are held in high regard and deep respect as the ones who know all the ancient secrets of protection and healing. They serve their communities in all aspects of life. The *Sanusi* is respected and revered as the “Uplifter,” the one who causes things to ascend. The highest of the *Sanusi* is known as the *High Sanusi*.

As a Sangoma and High Sanusi, Vusamazulu holds the keys to accessing the mystic state of communion with the Ancestors and the Divine, his followers believe. In so doing, Vusamazulu is able to cause the harmonization of the vibrating spirits of human beings with the same frequency as that of the Divine in the service of igniting or tapping into the healing powers of the Universe. As a Divine healer, Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa works simultaneously as historian, physician, psychologist, author, social worker, herbalist, artist, counselor, and adviser.

His Impact

In accepting his higher calling, Vusamazulu has come to affect the lives of untold numbers of people, not only the Zulu people. Many throughout the world can attest that their lives have been changed and “awakened” because of contact with Vusamazulu. In his lifetime, he has influenced

many people on an individual level, as well as in matters of worldly concern.

Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa is the best-known and respected Sangoma in Southern Africa. He is the author of *Indaba My Children* (1966); *Africa Is My Witness* (1966); *My People: The Incredible Writings of Credo Vusa'mazulu Mutwa* (1969); *Zulu Shaman: Dreams, Prophecies, and Mysteries* (2nd ed., 2003); *Songs of the Stars* (1st ed., 2000); and *uNosilimela*. He is, indeed, the “Amanze” of African sacred traditions.

Vera DeMoultrie Nobles and Wade W. Nobles

See also Congo Jack

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N

NAMING

African religion is expressed in the names of people and places. Most African names of people and places have symbolic meanings that are religious in nature. Names are chosen for their special meaning, power, and source. Names are often circumstantial, and historical narratives are woven around them. Newborns are named on the basis of specific situations surrounding their birth, and the names may be related to the feeling of the parents, time of birth, description of the child, or his or her background. Naming a child is taken seriously because it is believed that a name can make or mar a person. For example, a child born outside Yorubaland, particularly abroad, is often named *Tokunbo*, which literally means “coming from across the seas.” A child born during festivals or holidays is called *Abiodun*. A name is perceived as meaningless if it conveys no concrete meaning, has no links to a spiritual source, does not evoke a narrative, and is not linked to any historical events or landmarks.

In several African societies, life cycles are essentially dotted with elaborate rituals. One of the most conspicuous transitional rites that lubricate this passage through life is the naming ritual. An individual’s name represents an essential component of human spiritual anatomy and can serve as an indicator of destiny. Without a name, an individual would not exist. A name is an edifying emblem given to a child at birth by the parents. The Yoruba phrase *oruko lonro ni* literally translates as “names

affect behavior” and symbolizes the belief that the name given to a child can influence his or her behavior. The Akan philosophical expression *Onipa begyee din na wammeye hwee ara*, which means “man was born to make a good name above all things,” indicates that a name becomes a religious mark of identification and a sign of honor and respect. Although the form of the rite varies from one setting to another, the symbolism bears remarkable semblance as a significant constant.

African societies follow a similar naming ritual pattern through time, although there are variations in procedure and emphasis depending on ethnic and cultural background. Generally, a child is named within 7 to 9 days of birth. Among the Yoruba and Akan people, a child is usually named on the eighth day. At the naming ritual, the child receives between 2 and 30 names depending on the occasion and birth circumstances. In the Akan indigenous context, the first name received, the *kra den* (“soul name”), is determined by the day of the week the child was born, as well as the divinity that governs the day. Basically, most Ghanaian personal names comprise two main parts: the *kra den*, indicating the particular birth date, and the *agyadin*, which means “the name chosen by the child’s father or parents.” It is believed that Nyame (the Supreme Being) ascribed different spiritual qualities and functions to seven of His children translated as divinities. Each divinity is assigned to a day of the week. This spiritual quality of the divinities is believed to be transmitted to and carried by the soul of the child along a gender divide. A child born on Akwesida (Sunday) is associated with the divinity

Awusi/Osi; a male child is called Kwesi/Kwasi, whereas a female child is named Akosua/Esi. The significance of the naming ritual on the eighth day lies in the spiritual connection with the divinity. The inherent power in the *kra den* works to align the spirit of the individual with the divinity.

In many societies, the naming ritual is enacted during the early hours of the day. The seventh or eighth day marks a transition and a complete departure from the spirit world to the world of the living. It is a rite usually carried out within the family compound, and participation is limited, although not strictly restricted, to relatives and the extended family. An elder or a renowned personality in the family conducts the ritual in the presence of both maternal and paternal family relatives seated outside in the family compound. The scope of ritual enactments varies from one locality to another. For instance, a libation in the form of drinks is poured to venerate and invoke the blessing of family ancestors on behalf of the newborn baby. This symbolic presentation of drinks or sometimes food to the ancestors is a token of fellowship, hospitality, and respect. Libations are also symbols of family continuity and contact, which coincide with the announcement and blessing of the child's names. The child is instructed, symbolically, to develop good moral values and to take up his or her individual and societal responsibilities.

The naming ritual is also accompanied by the presentation of money and gifts, which symbolically represent objects with which to commence the life journey. The ritual ends with feasting and merry-making referred to in Ghana as the "outdooring." The ritual is a common feature in various Ghanaian indigenous societies and has significant meaning and relevance. Unlike the naming rite, the outdooring feast is more of a public ritual where family members, friends, and neighbors are invited to celebrate with the family. The enactment of naming and outdooring rituals accords the child both individual and social recognition, and the child is introduced to the community of which she or he is now a part. The community is expected to care for and help raise the child. Formal education, religious influences, and modern health institutions have influenced the flavor and texture of naming rituals, although the principles and symbolism have remained largely intact. The symbolism, meaning, and power of naming and several elements of the indigenous naming ritual

have been transposed within African Christian and Islamic worldviews, although the agency of propitiation has sharply altered.

Afe Adogame

See also Children; Family; Family Rites; Rites of Passage

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NANA BULUKU

The Fon people constituted the nucleus of the former kingdom of Dahomey, one of the most distinguished kingdoms of the west coast of Africa. Culturally and linguistically, the Fon belong to the Aja group. In the Fon cosmology, Nana Buluku is commonly known as the androgynous deity who represents the "beginning." Although it is difficult in Dahomean cosmology to speak of one "absolute beginning," after reference to Nana Buluku has been made to the "beginning," Nana Buluku does not appear in the story of the "ordering" of the world. Credit for the "ordering" goes to Nana Buluku's progeny, Mawu-Lisa. Indeed, according to Herskovits, there is no specific cult of Nana Buluku in Dahomey, although its preeminence in relation to all deities is recognized.

An essential element in Dahomean cosmology is the genealogy of the Vodun (i.e., god or gods). The purpose is to take into account the allocation among the gods of the different forces that act on men and women. The Fon people speak of the world of Vodun, rather than of the relations between the Vodun and this world. Thus, according to the Fon creation story, Nana Buluku gave birth to the dual deity Mawu-Lisa (also known simply as Mawu). Mawu is the female, and Lisa is the male.

Mawu is thought to be a Janus-like figure associated with the moon, and Lisa is associated with the sun. Their dual nature represents the complementary forces in the universe: Mawu, the female, is fertility, motherhood, gentleness, and forgiveness, whereas Lisa, the male, is power, warlike strength, and toughness. The idea of twin beings personifies the equilibrium preserved between asymmetrical complements, which are the nature of the world.

In the process of ordering the world, Mawu-Lisa is said to have cooperated and been aided by the deity Dā. Dā has the character of a force of life and motion, rather than a divine being. Whereas Dā is life, Mawu-Lisa is thought. Dā manifests itself in the world in a number of ways, chief among them Dā Ayido Hwedo, most commonly seen as the rainbow. The name *Dā* also means “serpent” in Fon, and this spiritual entity is always conceived as such.

After Nana Buluku created Mawu-Lisa, it withdrew from the world. Mawu-Lisa went on to give birth to all the Vodou. Each of the Vodou born of Mawu-Lisa was given a domain of responsibility. The Earth is assigned to the dual deity Sakpata, atmospheric phenomena are assigned to the androgynous Sogbo, the sea and the waters are assigned to Agbe-Naetε, and uncultivated land where no men live is the responsibility of Age. In fact, the last of the Vodou to be born of Mawu-Lisa is Lεgba, whose responsibility is to be the interpreter between the Vodou. Another important Vodou to be born of Mawu-Lisa is Gu, generally referred to as the Vodou of iron and the deity of the domestic hearth as well as of crafts.

Because many Yoruba and Fon men and women were taken to the Americas where they were enslaved, the veneration of Nana Buluku continued in the religious practice of Santería (Cuba), Oyotunji (United States), Candomblé (Brazil), Umbanda (Brazil), Batuque (Brazil), and Lukumí (Cuba). In Santería, Nana Buluku is an Orisha (god) and is known as the essence of the moon. Nana Buluku is also the mother of the river, whereas *Oshun* is known as the Queen of the river. Indeed, the continuity from Fon cosmology is apparent because *Nana Buluku* is also referred to as the Grandmother of the Orishas.

Garvey F. Lundy

See also Fon; God; Vodou in Benin

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NANNY

The African Jamaican heroine Nanny, also affectionately known as “Granny Nanny,” is a symbol of African agency, resistance, and freedom. In the 18th century, Nanny became the spiritual, cultural, and military leader of the Windward or Eastern Jamaican Maroon community. Nanny has been excluded from much of the written literature on Jamaican history, and much of what is known about her has been passed down from generation to generation by way of oral tradition, in addition to several written references. In some cases, many of the historical accounts of Nanny come from second- and third-hand sources, in many cases unreliable, such as those provided by racist British writers of the 18th and 19th centuries and Maroon captives being held under duress by Europeans. Nanny’s legacy has also been passed on from generation to generation by way of song, storytelling, and ceremonies commemorating her leadership and accomplishments on behalf of African people in Jamaica.

Although these sources are sometimes contradictory, there is some agreed-on knowledge with regard to Nanny’s legacy. In 1975, the Jamaican government inducted Nanny as a national hero, and her portrait now appears on the Jamaican 500-dollar bill. Most important, her legacy of unyielding resistance and freedom fighting lives on in the hearts and minds of people of African descent. Her legacy is perpetuated through stories, sayings, language, ceremonies, rituals, symbols, objects, and places named in her honor.

Nanny is believed to have been born in the Gold Coast area of West Africa (today's Ghana) to the Ashanti people during the late 17th century. The name *Nanny* is said to be a combination of the word *nana*, an honorable title given to Ashanti chiefs, and *ni*, which means *first mother*. It is reported that, along with her brothers Cudjoe, Accompong, Johnny, Cuffy, and Quao, Nanny was transported as a free woman from Africa to Jamaica in the early 18th century. While in Jamaica, Nanny, along with her five brothers, abandoned the British and joined the already existing Maroon community. The Maroons were formerly enslaved Africans who originally escaped from Spanish enslavement as the Spanish fought against the British. The British eventually won colonial control of Jamaica.

By 1720, Nanny had assumed leadership of Moor Town or the Blue Mountain Rebel Town, which eventually became known as Nanny Town. Nanny Town consisted of approximately 300 freedom fighters under Nanny's command. The Maroon communities made themselves responsible for freeing enslaved Africans from British slavery and colonialism as well as resisting European cultural dominance by preserving African culture, identity, and knowledge through African customs and cultural practices. Nanny was known for her leadership, military genius, spiritual prowess, and healing abilities. She was also able to use her military tactics and strategies to beguile and manipulate British soldiers, in many cases rendering them defenseless against attacks and counterattacks from Maroon warriors. Nanny trained Maroons to camouflage themselves to blend in with the trees and branches and to use the *abeng*, special horns to communicate with one another over long distances. She ordered lookouts to warn of approaching Europeans, and she commissioned spies on sugar plantations to find out when the British were planning to attack them. It is said that under Nanny's leadership, more than 800 enslaved Africans were rescued from slavery and brought to freedom in the Maroon communities of Jamaica over a period of 50 years.

African spirituality had played a central role in Maroon military struggles for freedom, and Nanny was known for summoning the powers of the ancestors to provide their assistance. The colonial authorities referred to Nanny as an Obeah, an

Akan word signifying a person with advanced spiritual powers. In Jamaica, the term was used to refer to a person who practices traditional African religion. Nanny used her spiritual knowledge to communicate with African ancestors and protect her community from harm. She provided the members of her Maroon community with spiritual training so that they could maintain their health and protect themselves. The spiritual system that Nanny preserved was referred to as the Kromantee Religion, heavily influenced by the Akan of Ghana. The word *Karomantee* is the name of a particular area in Ghana. Most of the leaders of the Winward maroons were from Ghana. According to the legend of Nanny, her spiritual power made her resistant to the deadly threat of European weapons. It is said that Nanny had the ability to catch the bullets fired by European soldiers and redirect them toward her enemy. Nanny was also able to use her extensive knowledge of herbs to heal members of the Maroon community.

After decades of resistance and freedom fighting, in around 1734, it is alleged that Nanny met her death at the hands of African collaborators who were compensated by the British for fighting against their African brethren in the Maroon communities. This event is doubted due to an abundance of evidence that she lived up until the 1750s. Nanny vehemently opposed signing treaties with the British because she feared they were only attempting to subvert autonomous African communities in Jamaica. However, several of the Maroon communities eventually signed land grant treaties with the British. The treaties allowed the Maroons to occupy their own communities. In exchange, the Maroons had to agree to help the British government catch and return runaway Africans to slavery, to keep and maintain a number of white men on their land, and help put down slave rebellions. It is said that, although Nanny detested the idea of compromising with European authorities, white planters in Jamaica consistently surrounded and threatened to take over the Maroon communities, forcing those who still held territory to sign land agreements. In 1734, a land grant treaty agreement was drawn up in Nanny's name, although it is doubtful that she in fact signed the document herself, and there is no evidence of Nanny's compliance with stipulations

in the treaty demanding the capture of escaped Africans, keeping white men on her land, and fighting alongside the British.

Serie McDougal III

See also Maroon Communities; Obeah; Resistance to Enslavement

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N'DOMO

The term *N'domo* refers to a mask that is used for one of the initiation rites of the Bamana people of Mali. It is believed that the Bamana were at one time matrilineal; however, since the emergence of Islam in Mali, they have been a patrilineal society like that of the Dogon and Mandinka communities in the same region of West Africa. Most Bamana villages are no more than 1,000 people. The relationship between father and son is a core axis of value in the Bamana household; therefore, the process of initiation, despite Islam, remains one of the central facts of Bamana life. This bond between father and son influences the clan name given to the son, the wealth of the family, the child's education, the identity of the child within the larger Bamana society, and the inheritance of status in the family. This entry describes Bamana culture, the role of blacksmiths in the creation of the *N'domo* masks, and the function of the *N'domo* initiation rites in the society as a whole.

N'domo is important because it represents one of the stages through which the child must pass to become a full member of the community. The

leader of this community comes from one of the clans that make up the village. All members of the society trace their lineage back to the first male ancestor. Given that the society is organized along age lines, all initiation rites, including the *N'domo* rites, are important to maintain order and civic duty. Every person between 6 and 30 must be accorded a role and status in the society. Knowing one's role and one's status helps to maintain the discipline necessary in the village. The *gwa*, or family group, is the unit that grows rice, sorghum, peanuts, melons, and millet. Each *gwa* has responsibilities for the fields and their goats, sheep, cattle, and fowl. A young boy grows up learning that he must participate in the society at some level during his youth and, furthermore, that the initiation ceremonies will be part of his membership in the society. Becoming an initiate of *N'domo* carries with it the burden of learning how to master the various aspects of the society. Because the youth have been initiated into the knowledge that is essential to maintain the community, the village is able to sustain itself.

The Bamana have several castes, the most important of which are the farmers and the artisans. The *nyamakalaw*, or blacksmiths, form the largest caste. They play an essential role in agriculture because they make the farm tools and instruments. They are said to be descended from the Mali Empire technologists. The blacksmiths, called *numuw*, are special sculptors called on during the *N'domo* rites; they gain their power from *Nyama*, the energy that animates the universe, and they are considered the "handlers" of this power. They are therefore important in the initiation process. People in this caste are often feared because they make the masks that others use for ritual occasions. Indeed, it is believed that they have magical powers. Women of the *nyamakalaw* clan are usually potters, whereas boys learn to sculpt, carve, and invent objects for use by the village. A boy might work with his father for as many as 10 years, operating the bellows, then carving wood, and then finally using the forge.

It is the interaction of the *numuw* and the culture that produces the *N'domo* masks. Bamana ideas of art are found in many other West African communities because the blacksmiths in one country may learn from something being done in another. Hence, there are similarities among the

initiation masks found among the Dogon, the Kurumba or Nioniosi, and the Bamana. Although each of these cultures has its own unique art, based on its myths, histories, and oral traditions, there are also similarities among them.

This is the context for the N'domo initiation mask. African art is called abstract because beauty is not simply the precise imitation of nature; rather, it is a way to distort or create in such a manner as to approach the unknown. The African artists of the blacksmith clan created and carved to please the gods, not to make money. One can see why there is no single word for art in any African language. Art not only serves a function, but also is expected to be pleasing. The Bamana use the expression *mafile fenw*, *laje fenw*, which means "things to look at."

The N'domo is one of several initiations. According to the Bamana, one does not exist as an individual, but as a person who is a member of the community. To exist as a person (consider the Latin *per-sona*, mask worn by actors) means that the dancer with the N'domo mask must play the part reserved for the mask. This is why the N'domo dancer covers his head. Authorities differ on the number of Bamana initiation rites, but it is generally agreed that there are six or seven. These initiations rely on the Bamana founding ancestor spirit's personality, symbols, masks, and ceremonies. What is called art among the Bamana seems to have been produced by the blacksmiths for one or another of these initiation societies. The perfection of the N'domo mask used by the Bamana in the second part of the initiation cycle for boys is found in the adult dancer who wears the mask. The vertical wooden prongs on top of the mask signify wisdom of the cosmos, the bulging face and forehead of the mask represent intelligence, and the large nose represents fertility and procreation. In the end, the ceremony for boys includes circumcision, teaching about appropriate behavior, and a revelation of the mysteries of the founding ancestor.

The N'domo mask is neither a theatrical accessory nor a piece of art in the Western sense. Rather, it is an object that radiates the energy and beauty of the deity or ancestor it represents. Thus, the N'domo mask confers on the dancer who wears it the power of the spirit it represents. All mask wearers, however, must ensure that they

do not break the taboos of the mask, or they will create problems for themselves; in some cases, a person might even face death. Therefore, it is mandatory that the wearers of the masks swear secrecy to the powers of the mask.

When we consider the N'domo mask as a part of the initiation, we need to think about art without classifying it according to Western aesthetic ideals. Given the variety and number of works in which African artists have projected their thoughts in three dimensions as sculptors of wood, stone, bronze, and other materials, they might be considered to be some of the world's greatest sculptors, although their names have rarely been passed down.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Bamana; Initiation; Rites of Passage

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NEB ANKH

Neb ankh means "lord of life" or "possessor of life." It can be used as a title or can refer to one's most prized possession or to the outermost layer of the coffin. Hundreds of years after the Africans in Egypt developed the *neb ankh*, the Greeks referred to it as *sarcophagus*, meaning the flesh eater; thus, Greek usage removed the ancient meaning of lord of life.

Through the ages, the *neb ankh* evolved through many forms, from the most simple and unadorned wood boxes to the most elaborate gilded container for the deceased. Occupying a

place of honor among burial items, its primary function was the preservation and protection of the body from either physical or spiritual deterioration or mutilation. The master artisans who crafted the neb ankh used a variety of materials ranging from wood to precious stones and metals like gold. In the early to middle dynasty of Kemet, the predominant material used for the neb ankh was wood (sycamore or Lebanese cedar), stone (white lime, red granite, deep onyx, or black basalt), or metal (gold, silver, or electrum). Once Africans had created the form, they illuminated the interior with colored pigment, protective spells, and excerpts from religious literature and the exterior with light portrait carvings of the head of the deceased and faïence-encrusted scenes. Sometimes they added false doors and windows in the form of *udjat* (eyes) through which the soul or spirit of the deceased passed. Next, the spirit of the deceased would be shown partaking of various pleasures, followed by the offering scene or other vividly painted scenes and excerpts of text and scenes from the *Book of Gates* or *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*.

The first evidence of the neb ankh has been dated to the early kingdom around the 3rd century BC. The earliest forms were simple wood rectangular boxes, which sometimes had vaulted lids and crosspieces. After a while Africans created neb ankhs to resemble palaces, with false doors and façade designs. By at least the 6th century BC, artisans had begun to embellish the interior of the neb ankh with calligraphically written excerpts from the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*. On the exterior, artisans sometimes painted white crisscrossed bands that imitated mummy wrappings. The sides were decorated with gold leaf replica of vulture wings and various colorful scenes and passages from the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*. Then they interspersed these scenes with the sons of Heru as well as images of Asar and Anpu. During this early dynasty, most neb ankhs were homogeneous, but by the Middle Kingdom, different provinces began to establish local styles. They perfected the craft of cutting and designing neb ankhs by the 12th dynasty.

In the New Kingdom, Africans continued to make neb ankhs with a variety of new materials, but regional and class differences emerged in the quality of the work. Depending on class or status,

Africans would produce styles ranging from a neb ankh made of a single piece of wood, covered with strips of linen and gesso (a white plasterlike paint) and then brightly painted, to a neb ankh finished in gold, silver, or faïence. Africans often reserved the court style, an elaborate style, for royal families. They were usually embellished in gold leaf or made of silver. During the New Kingdom (18th to 20th dynasty), Africans developed a neb ankh that took on an anthropoid form, and actually in the 18th dynasty, Africans created the neb ankh as the outmost container with several layers of containers for the body of the deceased inside. These increasingly elaborate neb ankhs became more distinguishable for their anthropoid style in the late dynasties of ancient Egypt.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Burial of the Dead

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NEHANDA

Nehanda Chargwe Nyakasikana was one of the major spiritual leaders of African resistance to white rule in Zimbabwe. She was born among the Shona people, one of Zimbabwe's major ethnic groups, in or about 1863. She passed away in 1898. She was considered to be a medium of the female spirit Mbuya Nehanda.

Mbuya Nehanda

The Shona people believe in one Supreme Being, Mwari, who presides over the world, although distant from daily human affairs. Under Mwari, and above the living, one finds numerous spirits

who assist Mwari and the living. Of particular importance are ancestral spirits, and among those, a particular group is believed to be quite powerful, the Midzimu Mikurukuru. The Midzimu Mikurukuru are also known as *mhondoro*, that is, “lions,” because the Shona believe that those spirits wander the forest like mighty lions awaiting a new incarnation. Mhondoro are particularly revered among the Shona because they help people interpret Mwari’s wishes and desires. They are also believed to ensure the well-being of large areas and numbers of people. For example, they will protect those under their watch by sending rain for generous crops or by guaranteeing peaceful relationships among community members. They preside over many important ceremonies and rituals. One mhondoro was a female spirit, Mbuya Nehanda, in Central and Northern Mashonaland. She only mounted women who were well thought of in their community and who, acting as her medium, communicated Mbuya Nehanda’s messages to the living. A woman chosen by Nehanda to be her medium received the title of Mbuya Nehanda and was never to marry.

The original Mbuya Nehanda spirit is believed by many to have actually been in existence during the 15th century. Although there are many stories regarding Nehanda, it appears that she was the daughter of a king of northern Shona territory, Ishe Mutota. She possessed great spiritual powers and was said to have disappeared into a mountain that bears her name to this day, Gomo reNehanda. Nehanda quickly became one of the most important Lion Spirits, or *mhondoro*.

Chargwe Nyakasikana

English settlers invaded Zimbabwe in 1896 and immediately started confiscating the land and cattle of the people. Initially in search of gold, they ruthlessly sought to impose white supremacy through forced labor and heavy taxation. Imbued with a great deal of racial arrogance, they rarely if ever hesitated to engage in numerous acts of physical cruelty, beating and torturing the Africans as they saw fit.

It did not take long for the Africans to start resisting and fighting back. In fact, the military campaign to push the British out of Zimbabwe, known as the

Chimurenga or “the war of liberation,” started in May 1896 at the initiative of the Ndebele people, another important ethnic group in Zimbabwe. The Shona joined them in their efforts a few months later in October 1896. A defining characteristic of the Chimurenga was its great reliance on African religion, with *mhondoro* playing a critical role.

At the time of the white invasion, the Nehanda medium was Chargwe Nyakasikana, a woman who lived in the northern part of the country and whose influence was already quite widespread. Nehanda, along with two other Lion spirits (Mukwati in Matabeleland, but especially Kagubi in western Mashonaland), found herself organizing and directing her people’s resistance to foreign assaults. In fact, the mhondoro effectively conveyed to their people that Mwari, their supreme god, unequivocally disapproved of the white presence and actions and demanded that the white people be removed from the land.

At first, they experienced many victories on the battlefield, and the realization of Mwari’s wish (i.e., the physical removal of the British from the land) seemed near. H. H. Pollard, a European commissioner who operated in Nehanda’s zone and had become notorious for his cruelty, was captured. Brought to Nehanda, she had him work as her servant for a while, and then had him executed. However, running out of supplies, the Africans were eventually defeated by the Europeans. Nehanda allowed herself to be taken into captivity to avoid further African bloodshed and deaths. She was kept at the Harare jail. Her trial opened in March 1898. Found guilty of having killed Pollard, she was executed by hanging on April 27, 1898. Unlike Kagubi (who was tried at the same time and also sentenced to death for killing a police officer), Nehanda refused until her last day to convert to Christianity. Furthermore, before she was hung, Nehanda announced to the Europeans that her body would rise again to lead the second, and this time victorious, struggle against them.

Because of the courage and heroism that she never failed to display, Nehanda is considered by many to be the single most important person in the modern history of Zimbabwe. She certainly was a major source of inspiration during the more recent nationalist struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. She is still referred to, out of affection

and respect, as Mbuya (“Grandmother”) Nehanda by Zimbabwean nationalists. The main maternity hospital in Harare is named after her.

Ama Mazama

See also Shona; Spirit Medium

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NGAI

Ngai (also called *Engai* or *Enkai*) is the name of the supreme God among the Maasai people of East Africa. The Maasai may have separated from other Nilotic groups as early as 1,000 years ago and moved into what is known today as the countries of Sudan and Uganda. This split was followed by two major migration waves, one that might have occurred 300 years ago or earlier and the second one in the 18th century. These migratory movements account for the Maasai’s present-day locations in Kenya and Tanzania.

The Maasai are primarily a pastoral people, whose life and, therefore, religion are centered on cattle because the latter are said to be Ngai’s unique gift to the Maasai. The word *Ngai* means “sky” in the Maa language. In the beginning, the sky (i.e., Ngai) and the Earth were one. All the cattle of the world belonged to Ngai. However, it happened that the sky and the Earth separated, and Ngai and its cattle were no longer residing on Earth. However, given that the cattle’s subsistence depended on the availability of grass, Ngai decided to send all the cattle down to the Maasai, giving them the divine mandate of looking after the beasts. The cattle slid down from the sky onto the Earth by means of a long rope made of the

wild fig tree’s roots. To the Maasai’s neighbors, the Torrobo (or Dorobo or Ildorobo) hunters and gatherers, Ngai gave honey and wild animals. To the Kikuyu, another neighboring group, Ngai sent seed and grain. But the Maasai alone were blessed with the gift of all cattle. A jealous Torrobo man cut the rope between the sky and the Earth, thus destroying the direct line of communication between God and the living.

Hence, like so many other African supreme Gods, Ngai is only indirectly involved in human affairs. However, through their relationship with and care of their cattle, which as the ultimate gift of God to human beings are most sacred, the Maasai re-create the primordial unity with Ngai. The cattle possess the qualities of God and attest to God’s greatness and generosity. Through the consumption of meat and the drinking of milk, God and human beings become one again. Thus, meat-eating and milk-drinking, through their re-creation of this original unity, are religious experiences of the highest order and, quite predictably, occur at the most important times in Maasai life, such as birth, initiation and circumcision, marriage, and death, and on all critical occasions like rites of passage from one age set to the next. Animals are ritually killed, the meat blessed by the elders and shared and eaten in the open.

Ngai, as supreme God, is androgynous, that is, both female and male. Ngai’s primordial dwelling, the Ol Doinyo Lengai, which literally means “The Mountain of God,” is located in northern Tanzania. Ngai presides over rain, fertility, the sun, and love matters. Although a single deity, the Maasai God appears under two manifestations: Ngai Narok, characterized by goodness and benevolence, is black, whereas Ngai Nanyokie, the angry one, is red, like the British colonizers who disrupted Maasai life. There are many stories about the relationship between those two dimensions of Ngai: Ngai Narok and Ngai Nanyokie. It is told, for example, that once upon a time, as famine spread as a result of a severe drought, leaving humans and cattle alike on the brink of starvation, Ngai Narok suggested to Ngai Nanyokie that they send rain to the creatures living on Earth. Ngai Nanyokie reluctantly agreed to it, and rain started to fall in abundance, providing much-needed relief on Earth. After a few days, however,

Ngai Nanyokie asked Ngai Narok to stop sending rain, which she or he did. Later, when asked to release rain again by Ngai Narok, Ngai Nanyokie refused. What followed was a dispute between the two, and the noise that they made while arguing was heard in the form of loud thunder. Hence, powerful, invisible forces of the natural world, such as rain, thunder, and lightning, represent both blessings and punishments from Ngai. When drought strikes, the Maasai appeal to their supreme God by having children sing a religious song while standing in a circle and holding a bunch of grass in their hands after the sun has retired for the day.

Ama Mazama

See also God; Maasai

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NGANGA

In Africa, religion is not merely about the world to come. It is not about self-denial for the glorification of deities. Rather, religion is viewed as a system of the ultimate meaning of human existence. It provides a comprehensive healing of mind and body and enhances spiritual and physical well-being. At the core of this religious worldview stands the nganga, or healer, who acts as a powerful mediator between the visible world and the realm of spirits and ancestors.

The nganga is an indispensable agent in the African tradition of healing and peacemaking. The word *nganga* is used in the Kiluba language of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in many other Bantu languages, from central Africa to Zimbabwe and South Africa. It refers to the healing function of religion. Although referred to by some scholars with less offensive lexicons as “medicine-man” or “shaman,” the nganga has been widely disparaged in Western scholarship, in which he is often referred to as a witchdoctor.

In Africa, however, the nganga is a savior of lives who plays an honorable role in the religious and social order of Africa. As a healer of body and spirit, the nganga works in close relation with the spirits and is often a priest who bridges the world of the living and that of the ancestors. In other words, the nganga is a complex and polyvalent agent. He is at once an herbalist and a priest, a diviner and a prophet. He may be regarded according to other taxonomies as a clairvoyant, a shaman, a psychic, or a medium. His medicine is closely intertwined with prayers, incantations, songs, dance, offerings, and sacrifices to the deities. While performing his divination, the nganga often enters a trance to better communicate with the spirits.

In African cosmology, it is believed that the world of the ancestors abounds in peace, joy, harmony, wealth, health, and happiness, whereas the current world of the living is beset by evildoers, danger, illness, and death. Therefore, genuine healing cannot be achieved without the intervention of the world of the ancestors. Moreover, physical and mental illness is viewed primarily as a form of disorder or imbalance resulting from disunity between mind and body, the individual and society, or humans and spirits. A proper diagnosis of the root causes of disease requires an investigation of social relations and spiritual transgressions. These negative forces of disorder are often referred to as witchcraft (*buloji*, *kindoki*, or *butshi*). Hence, the nganga employs divination and spirit possession to determine the cause of the disorder and plays the role of an “anti-sorcerer” (the one who neutralizes the power of witches). His healing process restores the psychic, social, and cosmic balance of the individual, as well as that of his community, and involves the observance of fundamental ethical rules to avoid sinking in chaos that brings about sickness.

The notion of nganga emerges from the fundamental vision of African theological anthropology (i.e., African understanding of human nature, the nature of African social structures, and the nature of illness and well-being).

Ngangaism is based on the fundamental African understanding of the interconnectedness between the material and the spiritual realms, and between the individual and society. In this worldview, physical health largely depends on spiritual well-being and harmonious social relations.

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Cosmology; Divination Systems; Healing

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NGEWO

Ngewo is the supreme God among the Mende people. The latter, who number about 1 million, are found in West Africa, more precisely in the southern and eastern parts of the country known today as Sierra Leone. However, a small Mende community is also found in the western part of neighboring Liberia. The Mende oral tradition, as well as linguistic evidence, indicates that the Mende migrated from the western Sudan, probably in several waves, between AD 200 and 1500. Their language is also called *Mende* (sometimes spelled *Mande*).

Ngewo, also known during more ancient times under the name of *Leve* (literally “one who is above”), is a sky god (i.e., the God of Heaven). Ngewo is thought of as the supreme force and power responsible for the creation of the universe and all that it contains: human beings, animals, plants, medicine, and so on. In addition, Ngewo

infused his creation with a force that permeates everything and manifests itself not only in human beings, animals, plants, and objects, but also in natural phenomena such as lightning, mountains, and waterfalls. Ngewo’s creative power thus asserts itself in all that is at all times.

Although omnipresent in daily Mende life and thought, Ngewo, as in most other African religious traditions, is withdrawn from the world, having retired to the heavens above. Evidence of Ngewo’s powerful presence is attested by the natural world, which serves a constant reminder of its greatness. It is said that Ngewo, having offered his assistance to human beings, grew tired of their constant solicitations and withdrew from the world of the living one night while people were asleep. This withdrawal does not mean, however, that Ngewo is not involved in human affairs at all. In fact, Ngewo determines people’s destiny, for example, how long they will live. Also, as the upholder of truth and justice, Ngewo’s name and ultimate authority are invoked by a diviner seeking to identify a wrongdoer. It is also Ngewo who sends rain down onto the Earth, said to be his wife. Through the release of rain, Ngewo continues to play his role as creator and sustainer of all life. However, Ngewo delegated most of his governing power to ancestral and nature spirits (called *dyininga*), whose primary responsibility it is to administrate human affairs. Those spirits in effect act as intermediaries between the living and Ngewo. As such, they are venerated and receive prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. However, prayers may also be addressed directly and occasionally to Ngewo.

Ama Mazama

See also Bondo Society; God; Mende

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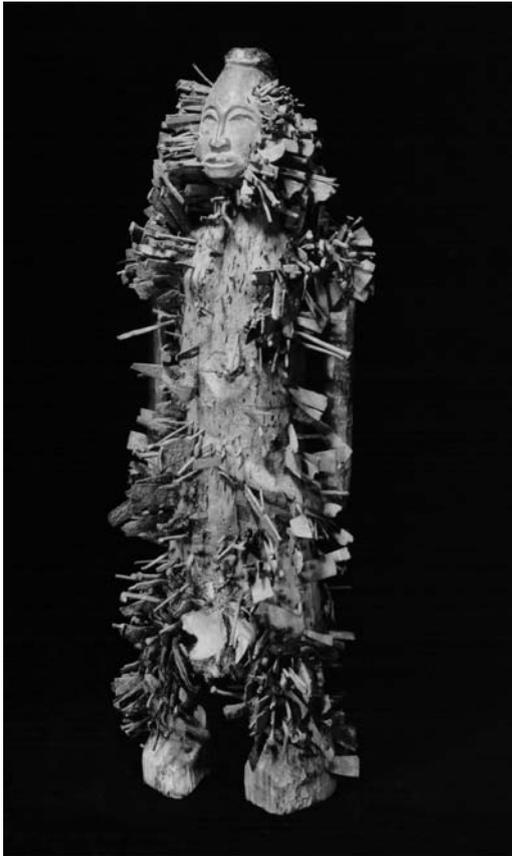
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NKISI

Nkisi (*Minikisi* is the plural form) is a Kongoles word for sacred medicine and, by extension, any object or material substance invested with sacred energy and made available for spiritual protection and moral use. BaKongoles believe that the god Funza gave the world the first Nkisi. The source for the Nkisi potency is the *bakisi*, messengers from the spirit world. Minikisi are vessels or sculptures made of ceramic, cloth,



Nkisi lumweno medicine figure. 19th century. Vili People, Loango region, Republic of Congo. Nkisi is the physical container for a spirit from the other world, the land of the dead. When activated by a specialist, or nganga, it has the power to heal, to protect, or to punish.

Source: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York.

wood, or other material. They contain spiritually potent substances to heal and defend against spiritual maladies. The *Nganga*, the spiritually healer, diviner, and mediator, usually creates them. Africans uprooted from this region, enslaved and dispersed during the Maangamisi (African holocaust) and Mfecane (dispersion), retained knowledge of some form of Nkisi making. In places throughout the United States, particularly the Deep South, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Miami, and Florida, African descendants still create Nkisi. Nkisi making is also found throughout the Caribbean and the African Latino world, in places such as Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. This spiritually charged material of healing is activated through ritual use of the word or by other means. A special person made sacred by role or function speaks the words that transform the material into a magical power capable of healing or correcting those behaviors that are betrayals of the rules of conduct in the society.

Functions of Nkisi

Nkisi has many interrelated functions. African doctors use it to affect healing, aiding the sickly to get well. They use the Nkisi to search for the spiritual and physical source of a malady and then chase it away from the body. As a preventive measure, the spiritual leaders also use it to protect the human soul, guarding it against disease and illness. In addition, they used it as a companion to instruct or redirect the spirit, sooth a broken heart, and greet a provocateur with laughter and generosity. They use it to serve as a charm to repel enemies, arrest them in their tracks, or inflict an illness on them, and to bind its owner to a friend or attract lovers. Furthermore, they use it to affect natural phenomena, such as changing a weather pattern or preventing or creating storms. Alternatively, they use the Nkisi to embody and direct a spirit; similarly, they used it as a hiding place for a troubled soul, keeping and composing order. Finally, they use it to preserve a life.

The African sense that informs the Nkisi is the assumption that it is a living form, at one with the spirit. Africans see the Nkisi as a metaphor of the cosmos in miniature form, a form charged with emanation, flashes, and traces of the spirit. Speech is often the activating agent both verbal and gestual. Accordingly, they view the Nkisi as divine spark



Carved wooden figure (Nkisi), Kongo, Congo, late 19th century. The iron blades embedded into the figure are believed to release ancestral power.

Source: British Museum/Art Resource, New York.

or soul within spirit embodying material, a spark that may be an ancestor returning from the other-world to serve the owner spirit.

Africans created the physical form of Nkisi out of select organic and inorganic material, a selection that is a combination of wood, cloth, leather, or metal casing on a combination of select roots, herbs, and leaves. Nkisi form may be a packet bound with fabric seven times, embodying material wrapped or concealed in organic and inorganic material. The creators of the Nkisi inscribe cosmograms—symbols on the surface or interior of the medicine that may come in the form of puns, symbols such as the sign of the four moments of the sun (a cross with circles on the ends).

The medicine of the Nkisi may be a moral, that is, a text signifying a vow or legal agreement to heal a troubled business relationship. For instance, today it may be an Nkonde statue in the Kongo with half-inserted blades representing a binding legal document or to provoke the spirits to deliver similar injuries to a guilty party; it may be a twisted root (High John the Conqueror root). Other forms of the Nkisi include the Nkonde figurine, whisk and anthropomorphic or zoomorphic statues that contain medicine in the lower belly region indicated by a mirror. Nails driven into the figure activate these. Nkisi may be natural objects such as trees, water, and mounds of soil, or human-made objects such as charms, lamps, bottle trees, or broken ceramic plate decorations at gravesites that signify an ancestor crossing over from the living world to the transcendent world. Nkisi may also be surface adornment of caskets that honor the spirit and guide it to the transcendent world, preventing the spirit from wandering or returning to haunt survivors. This harkens back to a similar process in the Nile Valley with the adornment of the neb ankh in ancient Kemet.

Sometimes Africans viewed handmade musical instruments that accompanied a funeral procession as an Nkisi. Even more interesting, Africans viewed highly regarded leaders as extraordinarily powerful minikisi due to their capacity to provide both moral leadership and spiritual healing.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Magic; Medicine

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NKULUNKULU

The Zulu name for the supreme deity is Nkulunkulu, literally the “old one.” Nkulunkulu is thought to be the Creator or First Cause of all things that exist. He taught the Zulu how to plant corn, how to build fires out of sticks of wood, how to make iron, and how to use herbs for medicine. In fact, he was the one who named all of the animals and the trees, and nothing came into existence without the energy of Nkulunkulu. To indicate the primary position that Nkulunkulu holds in the society, the Zulu elders called this deity by several names. One of the most honored names for Nkulunkulu is Mvelinquanagi. This name for the great high deity means that he came out first; there is none who came before him. Thus, the Zulu are clear and expressive when they say Nkulunkulu is Uthlanga, the place where life began and from which all men broke off, meaning that no one came from anywhere else. The question of the origin of Nkulunkulu is a perplexing one because the answer usually given by the Zulu begs the question. For example, one saying is that Nkulunkulu came from a bed of reeds, but then the question is, from where did the bed of reeds originate?

As the maker of things for humans, Nkulunkulu is thought to have made all things good because Nkulunkulu can create only good. In this regard, Nkulunkulu is like many African supreme deities who are thought to have made only good. Another word used in connection with Nkulunkulu is *Usondo*. There is the belief that *Usondo* means “the one who came forth first from Nkulunkulu” or, more precisely, “the first one.” This name is used at the end of statements that contain philosophical or ethical ideas in Zulu. The speaker will end the statement with a nod to *Usondo*. The people call the rains the “rains of *Usondo*,” and they speak of the harvest

as “the food of Usondo.” Nothing in creation can escape the idea of Usondo because it goes to the heart of origin. All Zulu are essentially the children who came after the breaking into existence by Usondo. They say that Usondo came by Unthlanga and all Zulu ancestors came by Usondo. The word *Unthlanga* means “Great Father.” Obviously, this is a reference to the original creation of the people. But Nkulunkulu is thought to have gone beneath the world to live once humans were created, and therefore he cannot be seen. Because Nkulunkulu cannot be seen there are no images, shrines, or priests for him; there is no way to trace him, and hence his work is done.

Among the Zulu, it is thought that evil originated when a human disobeyed Nkosi, the Lord of the Sky, and Nkosi became so angry that his anger literally ate him up. According to this story, the Lord of the Sky became angry and expelled both the man and his wife from the sky. This created anger, and the anger created pain. The Zulu distinguish between moral and immoral anger. Good anger is a response to violations of the moral order and supports the community. Once the person has offered reparations for the violation, it is erased from Nkosi’s record. Immoral anger is like evil incarnate and has the purpose of annihilation. The problem of evil exists in relationship to the supreme deity, but it is a human problem brought into existence by some action on the part of humanity. Thus, the resolution of evil is achieved when humans recognize their mistakes and reset the universal harmony given by the supreme deity.

Nkulunkulu, although known to be the creator, leaves it to the ancestors and spirits to order and run the society. Highly venerated ancestors are called on in times of trouble and are appealed to for children, family, food, animals, and shelter. Because the ancestral family is the first bond of community, the Zulu look to the age sets and lineage groups for assistance in the first instance. They make sacrifices to the *issitoota* or *amatongo*. These are the names of the venerated ancestors. Anything that is detrimental can be attributed to an ancestor who is not happy with something that was done by the living.

It is thought that, from time to time, Nkulunkulu has communicated with human

beings through myth. Nothing exists without the intervention of the creator, but the creator does not have to work constantly. Nkulunkulu puts forth an idea and afterward it has a life of its own. For example, death is explained through a story in which Nkulunkulu sent Chameleon to Earth with a message that humans would not die. But before he reached the people, Chameleon stopped to eat fruit. Nkulunkulu became angry and sent Lizard with a message to Humanity that said, “Humans will die.” Lizard got to the Earth and humanity before Chameleon and delivered the message that Nkulunkulu had decreed death. Or, maybe, that he had ordered that humans would be mortal? This mythical story has many counterparts in Zulu history, but the principal point is that Nkulunkulu is the Zulu’s connection to creation. Other mythical concepts are developed along the same line; the first use or the first occasion becomes the pattern for all other cases. Fundamentally, Nkulunkulu serves as the oldest idea in the Zulu world because before Nkulunkulu there was nothing.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also God; Zulu

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NKWA

According to the Akan people of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa, *nkwa* is a concrete reference to life. Nkwa does not refer to life in the abstract sense, but to life in its most palpable form. Nkwa is commonly referred to as an abundance or fullness of life. Beyond mere existence, the full manifestation of *nkwa* includes long life, fertility, vigor, health, wealth,

happiness, felicity, and peace. To achieve the full manifestation of nkwa, *ahonyade* (possessions, prosperity) must be present, adding wealth and riches to the meaning of life. Additionally, *asomdwei* (peace, tranquility) is also required to achieve the full manifestation of nkwa. Although a community must have peace and harmony to be completely located in the realm of nkwa, it is also necessary to encourage, support, and maintain the creative energy necessary for fertility in both the sense of agriculture and the productive sense of human procreation. It is the source of eternity for the community. Without nkwa, nothing exists because life does not exist.

The ultimate end of one's existence on Earth is the enjoyment and fulfillment of nkwa in its fullest expression. The Akan believe that nkwa, in its truest form, can be obtained only through the mediation of and spiritual connection with divinities and the ancestors. As a result, nkwa is the focus of many Akan prayers that call for rain, food, children, health, prosperity, power, success, and wealth.

Nkwa is connected to the Akan concept of the supreme manifestation of the abundant and joyous life. The Twi term *nkwaye* refers to *nkwa* (life in all its fullness) and *gye* (rescue, retake, recapture). In that sense, *nkwaye* represents the preservation, protection, and sustaining of life. Of course, this can only be done by activating the continuing involvement of the ancestors in everyday life. One must always carry out rituals and perform ceremonies that cleanse the people, reconnecting the disconnected to their spiritual roots, in an effort to secure the everlasting flow of spiritual energy. One can be protected from those who would do harm, such as evil persons with bad spirits (*abayifo*), false teachers and priests (*akaberekyerefo*), and quack doctors (*asumantufo*). By staying in contact with the *nsamanfo*, that is, the ancestors, the people can maintain nkwa as the main frame of their entire society's existence because it remains the creative and productive force of the community.

Some scholars believe that the power of nkwa in Akan may have been one reason that enslaved Africans survived capture and the brutal transport to the Americas. In the purificatory rites of the Akan, when one goes to the *abisa* (shrine priests),

we find the connectedness to the idea of the appeasement of all offended ancestors who have been disturbed by the enslavement of Africans. Thus, nkwa remains a key component to the traditional African religion's concept of the circularity of the community.

M. K. Asante, Jr.

See also Akan

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NOMMO

In West Africa, the Dogon people of Mali believe that the African concept of Nommo, the power of the spoken word, carries an energy that produces all life and influences everything from destiny to the naming of children. By human utterance or through the spoken word, human beings can invoke a kind of spiritual power. Nommo, the generative power of the spoken word, is the force that gives life to everything. It is present everywhere, and it brings into existence all that is seen and unseen. Furthermore, the Dogon believe that humans have power over the word and thereby can direct the life force. All human creation and natural phenomena emanate from the productive power of the word, that is, Nommo, which is a life force. Nothing happens in human society without Nommo. It is like magic in one way, but that is not strange to the Dogon because, in the thinking of the Dogon, all magic is ultimately Word magic. This is true whether the Word is manifested in incantations, blessings, or curses. In fact, if the Word did not exist, all forces would be suspended, there would be no procreation, and, therefore, there would be no life.

Although the concept of Nommo is most identified with the Dogon, it can be found in the African classical texts, with the same idea of using words to impart energy; to change forms, shapes, and conditions; and to make work easier. One could see this in the classical idea of opening the mouth of the gods; by employing certain chants and incantations, a priest was able to activate the deity. For the ancient Egyptians, *Hu-sia*, like Nommo, was the power of the spoken Word. Both concepts, Nommo and *Hu-sia*, are linked to the ethical principle *Maat* (truth, righteousness, justice, order, harmony, balance, and reciprocity) in its manifestation as the defender against chaos. *Maat* provided the ancient Egyptians with a value system by which to live, and the particular speech of the priests opened the spiritual mysteries to the people. The ancient Egyptians believed that the nature of *Hu-sia* was to bring about understanding and enlightening, brilliant utterances that created and sustained community; thus, it was the precursor to the later idea of Nommo found in the Dogon spiritual system.

Nommo may have different manifestations as utterances depending on the source of the word. Common, ordinary speech is not the same as specialized, informed, and sacred speech. Because all words that are spoken have power, ordinary speech is also dynamic and creative. Situations are transformed by the spoken word. Inasmuch as the creator is the source of all words, however, Nommo is originally "one with god." As such, it is a spiritual form; once humans express the spoken word, they are using portions of the god's energy.

Speaking with power is creative and transformative. This is why the Dogon believe that to command things with Words is to practice magic. The power of the speaker can determine how fascinated, energized, and galvanized an audience will be, but even more the person who is speaking the Word, that is, practicing Nommo, is at the transformative core of any oratorical discourse. In the sense of speaking before audiences, Nommo is remarkably present in powerful utterances that are based on the Maatic principles.

Morality is the prime consideration for African oratory and public discourse. The power of Nommo appears to be in proportion to the moral character of a speaker, not just the

person's oratorical skill. Thus, in an oratorical situation, it is imperative for the speaker to use creativity to present the word within the character of ethical discourse.

Ultimately, spiritual harmony is the objective of human utterance within the African worldview. The attainment of harmony is the aim of all participants when the community is called together for a common cause. Nommo, through the spoken Word, is a powerful instrument that is evident in numerous ways. It addresses profound life circumstances. Furthermore, the spoken Word creates human relationships that bring about social transformations. The Word, in an African sense, is the sacred force of life and creates reality for African people. The preeminence of Nommo is a defining cultural characteristic of African people.

Although it is true that African culture has created both written and spoken language, beginning with the origin of writing around 3500 BC and spoken language, of course, long before history, the fact that Nommo has remained an important concept in African culture is related to the productive force of speech. The philosophers among the Dogon believe that each word is an addition to the universe, and by adding to the totality of the universe the word changes the nature of our existences. No word that goes out of a person's mouth can be considered useless, because it is, by the physical act of being spoken and creating breath that enters the universe, transformative.

Only the Word that is spoken can actively engage the human being in a personal manner, and this generative action of Nommo constitutes a new relationship between a speaker and a listener.

Naming in African culture is also a social area in which the concept of Nommo or the power of the Word is ever present. Naming is an essential characteristic of African philosophy and religion, and nothing can exist without being called by a name. Nommo, the Spoken Word, is primary to an understanding of the family and community and is at the base of all naming. What we cannot conceive does not exist. Every human thought expressed becomes reality; in other words, it is spoken into being. Once we name it, it moves into existence. The power of Nommo through naming creates life. Additionally, without naming, life would be static; there would be no possibility of

social development or growth and no integration into human society. Naming, for Africans, is significant because it identifies who they are and where they hope to ascend. African naming ceremonies are sacred, and each time parents name a child they are commenting on the life path of that child, how that child will see him- or herself, and their hopes for the future of African people. The name goes with the child as a symbol as he or she navigates through life.

In Africa and elsewhere that Africans are present, every boy and girl is given a name with some significance. Names are important because many believe they may affect a person's behavior. This is the first act of religion and the point at which a newborn child becomes a real member of the community. Giving a child a name by calling it out aloud makes the child an accepted part of the society. Many Africans believe that giving a child a name has a psychological effect on her or him. Names are descriptions for the totality of a person. But it is in the Nommo practice, the announcing aloud of the name, that the transformative energy is released.

Adisa A. Alkebulan

See also Dogon; Oral Text; Oral Tradition

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NORTH AMERICA, AFRICAN RELIGION IN

The European slave trade from the 15th to the 19th centuries brought to the Americas millions of Africans along with their religious and cultural practices. Examples of these religious and

cultural practices are putting broken cups and dishes belonging to the deceased on top of the grave; not moving or making any noise during a thunderstorm; divination and spiritual readings; giving communication with the dead and “spiritual causality” as the reason for some phenomenon; and the healing technique—documented in 1976 in rural North Carolina—of putting a sick person into a hole, sacrificing an animal in the hole, pulling the person out, and quickly burying the sickness and thus healing the person. Many more African cultural and religious practices have continued uninterrupted up to the present day.

The traditional Black church displays the following African retentions and modalities: polyrhythmic music and antiphonal singing; call-and-response; spirit transcendence; prophecy and spiritual readings; the minister as “chief”; the deacons as “council of elders”; the women as “the power behind the throne”; speaking in tongues; blessing with holy oils and candles; prophecy; exorcisms and dispelling; spiritual cleansings; and “Deity” as immanent, personal, and friendly, as well as the dispenser of “eleventh-hour” miracles. Those families and communities that have persisted with and still practice their “Africanisms” are participants in what may be referred to as old school African cultural and religious practices.

The areas in North America that seem to have the greatest conscious and continuous African retentions, and recognizable practices, structures, and forms, are the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands and neighboring coastal areas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and other pockets throughout the rural Deep South. In the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Island areas, there are linguistic, dietary, and magicoreligious practices and passage ceremonies clearly of Angolan and Sierra Leonean origin. Louisiana has a strong historical and cultural connection to Haiti. The majority of the Blacks who migrated to Louisiana from Haiti—after their successful revolution in the late 1700s—were descendants of the Ewe and Fon peoples of West Africa whose religion was called Vodun (which means God or gods). Its Western adaptation and practice is called Vodou, and it is believed in and widely practiced by thousands of inhabitants of Louisiana and other parts of the Deep South.

African religion, spirituality, and culture have had a tremendous impact and influence on the Euro-American culture of North America—particularly in the South. This is a result of there being intimate and continuous contact for more than 300 years. The impact has been on food and diet, etiquette, genteelness, hospitality, linguistics, music, and spiritual-religious understandings, beliefs, and behaviors. The dominant Euro-American culture since the enslavement of Africans has devalued, suppressed, and distorted much of African culture and spirituality. Because Africans were considered inferior, so too were their contributions in terms of aesthetics and culture. What is paradoxical is that Euro-American culture has absorbed, adopted, and adapted key elements of African religious and cultural practices. This has produced key components of what has come to be identified as traditional southern culture. A visit to the Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia, corroborates this. This is the antebellum cemetery of the white southern elite and has been segregated by law and tradition since its founding. The following can be observed there: food and money offerings left at the various grave sites and mausoleums; beads, food, and money offerings left at and on grave statues; and persons pouring libations and making prayer petitions to their ancestors buried there. These are socially acceptable practices—although not necessarily shared with outsiders—conducted by white southern Christians and adopted from centuries of close association with a culturally African population.

These beliefs and behaviors have existed with varying degrees of openness and public awareness; most often, they took place within families and closed communities. A new movement, however, began to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s that has extended to the present day. This movement may be labeled the new school African and religious and cultural practices. Some of the luminaries of this movement are Zora Neale Hurston, renowned writer and anthropologist; Katherine Dunham, famous choreographer, dancer, and anthropologist; and Pearl Primus, premier dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist. Hurston investigated African cultural retentions and religious practices in Haiti, Jamaica, and the Deep

South. She transferred and transformed some of her material into novels, plays, and articles for popular reading. Some of her other materials were directed toward scholarly publications. Dunham and Primus presented to the American public performances and presentations from the following cultural areas: West African, Central African, Afro-Jamaican, Afro-Trinidadian, and Afro-Haitian. These authentic performances were presentations of the matrix of song, dance, and drumming, which are at the core of African culture, religion, and spirituality. Authentic spirit possessions are often manifested during the performances. For the first time—in North America—African religion and culture were openly and publicly presented and elevated for the appreciation of believers and nonbelievers alike. In the early 1950s, Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz musicians also began to show an interest in Afro-Cuban music and musicians. Gillespie was instrumental in promoting and introducing them to the jazz medium and the American public.

Yoruba Orisha and Ifa Traditions

With the Afro-Cuban music came an infusion of the African gods (orisha), whose rhythms are the foundation for what is called the Latin sound. It was common to hear Cuban—and other Latin performers—give honor to the African orisha in song during their performances. The Cuban band leader, actor, and TV personality Desi Arnaz frequently sang to the African orisha of sickness and healing, Babaluaye, during his performances. These immigrants, although they would give honor in music and song, were private and secretive. They avoided public displays and involvement in their African rites and rituals. It was the African Americans, who came through the lineages of Dunham and Primus, who were open and public with their African rituals and cultural presentations. These “new school practitioners” opened up cultural centers that taught the following: African languages, dance, drumming, dress and attire, foods and recipes, religion, culture, and spirituality in its many diasporic manifestations.

Oba Oseijaman Adefumi I, the founder and chief priest of the Yoruba Temple of New York and Oba (King) of the Yoruba Village in Sheldon,

South Carolina, came out of the Dunham School. He was a dancer in Dunham's company who traveled with her to Haiti and other places in the diaspora. In 1959, he decided to go to Mantanzas, Cuba, where he was initiated as a priest of the Yoruba orisha of creation Obatala. In 1972, he went to Nigeria, West Africa, and became initiated as a priest of the oracle Ifa and received the title of Babalawo (father of the secrets). Upon returning to the United States, he spent years initiating dozens of African Americans into orisha throughout the country. In the District of Columbia, he initiated Iya-Nifa Mother Taylor of the thriving Yoruba Temple of Spiritual Elevation and Enlightenment to the orisha Obatala. He is definitely the father of Ifa and orisha worship for African Americans.

Akan-Guan Traditions

Nana Dinizulu was a close and intimate friend and colleague of Oba Oseijaman for more than 40 years. He was an accomplished drummer and choreographer; in the 1950s, he was a devotee of the African orisha-vodu Damballa Wedo. It is quite likely that Baba Oseijaman may have regularly shared this experience with him. Nana Dinizulu made his first trip to Ghana in 1965 through the help of a Ghanaian friend, Afutu Arist Nequay. Nequay helped introduce him of Okomfohene Akua Operebea of Larteh, Akwapim, Ghana, West Africa. She was the most renowned and one of the most powerful priests in all of Ghana. She gave him three of her abasom (spirits) from this Guan cultural area to bring back to America: Nana Esi, Adade Kofi, and Nana Asuo-Gyebi. This was the beginning of the practice of the Akan-Guan religion and culture in America. Nana Dinizulu's temple, Bosum Dzemawodzi, was the first official abasom (plural of obosom) shrine established and authorized by Nana Operebea in America. The second was the Temple of Nyame and Asuo-Gyebi and Tegare Shrines of Washington, D.C., headed by Nana Kwabena Aboagye Brown; the third was the Asona Aberade Shrine of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, headed by Nana Afoh (a.k.a. Arthur Hall) of the famous Ilé-Ifè Cultural Center. The priestess who is presently in charge in Philadelphia is Nana Okomfohema Korantema

Ayeboafu. Almost all of the Akan houses in North America can trace themselves to one of these three original houses. Nana Operebea eventually gave the great Guan god of Larteh, Akonnedi Abena, to Nana Dinizulu and bestowed on him the titles of Okomfohene and Omanhene—Chief Priest and Paramount Chief of the Akans of North America. He is unquestionably the founder and father of the Akan-Guan religious and cultural movement for African Americans.

Asuarian (Osirian) Traditions

The Asuar Auset Society was founded in September 1973 by Ra Un Nefer Amen. His title is Shekum Ur Shekum (i.e., King of Kings). The line of descent (succession) of his kingship is through the Agogo state of the Ashanti region of Ghana, West Africa. He is enstooled and fully recognized there as a king and leader. He has developed a unique and complete religious system and practice based on both divine kingship and the pre-Christian and pre-Judaic Ausarian religion of ancient Kemet (a.k.a. Egypt). He has aligned the Kemetian-Asuarian neter ru (spirits) with the Yoruba orisha so that one-to-one correlations are clearly seen. He has integrated into the Asuar Auset structure the Paut Neteru, which is the Kemetic Tree of Life. The latter is also referred to as the kabala and is the basis of the organization's understanding and interpretation of the universe and life. It serves as an important pillar in its powerful divination system. The uniqueness of the Asuar Auset Society is that it is not an imported religious system or organization. Rather, it is an African-based system and organization completely conceived and developed in America. It has hundreds of members throughout the United States and several international chapters.

The Voduvodu Tradition

The Voduvodu Haitian Peristyle in Philadelphia was organized in 1981 by Gro Mambo Angela Novanyon Idizo. She made her first trip to Haiti in 1978 and another in 1981 to become a Mambo and subsequently opened her hounfort (spiritual house) in Philadelphia. In 1983—after

further initiations and training in Haiti—she received the title and position of Gro Mambo (i.e., High Priestess). Her primary loa (abasom, orisha, dzemawodzi, etc.) is Mali Louise, who, like the Yoruba orisha Oya, rules over the graveyard. Mambo is respected as a powerful and knowledgeable priest with a large following who is working tirelessly to unify African-based priests internationally. It is important to mention that, prior to 1978, Gro Mambo Angela was training to become a priest (okomfo) of the Akan-Guan traditions of the great obosom Asuo-Gyebi. She was a member of the Asona Aberade Asuo-Gyebi shrine in Philadelphia established by Nana Oparebea of Larteh of Ghana, West Africa. There are several Vodou houses throughout the United States. There are two unique things about the Peristyle in Philadelphia. They are one of the few—outside of the old school African religious and cultural practitioners of the Southern United States—headed by an African American and also one of the few with a predominantly African-American membership. The majority of the Vodou temples have sprung up over the last 20 years as a result of the mass migration of Haitians to the United States. One such temple is the Temple of Yahweh, which was founded in Washington, D.C., in 1996 by a Haitian named Max G. Beauvoir. There is a branch in New York City, and the members in both cities travel to Haiti regularly to spend time with their leader, who has returned there. The group advocates a cultural, ancestral, ethical, and moral way of living, which is guided by the loas (i.e., the Vodou Vodou spirits). They see Vodou as the link between the New World Blacks of the West and the Old World Blacks of Africa. There are an estimated 30 to 50 members between Washington, D.C., and New York.

Bantu Religious Traditions

There is a small but growing group of Bantu spiritual practitioners in the Washington, D.C.–Baltimore, Maryland, area. There is presently at least one person in New York who belongs to the Baltimore house. The person most responsible for this being introduced into the Washington, D.C.–Baltimore area is Makosi Zina Dueze-El.

She is a native of South Africa who moved into the above-mentioned area in 2003. Soon after moving into the area, she married Maliku Ali El, an initiated priest and member of the Yoruba Temple of Spiritual Elevations and Enlightenment in Washington, D.C. She introduced the Bantu spiritual path to Nana Korantema Dunyo, an Asuo-Gyebi okomfo of the Akan-Guan traditions. In 2005, Nana Korantema went to South Africa and began studying with the Ingoma (medicine person) Gogo Monica. She underwent initiation and is now also an Ingoma. In 2006, she assisted in bringing Baba Shado, a well-known Insangoma (diviner), from South Africa. He stayed in the Washington, D.C.–Baltimore area for approximately 3 months. During his stay, he did the following: He visited with several of the established priests and shrines in the area, lectured on Bantu traditions and spiritual practices, and conducted rituals. This spiritual path is catching the attention of many, including practicing Akans and Yorubas.

The history of the practice of African religion in North America begins with those Africans who brought their culture and spirituality to the New World in the 15th through 19th centuries. Many of the beliefs, practices, and rituals that traveled with them from Africa to America have continued to be practiced by families and communities. These practitioners have passed their knowledge down from generation to generation and are referred to as “old school African religious and cultural practitioners.” In the 1930s, a new, more open wave of interest, elevation, practice, and participation was ushered in by Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and others. This new wave has been labeled the “New School African Religious and Cultural Practice.” It was the catalyst and inspiration for Baba Oseijaman, Nana Dinizulu, and others who followed—from the 1950s to present-day times—to create African-based cultural and religious institutions for African Americans. The movement is growing and looks permanent.

Nana Kwabena Brown

See also Akan; Vodou in Benin; Vodou in Haiti; Yoruba

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NUER

The Nuer are an African people who live in southern Sudan near the conjunction of the Nile and Sobat Rivers in an area that has been called the Bahr el Ghazal. They call themselves "naath." It is an accepted fact that the Nuer cross the border into Ethiopia, and their concentrated region encompasses Lake No. The Nuer are an ancient people whose common linkages to the Atuot and the Dinka have brought about certain common customs and a mixture of traditions. Cattle are important among all three groups, and it is

believed that the separation of these three peoples occurred over cosmological and religious disputes about the nature of cattle in the society. The Nuer moved more deeply away from any contact with the Western world and found that they were more protected from the interference of either the Muslims or the Christians until the 19th century. In effect, the Nuer are still believed to have resisted Westernity longer than any other people in southern Sudan.

Nuer culture revolves around cattle, which the Nuer see as representing the highest religious value among the people. Therefore, they have developed a system where wealth for all purposes is measured in cattle. The husband gives the wife's family cattle as a part of the bride wealth. A person who has lots of cattle is considered fortunate indeed. All cosmological and religious concepts relate to the holding of cattle. Cattle change hands in ways that allow the society to continue the process of marrying and prospering. For example, when a man gives cattle to his bride's family, the men in her family are then able to marry and give cattle to other matrilineages. This system ensures the continuation of the custom and the sharing of wealth.

Among the Nuer, marriage is staged. One does not get married in a single day; rather, the marriage must go through various stages before it is finalized. When the bride has given birth to a certain number of children, typically two, the marriage is said to be final. The families say that the marriage is tied, knotted, when a third child is born. Only when this happens can a wife become a full-fledged member of the husband's clan. Most Nuer women seek to have at least six children. A man may have multiple wives and many children who do not live in the same household, although they all live in the man's clan territory.

One aspect of Nuer beliefs and customs that has attracted attention is the *ghost marriage*. This occurs when a man dies and his lineage is able to have him father children after his death because of the ability of his lineage to make cattle exchanges to define kinship and descent. If the man's male relatives can use his cattle, then those cattle can be exchanged in a marriage relationship as a gift from the dead man. Therefore, the children of the union are considered "fathered" by the deceased. At the base of this

idea is cattle exchange, but this is not the sum total of it; the cattle exchange is made possible and is activated by the religious beliefs the people hold about the continuity of the patrilineage and matrilineage.

In Nuer initiation rites, the person receives six parallel horizontal scars across the forehead with corresponding dips in the lines above the nose. These facial markings, or scarifications as they are often called, are referred to as *gaar*. Although the parallel lines are the most commonly used markings, it is possible to discover among some people *gaar* that are dotted lines, especially among the Bul Nuer, a branch of the Nuer people. One receives the *gaar* as an indication that adulthood is now possible. Without *gaar* the person remains a child.

Once a person is initiated into adulthood, the responsibility for maintaining the traditions is even greater. Inasmuch as all ideas, interests, and objectives are tied to the cattle, one's prestige is also in cattle. The Nuer will defend his cattle at the risk of losing his life. In any event, wars between neighbors are not so much wars for land or people, but for cattle. One can find Nuer who would rather be greeted by the names of their favorite cattle than by their own birth names. Indeed, parents might give their children the names of their favorite oxen or cows. With cattle being so important in the religious construction of the Nuer, it appears that every conversation is ultimately a conversation about cattle.

Each Nuer community is further divided by subdivisions based on kinship. The lineage is a fundamental aspect of political harmony and order. One cannot think of a Nuer community that is not based on some aspect of the territorial and lineage groupings that control disputes over land and cattle.

Although the principal cultural organizer among the Nuer is cattle, they are also agriculturalists and supplement their diet of beef with mango, corn, injera (a sort of bread), and kop (a type of pasta). Cattle are not to be considered just for food, although the people do eat beef on special occasions and do drink milk. The cattle are more like gold, used for their exchange value. Sacrifices always involve meat, and thereby the Nuer express the belief that the most valuable thing they possess, cattle, should be offered to the deity.

Africans have had a tradition of recognizing cattle as sacred for a long time. The Hapi-Ankh or Apis was one of the most sacred of animals in ancient Egypt. It generated lots of discussion in the ancient world because of the marks by which it was identified, its blackness, its manner of conception from the heavens, and the meaning that was to be made of its actions. Like the ancient Egyptians, who lived along the same river, the Nuer identified their cattle by the coloring and spotting patterns on their coats. Twelve words were used to identify the possible patterns of the cattle groups among the Nuer. Although cattle are owned and herded by men, they are milked by women and small children. Like the ancient Egyptians, the Nuer young man respects the ritual bull given to him at initiation. Furthermore, he composes songs to honor the bull, as well as to show his affection and gratitude. Like the Apis bull of ancient Egypt, the bull of the Nuer has a special place in the heart of the family.

Nuer believe in the continuity of community through contact with the ancestors. This is articulated in their belief that cows are devoted to the ghosts of their previous owners and any spirits that may have possessed them during their lives. To establish contact with the ancestors, the Nuer often spread ashes on the skin of the cattle as a way to contact the ancestral spirits. If a ceremony is held, the people also sacrifice a cow. Kwoth (sometimes Kuoth) is the Supreme Being, and the Nuer people believe that there are manifestations of Kwoth in the actions of ancestors who are reached by sacrifice. These manifestations are revealed to healers, diviners, and other spiritually attuned people. There are no hierarchies of religion, no place for the afterlife, only the living spirits of the Dead who influence the lives of the living.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Initiation

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NUMBER SYMBOLISM

Numbers can be symbols for something that has a much deeper meaning than simply their numerical value. Numbers can express ideas. Much of what passes for historical stories are really an inner understanding of deeper beliefs. Mythologies contain symbols that can be seen and sometimes handled and used to make visible an invisible truth or belief held important by the society.

Quite often in Africa numbers are related to gender. However, the assigning of a specific number to either of the sexes is by no means universal. Some cultures denote masculinity by an odd number and femininity by an even number. Other cultures assign even numbers to males and odd numbers to females.

Meanings of the Number 2

In the culture of North Eritrea, the number 2 is assigned to woman. This number has an important meaning throughout Africa. In ancient African religions, the number 2 signified two planes. One was conceptual, and the other was a plane of action. This idea is expressed in practice

by accepting the Creator in concept only, while another Being is recognized as the controller in the affairs of the world and is treated as such in the religious services.

Twin births are received differently by different people, but never go unacknowledged. For the Sango of the Eastern Ubangui, this is cause for great celebration that continues throughout the lives of the twins. But a much harsher reality awaits twins born among the Diola, where only one is allowed to survive. The Ibo consider the birth of twins as an evil omen, and frequently none are allowed to survive. The Miseke of Luanda believe that twins possess magical powers, and, for this reason, they receive great respect.

The following are examples of the varied usage of the number 2. Khen and Jippur are the names of the two social groups of the Angas. The Lala celebrate female puberty with 2 days of dance. The Yoruba describe two types of married women: the old and the young. Two groups of ancestral spirits are revered by the Mende. The Wapogoros identify two types of spirit: the bad and the good. A secret language is used by the Balovale for initiations and funerals. The Ibo god Ikenga is shown with two half-moon-shaped horns. Two animals are sacrificed on the second day of a Makhanya wedding. Certain Congo people bury their dead in two stages. The Kikuyu and Kamba use red and black on their shields. For the Shiluks, it is the aunt's responsibility to gift two cattle to the dowry of her nephew's soon-to-be wife. The Togos shape their teeth so that each has two points. Ajagbo, a Yoruba god, is represented as a double image. Nigerian jewelry is often made up of two figures, masculine and feminine, mounted on a chain. Bideyogo paintings often show the number 2 as two women, two men, two youths, two bulls, or two of anything in an activity. Further, the Kimbundu do not announce the death of their great chief for 2 days. The body is attended to by four dignitaries and is allowed to dry for 2 years. The Ovibundu chiefs are buried in a way that allows access to only two people. The Fali say the world was born from two eggs: one from a toad and the other from a turtle.

Meanings of the Number 3

Red, black, and green are the three traditional African colors. The Samake collect themselves in three groups, each one related to one of the colors. Girls of the Laila people receive three scars: The first during infancy is placed on the abdomen, the second on the arms and behind the neck in puberty, and the third on the buttocks and thighs a year later. Senufo initiations take 7 years and are done in three phases. The first occurs before puberty, the second takes place during adolescence, and the third is received in adulthood.

In West Africa, the number 3 is masculine and is associated with the moon. The number 4 is associated with the sun and is feminine. Among the Dogon, the drum has an important role in agricultural rituals. First, it symbolizes the sacrifice of the Monitor that allows the world to be reorganized. It also represents the millet seed used in planting and the circumcision blood of young boys that was reclaimed. There is a special mask that describes the composition of the world. The symbol at the top of the mask represents the sky. The middle symbol, ether, represents the arms followed by the legs, which represent the ground. The Akan people have a three-pointed axe symbol, and their new king is seated three times on his stool as part of the coronation ceremony. Shango, a Yoruba god, has three wives. In some East African areas, the teeth are altered to show three points; for the Bogouini, their cosmic tree is composed of a triple serpent.

Mende naming ceremonies take place 3 days after the birth of a daughter and after 4 days for a son. Naming ceremony gifts require three for a girl and four for a boy. On the second day of marriage, the new husband offers three kola nuts wrapped in white cloth to his mother-in-law in appreciation of his wife's purity. In polygamous families, wives take turns of three nights sleeping with their husband. It is the custom that a woman be bathed three times and a man four in purification rituals. When it is necessary to massage medicinal salves on the body, it is done three times for women and four times for men. Death rituals are performed 3 days after a woman succumbs and after 4 days for a man. At sacred

forest ceremonies of initiation, markings on the back of a boy are placed on the fourth day and on the third day for a girl. For the Kolokuma Ljo of the Niger Delta, odd numbers are masculine and even numbers are feminine. They have a 4-day week, with days 1 and 3 regarded as good days for men and days 2 and 4 for women. The Dogons use four strips of cloth to make clothing for women and three sets of three strips for a man's trousers.

Meanings of the Number 4

The number 4 often stands for the four cardinal points. Among the Ngulus, many gestures are done four times, and there is the requirement when using certain objects to use them four times. There are several peoples for whom the number 4 has religious significance. The Bazibas worship a god that has four sons. Typically the sons are masters of natural phenomena. One son is described as a mythic hero, and the other three are gods of water, sun, moon, and cattle. For the Mosi, their heavenly god created four brothers who became heirs to the kingdom of the Earth. Similarly, the Songhay have a master of the wind, a master of thunder, a master of rain, and a master of the beam. As part of ritual, the Shiluk king is confined for 4 days, and one important celebration lasts 4 days. Sky, land, lightning, and the sea are the domains of the four Fon gods. Bozo people have sacred objects that represent the four elements. Fali husbands are served by four wives in a 4-day rotation.

The Balubas and Lulus separate the world into four planes. The planes crisscross, and their creator lives in the intersection. Husbands have a house in the center of an X pattern, and their wives live on the outer points. A similar situation holds for the king's residence, where he is in the center and his dignitaries are on the four points. The gods of the Ashanti have four sons, whereas the Yoruba have constructed a four-part universe with four cardinal points that are connected to four gods and a 4-day week. Also, the Yoruba governing body is made up of four chiefs.

There are four ceremonies of initiation for Uhavenda boys and two for girls. The Uhavenda

worship four gods. Scarification rites conducted by the Tiv people include four generations of participants. In West Africa, the symbol of women in childbirth is four. The Kikuyu emblems of power are the center of command, knife, sacred horn, and lance. Kumu people are divided into four cohorts of old men, young men, circumcised youth, and children.

Meanings of the Numbers 5, 6, 7, and 8

A Yoruban myth posits that their supreme god gave his eldest daughter a five-fingered chicken. Bozo ornaments include the number 5, and the Bozo believe this number supports seed germination. However, the Akan people consider the number 5 to be an extremely bad omen. Males of the Nuer people have six horizontal incisions.

Nyame, the Ashanti god, descended to Earth on the sixth day, and Bete warriors are sequestered for 6 days before going to battle.

Ibo people say there are seven causes of death. For the Bambara, seven corresponds to seven stages of life, seven Heavens, seven Earths, seven waters, and seven stages in the growth of millet. The Teda bride and groom are forbidden to leave their house for 7 days. Bougouini people conduct initiation ceremonies every 7 years. But for the Vuguus, the number 7 is bad luck. Zulus, however, regard seven in two ways. It is bad as a dowry offering, but acceptable if the woman has been divorced. The Akan have high regard for the number 7. Their state is made up of seven clans that are associated with seven planets. Each day of their 7-day week is ruled by one of seven deities. Seven is an avoided number for the Kolokuma Ljo people because of its association with divinities. To the Malinke, *seven* is a forbidden word. In speaking, they use a combination of six-one for seven.

The Dogon people revere the number 8. They believe there were eight original ancestors who brought into being the eight clans. Among the grains, eight are mystical. It is believed that these eight reside within the collarbone of each Dogon and represent a spiritual bond between the Dogon and their crops.

Zetla K. Elvi

See also Seven; Three

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NYAME

Nyame or *Onyame* is the name of God, the Supreme Being in the Akan (from Ghana) conceptual system. Nyame corresponds to the spiritual idea of Deity. The Supreme Being is also referred to as *Onyankopon* as well as *Odomankoma*. Onyankopon in the Akan spiritual system represents the Supreme Being (Deity), whereas Odomankoma is an Infinite Being whose Beginning and End are unknown to humans. The three names, Nzame, Onyankopon, and Odomankoma, exist to identify the Supreme Creator, the Originator of the Universe, and the Infinite, respectively. He created all things, and he is continually creating and restructuring his universe. From philology and etymology, other names of African origin, such as Nyambi or Nzambi from East Africa, seem to have sameness as Nzame/Nyame.

Nyame is one God that links the Akan religious belief system to monotheism. This is revealed by the fact that Nyame is one word in the Akan language that has no plural root by linguistic

construct. The plural would have been *anyame*, which is nonadmissible in the Akan language. To emphasize the Oneness of Nyame, the word *Onyame* is more often used to represent the uniqueness of God as the One and Only One. Nzame has a number of spiritual properties that are expressed in Nzame, Odomankoma, and Nyankopong. The God of the Akans appears as a Trinity expressed as Nzame, Odomankoma, and Nyankopong with the following spiritual properties:

1. All-seeing, All-knowing, All-powerful, All-satisfying, majestic, All-brilliance, and many others that are unique to Nyame.
2. He is One In One and yet Many and spiritually visible everywhere.
3. He is every Thing and hence He is All Things in One and One Thing in All.
4. His Son is Onyankopong and His spirit is Odomankoma.
5. He is Indivisible, Almighty, and Dependable that is expressed in unity of the Trinity of Nyame, Onyankopong, and Odomankoma.
6. He is boundless, Infinite, and giver of inexhaustible abundance.
7. He is the Giver of life and death to complete His inexhaustible creative process through the universal evolutions in accordance with His All-powerfulness (Otumfo). Nzame is both a forgiving and a punishing God.

The symbolic reminder of the Trinity, Unity of Nyame in Akan ecclesiastics is represented as Nyamedua (God's Tree) that draws attention to the underlying unity of universal creation whose Beginning is the End and whose End is the Beginning. Nyame as Creator of the Order in which he lives cannot be created by any other Being but his own Being. Thus, in the Akan belief system, Nyame is self-created in the sense that He owns all things. He is All-Thing and hence he cannot be created outside all things that he owns. Thus, God is everything and in everything. His Order of creation contains life–death and forgiveness–punishment duality, which reminds us of the

African roots of duality, polarity, and contradiction in cognition.

In the creational process, it is held in the Akan belief system that Nyame created Osoro (Heaven) and Asaase (Earth), which form part of his spiritual system. Osoro is Osiris (Ausar) and Asaase is Isis (Auset) as spiritual properties of Onyame. Osoro (Osiris) is male and Asaase (Isis) is female. The implication is that Nyame is composed of male–female duality that constitutes the unity of his creation and the evolution that he set forth through the male–female creative process. Residing in Otumfo (the All-powerful) is the male and female characteristics that affirm his *All-in-All*. These characteristics of Nyame and the Akan belief system not only bear isomorphism with the Egyptian theology; it is also claimed that the Akans are the originators of the concept of One God in Trinity with male–female duality in ancient Egypt.

Humans as children of Nyame and Nyame as the last of the ancestors by the method of reductionism is expressed in the Akan belief system as *All people are Onyame's offspring, no one is the offspring of Earth*. Additionally, Onyankopong is often addressed in prayers and invocations as Opanyin or Nana (Grand Ancestor). The foundation of the Akan Ancestral Tree is Nyame. All Akan prayers or invocations start with *Twediampong, Odomankoma, Oboadee, Nana Nyame . . .* (i.e., All-powerful Nyankopong, Odomankoma, the Infinite Creator, the Grand-Ancestor Nyame . . .). The Otumfo (All-powerfulness of) Nyame is expressed in many Akan maxims, such as *Obi a Nyankopong ashira no no w obo ne dua nye yiye* (i.e., no human curse can have an effect on anyone who has been blessed by Nyankopong).

Etymological analysis of Nyame has produced a number of related words. The concept of Nyame is connected to the ancient Egyptian theological system that defines Nyame as a derivative from God Amen (Nya-Ame), where Amen, among many attributes, defines Satisfying God. A special day has been set aside in the name of Nyame, God Amen, for His reverence and worship. The day is Amen–Menda, shortened as Menmendeda (God Amen's Day or Nyame's Day), which is Saturday. Because he is a male in the

Akan ecclesiastics and belief system, he is named Kwame (or Kwa-Amen-a). This simply affirmed the linkage of Akan ancient roots of the Alkebulan or ancient Egypt or ancient Ethiopia or Kemet.

Kofi Kissi Dompere

See also Adinkra Symbols; Akan; Asamando; Asase Yaa; God; Sunsum

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NZAMBI

The Supreme God of the Bakongo people is called *Nzambi Mpungu*. The Bakongo are a people who live in the lower Congo River region of Africa. They cover parts of the Republic of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this heavily forested region of the world, the idea of Nzambi Mpungu as the Creator God included the making of man who was evil and had to be buried and the remaking of man, the

creation of a woman from wood, and the beginning of the human race from this created couple. Their concept of Nzambi Mpungu is of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and invisible deity who created all things. Indeed, Nzambi Mpungu did not just make men and women; Nzambi Mpungu made sacred objects that humans could use to make rituals and honor ancestors.

Nzambi Mpungu intervenes in every birth and all creative adventures of humans. Whether one is old or young, he or she must remember not to violate the prohibitions of Nzambi Mpungu. Unlike many supreme deities in Africa, Nzambi Mpungu is known to punish those who violate the rules laid down by the deity. In fact, the expression *sumu ku Nzambi* means to violate Nzambi Mpungu and is considered one of the gravest things that a person can do. Inasmuch as Nzambi Mpungu is the maker of the universe, the one who is over all, the master of humans and the Earth, the person who commits a violation against Nzambi Mpungu will have a bad death, *lufwa lumbi*.

It is believed that Nzambi Mpungu sent Nzambi to Earth to deal with humans on a daily basis. Nzambi was a female energy. Nzambi was considered a great princess who ruled the Earth and learned the power of rain and lightning. She kept these secrets buried in her own intestines, and humans had to make special rituals to obtain these powers. Nzambi was a severe teacher of values to humans. The following story is an example of stories about Nzambi's teaching.

According to the Bakongo people, one day, several women were planting their seeds when they discovered that the Earth was very dry. They had brought a little water for drinking in their pots, but they did not have enough water for planting. But while they were toiling in the hot sun, an old woman carrying a child on her back walked past the women. She hesitated and then, as if she was thinking about it, walked back to the farming women and asked them to give her child a cup of water. Of course, the women said to the old woman that they only had enough water for themselves as they had carried it from a long distance. The old woman told them that they would one day regret their lack of charity and then walked on down the road.

The old woman soon passed a man up in a palm tree and she asked him if he would give her baby a little palm wine because the little baby seemed near death from thirst. To her surprise, the man came down the tree and placed a calabash of palm wine at her feet. She said to him, "I do not have a cup." He said to her, "do not worry, mother, let me break this spare calabash that I have here and I will give the child a drink."

The woman gave thanks to the man and said to him, "My son, thanks again, be here tomorrow at the same time." She then went on her way.

The man did not know what she meant, but he could not sleep at all during the night because of her words. The next day, he felt obliged to be at the same place at the same time to see what would happen.

When he got near the place where he had climbed down the palm tree, he saw a great lake. He said to himself, "How can this be? I know that there was no water there yesterday and now there is a great lake." Just then the old woman came to him and said, "Do not wonder about this, my son." She said to him that she had punished the women because of their lack of charity, but that

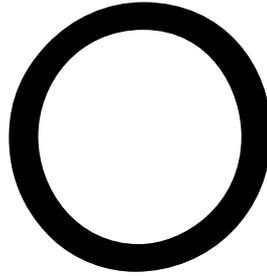
the lake was full of fish, all the men could fish there daily, and the supply of fish would never be depleted. However, she added that no woman should eat these fish, for if she ate the fish, she would die. "Let the lake and its fish be prohibited for women; I, Nzambi, have ordered it so," said the woman. She then named the lake "Bosi." Thus, the lesson taught by Nzambi about the need for compassion and generosity remains central to ethical life in Congo society.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Bakongo; God; Taboo

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OATHS

In Africa, oaths are promises or statements of fact that call on something that a person feels to be sacred and holy, for example, a deity, an ancestral lineage, or a group. The idea is that the sacred object, group, or entity witnesses the making of a promise or statement by the person. Thus, a person who takes or makes an oath expresses certain vows.

When a person claims an office, chooses to lead a campaign against the enemies of the group, or marks an occasion of birth or death, it might be done with an explicit statement of swearing before the sacred or holy object or entity. One is making an oath when the idea of a witness, a holy or sacred thing or person, is considered to be the foundation of the action.

The African oath is taken before the people and, as such, is a ceremony of great solemnity. How one makes an oath, that is, the physical arrangement of sacred things or the holding of special swords, is dependent on the traditions of the African community. Yet it is clear that Africans know that the physical environment or the arrangement of objects is not the oath, but rather the actual making of the statement of promise is the oath. When one says that he or she is making an oath and implies or says that the witnesses are aware of this oath and that if he or she does not complete or fulfill the task required then the oath is broken, an oath has been made, regardless of whether the person holds a sword.

An oath may be made to the royal court of Benin or Asante before giving testimony, or an oath may be made by a newly elected or appointed officer or king in Zulu or Shona societies. One can claim that this is an affirmation, but an affirmation made in a verbal, vocal way before the people is more than a written statement could ever be in the African context.

The concept of the oath is found throughout Africa and is entrenched in the idea that the maker of an oath believes fundamentally in the power of the sacred object or entity. An oath acknowledges the truth of what a person says before a witness because it is a serious attestation of the truth of one's words before the ancestors, the people, or the deities.

One of the classic oaths of the African people is the oath made by Okomfo Anokye, the philosopher and ethical teacher of the Akan people. Standing before Osei Tutu, the new king of Asante, Anokye took one of the swords and said, "I speak the name of the father of Osei Tutu (his spiritual father, the God Otutu), the great forbidden oath that, if I do not go to this war on which you have sent me forth, or if I go and show my back to the enemy, and if I run away, then I violate the great forbidden oath. If it is a choice between dishonor and death, death is my choice. If I go forward, I die, if I flee, I die of the oath; better to go forward and die in the mouth of battle." Other oaths are found among African societies that have similar structures. Among the Akan, it is also typical to name one's lineage and to state that one is making the oath before the people when

taking the oath of kingship. If one does not follow the oath, then one has violated the people. Therefore, the African idea of oath is often connected to the same spiritual idea as the quest for ancestor approval.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors

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OBATALA

Under the leadership of the Supreme Being Olurun or Olodumare, who created the universe, Obatala is the god who created humanity and the world in the Yoruba religion in Nigeria. Obatala, who is also known as Oxalá, Orixalá, and Orishanla, is the oldest of all Orishas. Some of Obatala's praise names include Oluwa Aiye (Lord of the Earth), Alabalase (he who has divine authority), Baba Arugbo (old man), Alamo Re Re (the one who turns blood into children), O Ho Ho (the father of laughter), and Baba Araye (father of humanity).

Obatala descended from Heaven on a chain to mold the first humans and now molds every child in the womb, according to the Yoruba. Obatala created the world and humanity, whereas Olurun breathed life into humanity. Obatala is therefore considered the father of humanity and owner of all the heads where human souls reside. Other Orishas may claim individuals, but Obatala still owns the

head or soul of individuals until those individuals are initiated into the priesthood of that Orisha.

One day, as Obatala was creating humanity, he started drinking too much palm wine, the Yoruba creation story goes. As a result, some of the people he created became physically or mentally handicapped. Olurun chastised and forbade him from drinking palm wine while doing his work. Full of remorse and shame, Obatala vowed to be the deity or father of people who have defects, as they are called “eni orisa” or “people of Obatala.” Making fun of these people became totally prohibited. Obatala is also considered the father of albino people. Furthermore, Obatala can never be worshipped by anyone with palm wine, oil, or salt. Also, palm wine is prohibited among his worshippers. However, they can ingest palm oil and salt.

Obatala formed the first humans out of clay in Ilé-Ifè, the home of the Yoruba, where the world originated, according to Yoruba cosmology. Soon after, a dynamic personality and leader emerged on the scene by the name of Odudua. There are at least two stories about where Odudua came from. One story says that when Obatala got tired of the hard work of making people and from drinking palm wine, Odudua stepped in and finished the task. Another story has it that Odudua came to Ilé-Ifè from the east.

After Odudua emerged and Ilé-Ifè had an adequate amount of people, Odudua instructed that a constitution needed to be drafted and a government to be created with Odudua as the leader. Obatala challenged this order because of his special role from Olodumare of creating the Earth that made him proud, and tradition said that he was stronger than Odudua, who is regularly identified as his brother. Obatala felt that he should at least share the leadership and at the most have a higher position than Odudua. A struggle for leadership ensued between the two spiritual entities. They both sought out allies—Obatala teamed with Obawinni and Odudua partnered with Obameri. Because Odudua and his allies eventually won the battle, he became the leader and the first king of the Ilé-Ifè. Subsequently, all the kingdoms of the Yoruba have traced their lineage back to Odudua, as the first kings of all of their kingdoms are regarded as the sons of Odudua. According to some stories, after Obatala was driven from Ilé-Ifè after being defeated, he went to live in exile with

his ally, Obawinni. Obatala still challenged Odudua's kingship through raids at night, legend has it, with the Igbo who had masks that made them look like evil spirits. Peace was eventually restored when Moremi, a woman in Ilé-Ifè, discovered the secret of the masks.

The name *Obatala* means "king who wears white cloth." In Yoruba, *Oba* means "king" and *tala* is "fabric that is not colored." Obatala is always depicted as wearing extravagant white cloth, white lace, white beads and cowries, white flowers, silver jewelry, and coins. White hens, snails, white melon soup, yams, and eko (corn wrapped in plantain leaves) are some of the foods that are used to show respect to Obatala and appeal to his benevolence. White through Obatala represents purity and cleanliness. People try to take on the moral purity of Obatala by wearing white, particularly his priests and priestesses. Worshipers also wear white to honor him. They also wear the color for protection because Yoruba theology says that Obatala places his white robe over his children to protect them. In addition to purity, Obatala is associated with the characteristics of wisdom, compassion, peace, honesty, purpose, the New Year, forgiveness, resurrection, and ethics. In addition to being a creator, Obatala enforces justice in the world. Obatala manifests himself in the following "white gods" of creativity and justice: Orishanla, Oshala, Oshagiyán, Oshalufon, Orisha Oko, and Osha Funfun.

Obatala has been carried by African people to several African diaspora communities. Obatala is named Oxalá in Candomblé, the African religion primarily practiced in Brazil that is also becoming popular in neighboring countries and worldwide. Obatala is the "Orixa funfun" or oldest white god that again represents moral and spiritual purity. Many other elements of Candomblé are traceable to the religious system of the Yoruba, including the deifying of a plethora of Orishas. Candomblé was established in Brazil in the city of Salvador, which is the capital of Bahia, one of Brazil's 26 states. In Bahia, among the adherents of Candomblé, Obatala is celebrated during the Festa do Bonfim, one of the most popular celebrations in Salvador that begins every year on January 6. These celebrations last 10 days and include multiple Candomblé rituals to honor Obatala, including the people dressing in white.

Obatala can also be found in Santería, the African religion primarily practiced among African peoples in some parts of the Caribbean. Santería, like Candomblé, has religious beliefs and practices that are derived from the Yoruba, including its governance by Orishas.

Obatala is known as Danbala in Vodou in Haiti. Danbala is considered to be the loa or god of creation. Danbala presents himself in white and is associated with snakes. Instead of talking, he makes hissing noises like a snake.

The following is a praise song for Obatala:

Obatala, strong king of Ejigbo
 At the trial a silent, tranquil judge.
 The king whose every day becomes a feast.
 Owner of the brilliant white cloth.
 Owner of the chain to the court of heaven.
 He stands behind people who tell the truth.
 Protector of the handicapped.
 Oshagiyán, warrior with a handsome beard.
 He wakes up to create two hundred civilizing customs,
 Who holds the staff called opasoro, King of Ifon.
 Oshanla grant me white cloth of my own.
 He makes things white.
 Tall as a granary, tall as a hill.
 Ajaguna, deliver me.
 The king that leans on a white metal staff.

Ibram H. Rogers

See also Candomblé; Danbala Wedo; Santería; Vodou in Haiti; Yoruba

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OBEAH

Obeah, also and better known as the Comfa religion, is practiced by an undetermined number of African descendants in Guyana, South America, regions of the Caribbean, and the southern United States. Grounded in primarily Bantu cosmology, Comfa is expressive of the Guyanese history of enslavement, European colonialism, and African cultural nationalism. Popularly synonymous with Comfa is the word *Obeah*, used mainly by non-practitioners. The word *Obeah* derives from the Twi concept *obeye*, which means that which can do work but is not seen. Still some nonpractitioners become Obeah clients in search of perhaps their only access to immediate power over life's many difficulties and traumas. One might be heard exclaiming: "Is wuk, she wuk *Obeah* fa mek dah man stay home with she." Understandably, then, linguist Kean Gibson assesses the foundation of this African-derived religion as "[t]he use of identity symbols as sources of motivation and great personal power" (p. 224).

Unlike the religions of the Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Guyana, Comfa is dynamic and decentralized, and it draws from eclectic African worldview and Guyanese nationalist sources and therefore might be best called a *faith system* instead of a religion. The Comfa system has neither centralized administrative hierarchies nor permanent physical sanctuaries. Nonetheless, the Comfa Service or Work is the bedrock ritual and is held at the homes of pastors/leaders, practitioners, and clients alike—similar to the more widely practiced preburial "Wake" rituals held at the homes of the deceased or their families.

Comfa pastors and practitioners alike claim and facilitate, in varying degrees, power to heal and harm through engagement with celestial and terrestrial spirits. Celestial spirits comprise God the father, Jesus Christ, Angels, and Biblical prophets and Saints, all of whom form a foundation for the Celestial Spirits, who chiefly comprise personal and national Ancestors. Other terrestrial spirits employed in the Comfa system include the Old

Higue and the Bacoo. The Old Higue is a female figure infamous for marauding for the blood of children and animals, and the Bacoo is a dwarfed male figure who is invisible, mischievous, and often obtained from neighboring Surinam to bring wealth to the Comfa or Obeah client.

A Comfa service or work is organized for one of three main purposes. A Thanksgiving service is held to thank God, Jesus, or any other celestial force for life's blessings. Terrestrial services are held to venerate a family ancestor to bring appeasement or for help in resolving an internecine conflict. In the third instance, one desiring personal success, or protection from harm, may sponsor a service for one of the ancestral spirits in the following order of prestige: British, Spanish, Indian, Chinese, African, Dutch, and then Amerindian—a pantheon mirroring the culture-national demographic of Guyana's promotional identity as a "nation of six peoples." Accordingly, one who seeks wealth venerates the British, Spanish, or Indian—society's historic (socioeconomic) power holders. The least influential of these spirits is that of the Amerindians, who for their minimal engagement with colonial and post-colonial society are not viewed as embodying the power sought by Comfa or Obeah practitioners and clients.

As in most systems of Ancestor veneration, Comfa divination is practiced through a dynamic body of rituals and symbolism, including music, drums, foods, drinks, clothes, colors, scents, dances, dreams, and visions. An important dynamic of this system is its relatively communal and democratic values. During a service, dinner, or banquet, any individual observer might criticize the execution or use of a particular dance, music, object, or procedure even to the displeasure of the ritual leader. In such a system, participants play an active role in the preservation and innovation of the Comfa worldview.

The use of Comfa for good as well as bad and its adoption of the colonial hierarchy highlight a characteristically African negotiation of evil forces. According to Comfa practitioners, out of evil can come good.

Comfa characteristics reveal the same fundamental worldview elements as those found in many African, but particularly in Bantu, Niger-Congo cultures. Perhaps most illustrative is that many

Comfa songs are in the Kikongo language. Furthermore, it is possible to describe the Zulu religious system as capable of having numerous transformations in a variety of settings, suggesting the force behind African cultural continuity in the diaspora and therefore the classification of Comfa as an African religious and cultural system. It is this *adaptive vitality* that is responsible for the process of fashioning the distinctly Comfa faith from the more purely African Watermamma religion in Guyana.

Indeed, the expression of Comfa religion in Guyana illustrates the relative success of African cultural resistance to enslavement in a strange land. Indeed, Comfa as part of a web of such other Africanist forms as Cumina (Jamaica), Big Drum (Granada and Carriacou), Black Carib (Belize), Kele (St. Lucia), Santeria (Cuba), and Rastafari testifies to the resilience of the African cultural *asili* (seed) and ethos in the face of the morally monstrous enslavement holocaust. Of broader significance beyond religion, the dynamics of Comfa offer an important exemplum for a philosophical analysis of Guyanese nationalist culture.

Geoffrey Jahwara Giddings

See also Candomblé

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primordial ocean, the boundless abyss of substance from which material existence originates. Accounts of this primordial ocean are frequently found in the creation stories and myths, whereas accounts of the physical ocean are found in more common rituals and practices and reflect people's proximity to and experience with the physical ocean. Those people close to the ocean tend to perceive the ocean as a deity with specific attributes. In many cultures, these two oceans are fused into a single cosmology.

Physical Ocean

The water of the physical ocean is one of the primary elements of life. This water is likened to life-giving and life-sustaining blood, fluids of the womb, and semen. Water cleanses, purifies, and nourishes. Water as an element has the distinct property of being purer than what it touches. Although other elements such as fire can be used in purification and although the Earth may be used in a symbolic burial signaling rebirth, water remains nature's ultimate purifier, as witnessed in the common rituals of bathing or washing food. Water connects the realms of Earth and Heaven because fresh water falls from the sky and is returned to Heaven again through evaporation. Therefore, water on the scale of an ocean intensifies the qualities of purification and connection between Earth and sky.

In Fon cosmology, there is a group of deities known as the sea pantheon. The primary deities of this pantheon are Agbè and Naètè, the third set of twins born to the androgynous deity Mawu-Lisa. Sometimes Agbè and Naètè are portrayed as husband and wife or the children of Sogbo, the leader of the thunder pantheon. It was Sogbo who gave Agbè control over what occurs in the universe and care over the Earth. The sea was created for him to live. Agbè and Naètè inhabit the sea and also command the waters. Their children perform numerous functions in relation to the sea. Some sons are responsible for the rising and falling of tides. One son has a fondness for sinking boats. One daughter, Avrekete, keeps the secrets of her parents and is therefore the guardian of the treasures of the sea. One child is responsible for extracting water from the sea to make rain. Other children reside in lagoons.

OCEAN

There are two types of oceans found among the religious beliefs and practices of many African peoples. The first is the physical ocean, which is composed of water, and the second is the

For the Yoruba, the divinity of the sea and marshes is Olókun. Among some Yoruba and Edo of Nigeria, Olókun, which means “owner of the sea,” is masculine, but among other Yoruba and the Fon, she is feminine. Olókun, also called Yemíderegbe, or Awoyo among the Fon, lives in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean, which is believed to be a gateway to Heaven below (Òrun-Odò). Olókun is the richest entity in the world and the first of the Yoruba orisha to wear a crown. She is the wife of Orunmila, the deity of divination, the son of the sky deity, Olorun. As with the Fon, for the Yoruba, there is a complex relationship between sea and sky deities. Olókun ruled over a vast expanse of water and wild marshes that was grey, with no living creatures or vegetation. Obatala thought the area lacked inspiration and life, so, with the assistance of Olorun and other deities, he created solid land with forest fields, hills, and valleys. Olókun was upset that her domain was disturbed and washed everything away with a flood. She sought to challenge Olorun, the deity of the sky, but soon realized that the powers of the sky were greater than her own.

Other African deities associated with the ocean or sea are Nai among the Ga, Opo from the Akan, Wu among the Ewe, Ngaan among the Congolese, and Kianda found in Angola, all of which are masculine. Feminine deities include Yemoja (Yemónja), Osun, and Mami Wata. Sometimes these feminine deities are associated interchangeably with the ocean, a sea, a specific river, or any significant body of water.

Primordial Ocean

In many creation accounts, there is a state of existence prior to the creation of the physical universe. This state contains the potential of everything that will be created. Although this realm is potential, it does have a physical form that is likened to an ocean. The ancient Egyptians called this dark liquid mass that has no surface and stretches in all directions beyond the reach of imagination Nun. Nun is the deity of the primal waters and was depicted as a man, waist deep in water, partially covered with scales supporting the solar bark. Nun's feminine counterpart is Naunet, and both are part of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad. In this creation account, Atum arose out of the

primeval mound that emerged from Nun. Nun continues to exist after creation and is found along the boundaries of the universe, in the Nile, and in sacred lakes. Nun is shown on the enclosure walls of temples by a unique pattern of alternating bricks that gives the appearance of water, which then makes the temple a symbol of the universe or a distinct place from the watery abyss of Nun. Nun also represents the underworld through which Ra, the sun, travels at night.

Among the Dogon, before the universe was created, it was first designed with signs drawn with water. However, Amma had placed too many things in creation, and water left the whole. Amma was dissatisfied with creation and began again keeping water, a seed, and the elements of fire, Earth, and air. In the next creation, one of the first eight animate beings will be incomplete because it is missing water. This being is the Fox or Yurugu. Among the peoples of the Congo, the creator emerges from a primeval marsh that in turn creates offspring that would populate the Earth.

Denise Martin

See also Water

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ODUDUWA

The orisha Odudua or Oduduwa has a complex history in Ifa theology that contains female and male conception of the orisha. There is some scholarship that suggests Oduduwa was originally

venerated as a female orisha. E. Bolali Idowu takes this position given the goddess tradition in Yorubaland, and words found in existing liturgy even in Ilé-Ifè, the sacred city of Ifa, where the male-orisha tradition is strongest. He also stresses the fact that Oduduwa is clearly a female orisha in the city of Adó and elsewhere in Southwestern Yorubaland. In one narrative, she is the wife of Obatala, and together they represent the merger of Heaven (Obatala) and Earth (Oduduwa). Moreover, in this tradition, Oduduwa, as wife of Obatala, the principal male orisha, is the principal female orisha. She is also an orisha of love and the mother, with Obatala, of Yemọnja (representing water) and Aganju (representing land).

Awo Awolalu states that the male orisha Oduduwa has two sources of origin. First, he is seen as a creating orisha who took the assignment Olodumare gave his senior brother Obatala to create the Earth when he failed to carry it out. According to Ifa theology, Oduduwa descended at Ilé-Ifè and poured divine sand in the primeval water below the heavens and the sand hardened and formed the Earth (*ile ayé*). However, Obatala did not take well Oduduwa's assuming of his mandate and challenged him. Olodumare settled the conflict by giving Obatala a commission to form the human body and afterward breathed into it the breath of life. The conflict between Oduduwa and Obatala is staged in a mock battle between adherents of both orisha annually during the Obatala festival at Ilé-Ifè.

The original inhabitants of Ifè, however, acknowledged and worshipped Obatala as the creator of Earth. But at an early time in Ifè's history, there appears to have been an invasion and conquest of Ilé-Ifè. This assumed dynastic change at Ilé-Ifè thus seems to also bring with it a religious change. For it seems that, subsequently, the conquerors supplanted the worship of Obatala with that of Oduduwa, the female orisha. Awolalu concludes that, after the conquering leaders died, his followers perhaps deified him and called him Oduduwa after the name of the female orisha whose worship he established at Ifè. Thus, he says, Oduduwa has two personalities: one as a primordial divine spirit and the other as a deified ancestor.

In the final analysis, Oduduwa emerged as having a male form. He is the ancestor who established the worship of Oduduwa and became the

King of Ilé-Ifè, bearing the title, as Kola Abimbola points out, Olofin-Aye—Lawgiver (of the) world. But he is also the orisha who was commissioned by Olodumare to create the world, and, as has been noted, the ancestor and divinity seemed to have merged into the orisha worshipped now at Ifè and elsewhere. However, he is especially worshipped in Ifè where the Obadió, his high priest, resides and reigns. He remains there in Ifa tradition as divine ancestor and founding king, the symbol land foundation of Yoruba social and spiritual unity. In fact, the Yoruba considered themselves *omo Oduduwa*, offspring of Oduduwa. In the *Odu Ifa* (78:1), human beings in general are called *omo Oduduwa*, offspring of the Creator. For it says in closing, "Thus when the children of Oduduwa gather together, those chosen to bring good into the world are called human beings (*eniyán*), chosen ones." Here both the role of Oduduwa as creator of the Earth and his role as divine father, orisha of the inhabitants of the Earth, are reaffirmed as central tenets of the Ifa tradition.

Maulana Karenga

See also Yoruba

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ODU IFA

The *Odu Ifa* is the sacred text of the spiritual and ethical tradition of Ifa that has its origins in ancient Yorubaland, which is located in modern Nigeria. It holds a unique position among African religions as the only one that survived the enslavement holocaust and colonialism and developed on an international level. In fact, Ifa is found in modified forms and under various names in numerous countries. For example, there is Lekumí in Cuba,

Puerto Rico, and the United States; Voudun in Haiti; Shango in Cuba; and Candomblé in Brazil. Ifa also retains its name and orthodox form in Nigeria and has begun to grow in the United States in orthodox and modified forms. Thus, the *Odu Ifa* remains the spiritual and ethical source for practicing an ancient living tradition for communities around the world. Moreover, *Odu Ifa* is one of the great sacred texts of the world and a classic of African and world literature. Like all great sacred texts, it includes a wide range of literary forms and subjects ranging from divination, art, literature, and medicine to history, spirituality, and moral instructions for daily life.

The word *Odu* is open to various interpretations, but in the Kawaida tradition, *Odu* is translated as “Baskets of Sacred Wisdom.” Thus, the name *Odu Ifa* can be translated as “Baskets of Sacred Wisdom of Ifa.” This name evolves from the Ifa creation narrative in which Olodumare, God, gives orisha (divine spirits who aid God) and humans baskets of sacred wisdom to make the world good. There are 256 *odu* (baskets, chapters) and innumerable verses called *ese*. Each chapter or *odu* is a container of sacred wisdom for use by humans to make the world and life in it good.

The name Ifa has three interrelated meanings: It is at once the name of a corpus of moral and spiritual wisdom, an intricate system of divination that is contained in that body of knowledge, and an alternate name of Orunmila, the sage, master teacher, and “divine witness to creation” who taught this sacred wisdom. Abimbola describes the structure of each *ese* Ifa or verse of Ifa as having a maximum of eight parts. These include

1. names of priests involved in past divinations,
2. clients named for whom the divination is performed,
3. reasons for the divination,
4. instructions from the divinations to priest and client,
5. compliance or noncompliance by the client,
6. consequences to the client based on compliance or noncompliance,
7. reactions of joy or sorrow by the client, and
8. a moral lesson drawn from the narrative.

Ethics of the Odu

Traditionally, divination and sacrifice are key pillars in the practice of Ifa, and these remain the bedrock of this faith tradition. However, there is a growing discourse on the ethics of the Odu that gained initiative and impetus from the work of Maulana Karenga, professor of Africana Studies at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). In 1999, he called an International Conference on Yoruba Culture and Ethics held at CSULB; University of California, Los Angeles; and the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies to introduce and create discourse and exchange around his text *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings*.

In his introduction, Karenga claims that his work is part of a larger corpus of modern translations of ancient texts accompanied with commentary to provide both *interpretation* and *transmission* of the *Ifá* tradition of the Yoruba. His aim was to shift the focus to ethics and away from only divination. To achieve this, Karenga moved to discover and extract explicit and implicit moral teachings giving due reference to balancing ancient meanings with modern moral interpretations and concerns. Also, given the central role of the concept and practice of sacrifice in the Ifa tradition, Karenga sought to expand the understanding of sacrifice, defining *sacrifice* as both “ritual performance and moral practice.” He defined *ritual performance* as essentially “object-giving” and *moral practice* as “self-giving,” allowing that one could do both simultaneously or separately. Finally, he retranslated the phrase *a difá fún*, which is usually translated as “divination was performed for,” to expand its meaning to also “the teachings of Ifa were interpreted for” or “this is the teachings of Ifa for.” This allowed for the texts to be approached as moral instructions concerned with the problematic and promise of the central Ifa moral imperative to bring good into the world.

Ifa Teachings

Within this framework, several major themes form the bedrock of ethical Ifa teachings in the *Odu Ifa*. The first is the goodness of the world. The Odu 10:2 relates that, at the time of creation, Olodumare, God, sent orisha into the world to make the world good and that he gave them the

ase (ashay), the power and authority to accomplish it. This evolves the concept of the good world while conceding the evil that exists in it. There are several forces on Earth that threaten humans. Among the major ones are death, disease, conflict, loss, and ignorance. Furthermore, there are vices that also wreak havoc on the goodness of the world and the good life ordained for human beings (i.e., selfishness, injustice, cruelty, falsehood, and greed). In addition, it is important to avoid pursuit of wealth, comfort, and convenience, which threatens the Earth. Thus, the Odu 10:5 says, humans are to “stop making sacrifices for wealth and instead make sacrifices that would protect the earth from its enemies.” These enemies in modern Ifa ethics are, especially, pollution, plunder, and depletion. Therefore, Ifa teaches that what is required is a morality of sacrifice and struggle, the cultivation of good character and inner strength, and the gathering together to bring, create, and sustain good in the world.

Second, Ifa moral anthropology is rooted in the concept that “humans are divinely chosen to bring good in the world” (Odu 78:1) and that this is the fundamental mission and meaning of human life. This divine act of making humans chosen is both a divine endowment and a task. It requires human agency to honor the identity and complete the task of bringing good in the world. The uniqueness of this concept is that it includes all humans as chosen, not one group that self-defines as such. In fact, the word for human being is *eniyan*, which literally means chosen one. Thus, the concept gives transcendent, equal, and inalienable status to all human beings without distinction of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, or any other social or biological attribution.

In terms of sex and gender roles, the *Odu Ifa*, especially in Odu 10:2 and 248:1, teaches sexual equality and the indispensable partnership of women and men in all things of importance in the world. Indeed, in Odu 10:2, it says Olodumare “gave women the ase (power and authority) so that anything men wished to do they could not possibly do it successfully without women. Moreover, it says that “people should always respect women greatly.” For if they “always respect women greatly, the world will be in right order.” In Odu 248:1, this stress on equality, partnership, and respect is reaffirmed. For in a narrative of

creation, the male orisha fail in their assignment to make the world good by not including the one female orisha, Oshun, among them. When they return to Heaven to report their failure, Olodumare asks them two questions: “Where is the woman among you?” and “Did you give her due respect?” He then instructs them to go back and include her so that all their work will succeed, and it does. The emphasis again here is on the indispensability of women in all things of importance in the world. The two questions Olodumare asked concerning the presence and due respect of women are called the *Oshun question*, considered as two parts to one question. That question is, “Are women present and given due respect, that is, in position, participation, and treatment?” This principle, modern Ifa ethics asserts, is morally compelling, especially in all things of importance and for common good.

In *Odu Ifa* 78:1, a pivotal locus of fundamental concepts, we also encounter the divinely ordained right of every human to a good life. In fact, the text says that no one can reach his or her highest level of spirituality or rest in Heaven until there is achieved the good world “that Olodumare, God, has ordained for everyone.” Joined to this right is the correlative obligation of shared responsibility to make the world good for the common benefit of all. It is important to note that this is a theological and social ethics that teaches that transcendence in the spiritual and social sense cannot be individualistic, but must always include the happiness and well-being of others.

The *Odu Ifa* (78:1) defines the conditions of the good world as a world in which there is “full knowledge of things, freedom from anxiety and fear of enemies”; end of antagonism with other beings on Earth (i.e., animals and reptiles, etc.); well-being and the end of forces that threaten it, especially death, disease, conflict, loss, ignorance, and uncertainty; and “freedom from poverty and misery.” It cites the requirements for achieving a good world as moral wisdom adequate to govern (i.e., take responsibility for the world); a morality of sacrifice; good character; love of doing good, especially for the needy and vulnerable; and the eagerness and struggle to increase good in the world and not let any good be lost.

Key to the ethical teaching of *Odu Ifa* is respect for knowledge (*imo*) and its higher form (*ogbón*).

“Full knowledge” and “wisdom adequate to govern the world” are cited as the first requirements to have a good world and to achieve a good world. The wisdom required is always undergirded and informed by *the moral*, but it must also be grounded in a full range of disciplines of human knowledge to adequately govern the world. The concept of “govern” here, as the word for govern in the text, *àkóso*, indicates, is to *gather people together for good purposes*. This stresses shared responsibility for the good in and of the world and reaffirms the teaching that humans are “to take care of the world . . . and do good for the world” (Odu 33:2). This requires, as Odu 33:1 says, that we “speak truth, do justice, be kind and do not do evil.” Indeed, we, Odu 78:1 says, are to “love doing good” in and for the world, especially for the needy and vulnerable. In this way, we constantly repair and renew our injured world and honor our identity and task as chosen ones.

Maulana Karenga

See also Ilé-Ifé; Oduduwa

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OFFERING

Two acts of piety and devotion represent the core expression of fidelity and loyalty to traditional African religion: offering and sacrifice. Offering is the purest act of gratitude to the ancestors and deities. It is usually motivated out of desire to demonstrate humility and respect to the ancestors for the maintenance and well-being of community. One may see daily offerings of food or drink in the form of a libation given to express the understanding that the ancestors are also present and must be acknowledged. However, the ancestors or the deities require sacrifice as a response to some act,

misdeed, or violation of taboo within the society by one or more of the members of the traditional religious community. Thus, sacrifice is motivated by the community’s interest in reestablishing the cosmic balance in the universe. Violations and transgressions alter the relationship between humans and deities and between the living and the ancestors. To rearrange the structural, spiritual order, the deity requires of humans sacrifice. In most cases in Africa, the idea of sacrifice is accompanied by blood, which means that an animal has to be killed for propitiation.

Offerings are among the most prominent acts of worship shown on the walls of the ancient African temples in Egypt. As early as the Old Kingdom, there are examples of Africans bringing gifts to Ptah and Atum. Throughout the history of ancient Kemet, one sees evidence of the offerings made to Ra and Amen as well. Sometimes offerings are received by the per-aa (pharaoh) in his position as a deity, as in the representations of Ramses II as god.

Sacrifice is usually related to the letting of blood. In such instances, animals are killed, prepared in a special way, and offered as a sacrifice to God or the ancestors. Always in sacrifice the idea is to give life, even to the point that some have been willing to give their own lives to the deity to safeguard the rest of the community. Such selflessness is regarded as one of the supreme forms of sacrifice. It has been demonstrated and celebrated throughout African traditional culture. For example, during the 18th century, among the Asante, the king of Mampong offered himself in sacrifice to go with the Asantehene in death to seal the covenant between the living Asante community. There have been other examples, formidable in nature, because of the unadulterated belief on the part of the sacrificing persons that they were, in effect, by giving their lives saving the entire community from calamity.

The Yoruba *Odu Ifa* says that when there is imbalance in the spiritual universe, God requires only one thing: sacrifice. Therefore, prayers, colloquial solicitations, praise songs, invocations, and incantations may be correct and useful, but in the end, to make the cosmic and communal order correct and in harmony, it is necessary for sacrifice. Sacrifices of lambs, goats, chickens, and other domesticated animals are the type that are usually

accepted as influential in the cosmic order. On special occasions among some African groups, the sacrifice of a cow or bull represents the greatest possible offering to the ancestors and God.

Clearly, a sacrifice, although a blood offering, is a kind of offering because it is a presentation to the divine. In the traditional African religion, it is thought that the Supreme God is a creator and not one who is concerned with the daily activities of the community. Ancestors handle the ordinary concerns of birth, death, health, marriage, and wealth. Almighty God is the source of all life, but the order that has been created must be maintained by the ritual acts of humans working through the ancestral spirits. Rain, agricultural abundance, and society harmony are all the responsibility of ancestral spirits. Thus, one does not ordinarily offer sacrifices to the Supreme God because there are rarely any shrines or temples that are large enough to hold such a force. One offers, in contrast, gifts and sacrifices to those spirits who represent the Supreme God's power. Once creation has occurred, the Supreme God is transformed into an agent of continuing creation in the process of birth, the productive power of the Earth in agriculture, and the productive power of the spoken word in intellectual ideas. These are the representations of the creative energy of the divine, although one does not see evidence of a Supreme Deity as a personal god.

Neither offerings nor the specialized sacrifices can be given without some sacred protocol involving the proper officials, the special site or altar to receive the gifts, and the participation of the community. One does not give an offering to establish individual advantage with the ancestors, but to represent the collective response of thanksgiving from the community. When offerings of food, eggs, wine, meat, fish, fowl, and fruit are presented to the ancestral spirits, they are often done in an effort at community purification and propitiation as a way to maintain reciprocity between the community of the ancestors and the community of the living. Therefore, the priestess or priest is present to monitor the correct protocols for the gift, offering, or sacrifice. In some cases, the individual or individuals who are giving the offering may leave it at a special place knowing that the deity will receive it as a sacrifice or offering. This knowledge is also common to the priests and

priestesses who must make note of the offering and perform the necessary rituals that accompany such presentations.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Rituals

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OGBONI SOCIETY

The Ogboni society is an institution indigenous to southwestern Nigeria, where it emerged among the Yoruba-speaking people. It is also found within the Yoruba community of the eastern part of the Republic of Benin. It is a society of secrets (often referred to as a "secret society"). Many similar organizations have sprung up throughout Africa, such as the Porro society among the Temne people of Sierra Leone or the Okonko society among the Igbo people.

The Ogboni society fulfills many functions of a religious, political, and judicial nature. Members of the society are distinguished and bound by their veneration of the Earth goddess, Ilè (also known as Odudua), the mother of all life. As such, they commonly present Ilè with offerings of food and drinks. Thought of as privileged intermediaries between the living and the ancestors, whose primary abode is the Earth, priests of the Ogboni society are often called on to consult the oracle to determine a number of sensitive issues, such as ancestral support for the King. In fact, members of the Ogboni society are guardians and protectors of the divine oracle and laws. All Ogboni

groups and members, however, are under the authority of the *Alafin* (i.e., the political leader) of the Yoruba. As the ultimate chief of the Ogboni, the Alafin has the authority to convoke the priests into extraordinary sessions, for example.

Before the advent of colonialism, Yoruba government was centered on the powerful Oba (i.e., the King). However, the King's acts were expected to conform to certain socially sanctioned norms, and deviance from these norms—such as despotic administration or questionable decisions made single-handedly—was checked by the Ogboni society, which functioned as the Oba's Council of Elders. In other words, it was the Ogboni's duty to set up institutional checks and balances by protecting the community against excesses or abuses from the King, thus ultimately acting as powerful agents of law and order maintenance in the society. In fact, it was the Ogboni elders' responsibility and prerogative to select kings and remove them if deemed necessary. They derived this right from their spiritual and religious connections.

The Ogboni may also get involved in cases of capital offenses, especially when it is believed that the sanctity of the Earth has been violated. It is said that criminals are sometimes delivered to the Oro, a secret ancestral group within Ogboni, who may then put them to death.

Ogboni lodges have existed in the different Yoruba political units, from kingdoms and empires to cities, towns, and villages. These lodges have been responsible for commissioning brass jewelry and sculptures that have become the emblems of the society. Chief among such symbols is the famous *Edan*, representing a pair of Ogboni initiates. The male and female figurines are joined by a metal chain attached around their necks. Although brass was chosen because of its incorruptible quality, a metaphor for the immortality of the Ogboni society, the tied male–female pair stands as a reminder of the necessary complementarity of the sexes for the perpetuation of life.

Bearing witness to African cultural resiliency as well as to Ogboni power in Africa, the Ogboni society was re-created in Bahia, Brazil, during the early part of the 19th century at a time when the Yoruba had become the major cultural group there. The Ogboni society of Bahia initiated or supported many revolts by enslaved Africans and exercised much of its influence through Candomblé houses.

Obas are still in existence in Nigeria, although in a weakened form, and the Ogboni continue to exercise their political advisory role. Generally speaking, the Ogboni's influence and power over the affairs of the nation remains quite significant today. Membership is no longer restricted to Yoruba people, but is open to other ethnicities as well. Also, although both men and women are eligible to be initiated into the Ogboni society, the predominance of male elders is undeniable, thus causing some to refer to the Ogboni society as a fraternal order.

Today, some orders, such as the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity and the Indigenous Ogboni, have adopted original Ogboni symbols and references. However, the cultural and political integrity of those organizations has been called into question given their strong links with Freemasonry, the Rotary Club, or the Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Ama Mazama

See also Ekpo Secret Society

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OGDOAD

Ogdoad is the name assigned to a group of eight deities that played significant roles in the preliminary

creation of the world according to the Kmtic (ancient Egyptian) priesthood of Khmnw (Hermopolis to the Greeks), which literally means city or nation of eight. The genius of Kmt's priests is reflected in their manner of addressing the conceptual vacuum logically created between the original formless void and the eventual world teaming with life. The priesthood of Khmnw focused on the premanifest world to lessen this area of the unknown. The priesthood acknowledged that the manifest world was characteristically finite, visible, and illuminated and had solid form. The manifest world, however, was the result of a previous state of existence in which an opposite set of characteristics reigned. The incarnation of these prenatal characteristics took place within the Eight Deities of the Ogdoad.

The earliest known records mentioning the Ogdoad are found in the Old Kingdom of Kmt in the Pyramid Texts (circa 2350 BC) and later in the Coffin Texts. Creation stories were apt to change over Kmt's 4,000-year history even when the deities remained consistent. In one creation story, the eight deities were said to have arisen from the Nun, the formless watery primordial substance, when Djhwty, the initial creator in this version, called for them. Another rendition of the Ogdoad claims that the deities were self-created. In both of these renditions, the Ogdoad helps to give birth to the Sun deity as either Ra or Nfrtm, who proceeded to create the rest of the living creatures. The Ogdoad then lives on Earth during Kmt's golden era until they make the passage to the next life. Their passing, however, does not make them inert because they continue to manage the forces of the flood or the inundated Nile River.

Although the creation stories varied, the deities consistently emerged as four pairs, with each pair reflecting an equivalent balance of male and female force. Thus, there were four male deities pictorially represented as frogs and four female deities pictorially represented as serpents. There are alternative renderings of these deities, but the frog and serpent rendition provides the most insight to the relationship that these deities have with the Nun. Frogs and serpents were the first and most obvious forms of life that appeared on the banks of the receded Nile River.

The Eight Deities were Nun (male) and Naunet (female) of the watery void, Kuk (male) and

Kauket (female) of darkness, Heh (male) and Hehet (female) of infinity, and Amun (male) and Amaunet (female) of invisibility. Reflecting the harmonic balance of gender duality, the description of the Ogdoad extends procreating potential to the inverted properties of the manifest world. The proof of their fecundity is in their resultant offspring, the Sun god, who goes on to create the other living creatures. The dialectical nature of the Ogdoad is proof of the Kmtic ability to articulate abstract concepts.

D. Zizwe Poe

See also Amen; Ptah; Ra

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OGUN

Ogun is a major West African divinity whose history covers several centuries and whose worship stretches onto many continents. Some scholars have suggested that Ogun may be worshipped by as many as 70 million individuals around the world, and the number of Ogun worshippers may well be increasing constantly.

Although it may not be possible to date with precision the emergence of the deity Ogun, it is likely that it goes back to the beginning of the Iron Age and attendant ironwork in Africa. Indeed, in its original persona, Ogun is first and foremost the divinity of iron and, by extension, the divinity of war and hunting. Although the earliest iron smelting sites emerged in Central Nigeria, thus making Ogun a preeminent Yoruba deity (Orisha), the worship of Ogun has been attested throughout the Guinea Coast, where it had spread since ancient times, with shrines to Ogun found in virtually every forge. In the Kingdom of Dahomey (now the

Republic of Benin), for example, Ogun appeared as Gu, the god of iron and war, and ranked third in the Vodun pantheon, right after Mawu and Lisa. A common emblem of Ogun was and still is a ceremonial sword. Other common emblems have included small iron implements, such as miniature hoes, knives, daggers, shovels, and spears attached onto necklaces, bracelets, clothing, or crowns.

This high and widespread reverence for Ogun, god of iron, can only be understood within a context that defines iron and ironwork as the most sacred. The blacksmith surrenders to God while doing his work, and the latter, therefore, bears the mark of the divine. Most compelling, however, the blacksmith in his forge replicates, in a symbolic and metaphorical way, God's act of creation of the world. Indeed, the melting of iron in a furnace, a pervasive symbol of the female womb, has been frequently associated, in many African societies, with fertility, vitality, and creative power. The reenactment of the creation of the world, and of life itself, through the melting and forging of iron largely explains the lasting prestige of blacksmiths and, above all, of Ogun, the divinity of iron. In addition, given the civilizing power of iron, Ogun is also considered the deity of civilization and technology. All those whose occupation is related to metal, from farmers to surgeons, from barbers, haircutters, mechanics, butchers, and taxi drivers to soldiers and hunters, pay tribute to Ogun as their patron.

Many festivals are held in Ogun's honor, such as *Odun Ogun*, in Yorubaland, where Ogun is appealed to to maintain peace in society. Likewise, *Ijala* songs are Yoruba poetic chants devoted to salute and praise Ogun. In Africa, Ogun's personae include Ogun Akirim, Ogun Alagbede, Ogun Alara, Ogun Elemona, Ogun Ikole, Ogun Meji, Ogun Oloola, Ogun Onigbajamo, and Ogun Onire. His favorite foods and drinks are dogs, pigeons, snails, cocks, eggs, chalk, kola nuts, plantain, yams, palm wine, palm oil, and black and white thread.

Ogun crossed the Atlantic Ocean along with the millions of Africans who were forcibly removed from their homeland during the days of the European slave trade and concurrent enslavement of African women, men, and children in the Americas. Understandably, the focus on Ogun as god of iron, while subsisting, became nonetheless less marked, whereas greater emphasis was placed

on Ogun as god of war. In an environment where Africans were subjected to cruelties and tortures of all kinds, on a constant basis, a divinity like Ogun became quite necessary and significant. In fact, Ogun is intimately associated with the Revolutionary War in Haiti, which took place in the 19th century. It is said that Dessalines and Toussaint L'Ouverture, two major players in the war, both served Ogun and were in turn protected and guided by him.

However, whatever his geographical location, common characteristics are clearly discernible. Ogun is most unambiguously associated with strength and power. He is fire, and, as such, Ogun can be quite aggressive, direct, and forceful. Because of his hot energy and quick temper, Ogun creates as well as destroys. But Ogun is also an uncontested leader who breaks new grounds and creates new paths when others have given up. This particular attribute of Ogun, as leader, stems from the ancient Yoruba story according to which Ogun was the first Orisha to have come onto the Earth, leading 401 other Orisha. Thanks to his iron implements, he cleared the forests, thus creating a sacred passage to the Earth. Others followed him, whereas Ogun led the way into the world.

Ogun is Ogun in Haiti. In Haitian Vodun, he is quite fond of smoking cigars and drinking rum. A machete firmly planted in front of the Vodun altar remains Ogun's most distinctive emblem. His Vodun personae include, among others, Ogun Feray (or Ogun Fè), Ogun Badagri, Ogun Balindyo, Ogun Batala, and Ogun Shango. In Brazil, Ogun is Ogun. His Candomblé worshippers place pieces of iron and miniature iron objects, like those displayed in Africa, such as knives, swords, shovels, and picks, on the altars dedicated to him. In summary, Ogun continues to play a major part in African religious life because his incredible power is both revered and feared.

Ama Mazama

See also Shango

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OHUM FESTIVAL

The Akyem, like many African kingdoms, observe festivals that accentuate the religion of the kingdom. One such festival is Ohum. The Akyem Ohum is a commemorative festival that explicates the religion and origin of the Akyem people. Central to Ohum is River Birem, the spiritual force and fountain source of the existence of the Akyem state. Legend has it that the aboriginal Akyem people led by Okomfo Asare emerged from the depth of River Birem at Bunso with five divine stools. Okyeame (state philosopher), Okomfo (High Priest) Asare emerged from the depth of the river with his body covered with white calico, *merekenson* (palm frond) held on his left shoulder. But, according to some accounts, the Akyem of the *Aduana abusua* (maternal kinship) migrated from Nyanoa or Fomena under King Okru Banin, with Okomfo Asare leading the way, to settle on the banks of River Birem at Bunso by the 15th century. The apparent contradictions notwithstanding, both of them concur that the Akyem came out from River Birem.

Background

The story is that the Aduana migrants, upon reaching the western bank of River Birem at Bunso, saw a hunter (believed to be a Guan); to avoid being noticed by the hunter, they went under the river to hide. All except the Queen Mother, Bawaafri, came out of the river. Another version says that an exclamation by the hunter and his people, as the Akyem were emerging from the river, amidst *bomaa* and *mpintin* drum music

and merrymaking, caused the Queen Mother to return to the depth of the river. This miraculous phenomenon occurred on the Tuesday after Akwasidae (the Akan sacred Sunday). They thus considered the river a Tuesday deity and called her *Biremu Abena* and the site *Bunso*. *Beremu* (Birem) means “the midst of palm branches,” *Abena* means “female born on Tuesday,” and *Bunso* means “the bank of the depth of a river.” Astonished by what they believed to be supernatural developments, the Akyem migrants decided to settle on the eastern bank of River Birem and called the site *afriye* (the site of emergence).

Some years later, human activities polluted the surroundings of River Birem and caused the displeasure of the river, resulting in constant calamities. Consequently, the Akyem resettled at Tafo near River Awansa under the spiritual guidance of Okomfo Asare. Again, conditions at Awansa compelled them to move to a new settlement close to River Taako, and they called the town Tafo. Tafo has since served as the origin and soul of Akyem Abuakwa, as well as the heart of Akyem Ohum.

Okyeame, Okomfo Asare, and Ohum Rites

It was to commemorate the transcendental events and settlement of the Akyem on the eastern bank of River Birem at Bunso on the Tuesday that Ohum was born. *Ohum* in Twi means “an eyewitness to a phenomenal event.” It is celebrated on the Tuesday after Akwasidae. Every year, the elders and Okomfo Asare would go to the sacred *afriye* or *asoreyeso* (the holy site of worship) to launch Ohum. They would stand on the bank of the depth of River Birem and start with incantations and prayers saying that “the New Year is just approaching and we have come to ask you for *merekenson* to cleanse the Akyem kingdom.” Thereafter, Okomfo Asare would dive into the depth of River Birem, commune with her from 1 to 7 days, and then emerge. If he came out of the river with *merekenson* on his left shoulder and white calico on his body, in addition to holding *adwene* (mudfish) and three *atidie* (porgies) in a large copper bowl, then it signified prosperity in every human endeavor and victory in wars. He would then prepare *eto* (mashed plantain) with the fish and place them before the ancestral kings in the stool house for them to eat. If, in contrast,

Okomfo Asare appeared from the depth of River Birem with red clay on his body and charcoal marks on his shoulders, it signified a bad omen for the state in the year to come, including, but not limited to, frequent deaths. They would pour libations and make spiritual consultations and offerings to the spiritual forces until Okomfo Asare had dived into the depth of River Birem and emerged with white calico on his body, as well as merekenson on his shoulders. Okomfo Asare performed these sacred rites until his mysterious departure.

In his last days, Okomfo Asare called the elders and king together and said to them: "Now that I have guided and protected you to find a permanent settlement, I may not come back to you the next time I go under River Birem." But he told them to continue celebrating Ohum yearly and then passed on his role to the *Omanhene* (Paramount) king of Akyem at Tafo. He also gave some divine instructions regarding the acquisition of merekenson for the launching of Ohum. Thus, because nobody could go under the river to bring the merekenson, they should go to the afriye or asoreyeso at Bunso with a ladder to jerk the merekenson three times to pluck it for the Ohum rites.

Post-Okomfo Asare Rites

Since the passing away of Okomfo Asare to the spiritual world, a team of *ahenemma* (sons of the kings, past and present) goes to the sacred site at Bunso each year with a ladder and places it against one palm tree. This is followed by a libation, after which one of them mounts the ladder to pull the merekenson downward from the top of the palm tree. A second libation is poured to seek permission from Onyame (the almighty God), Asaase Yaa (Mother Earth), River Birem, and the legendary Okomfo Asare to pluck the merekenson for Ohum rites; thereafter, they jerk it three times to sever it from the palm tree and take it to Tafo to commence the launching of Ohum. If the plucking proves unsuccessful, they go to the second or third palm tree. If the third attempt fails, the elders offer prayers, make divine consultations, and give offerings to the ancestors and deities to prevent any calamities that the coming year might bring to the state. From then on, the team of *ahenemma* goes to Bunso for the second

time to pluck another merekenson, which they hang on the *Ohumdua* (Ohum tree) at Tafo for the launching of Ohum.

The Launching of Ohum

The launching of Ohum on Tuesday is marked by a procession of the King of Tafo and elders preceded by the sword bearers to *abontenkesemu* (the place of public meeting). A libation is poured and is followed by the sweeping of the sacred ground to drive away evil spirits. A consecrated bed is made of a white pillow, white blanket, and other rich ornaments. A *bomo* (a spiraled rich fabric) enfolded with a loincloth is laid between the swords and *akyeampoma* (Okyeame staff) and covered by a rich, silky fabric cloth like kente. This is followed by the *ahenemma* procession with the merekenson on their shoulders. They herald their arrival by chanting the names of the almighty God and River Birem. After that, the king of Tafo faces the consecrated mat with the merekenson in his hands and hits it three times while calling on God, Mother Earth, River Birem, and the eight Akan abusua to usher in the new year with blessings to the Akyem state and citizens. Next, the king of Tafo, through the Okyeame, officially proclaims the launching of Ohum to the public, after which the elders pluck pieces of the palm leaves to adorn the fronts of their houses.

The observance of Ohum is ushered in by an official 2-week prohibition on noisy activities and actions. These include public burial and funeral obsequies, drumming, crying (including infants), whistling, seeking of payments, firing of guns, pounding of *fufu* (the principal meal) in the night, and sex between couples. This prohibition provides a congenial atmosphere for meditation concerning the welfare of the state and quality of life in the coming year.

The Week of Ohum

On the Monday after Akwasidae, the people (mostly farmers) go to their farms to make their end-of-the-year harvest. On their way home, they tie a few of the crops with knots, place them at their junctions or loading stations, and say goodbye to their farms.

Tuesday, *Benada Dapaa* (holy Tuesday), is the sacred day for the celebration of Ohum and the remembrance of the ancestors. The day is marked by a certain creed and several activities. Everybody wears dark garments. There are prohibitions on splitting firewood, pounding of fufu, fighting, arguments, and crying (including infants). Early in the morning, the womenfolk and children take wooden chairs, stools, mortar, silver and copper bowls, and other items to the rivers to cleanse and polish them. Everybody (including infants) is required to bathe in the morning before eating. The elders make fires, gather around them, and pour libation; after that, they go from house to house to pay homage to other elders. By mid-morning, *eto* is prepared. The elders sprinkle some of the *eto* on the courtyard and in front of their houses. Some of the *eto* is also put in two earthenware containers, one female and one male, and placed in a room for the ancestors to come and eat. At dusk, the king asks the divine drummer to beat the sacred drums to signify the end of Ohum, as well as to welcome the New Year. In the past, a white bird, presumably a dove, would come out of Mount Obootabri near Koforidua and fly over Tafo. After this proclamation, families may then mourn their departed members.

Awukudae (Sacred Wednesday) is a sacred day set aside for the cleansing of the *nkodwafieso* (the stool house), paying of homage, and propitiation of the spirits of the royal ancestors. This allows the king and the elders to win the favor of the ancestors and Onyame (God) in order to be blessed with prosperity and abundant harvest in the year. This is also a day for giving gifts to the kings, and for public pageantry, merrymaking, and *durbar*. Ohum *Awukudae* is first marked by the sounds of *bomaa* and *atumpan* (war drums). The elders and the king gather at the stool house and enter the stool room with a male white sheep. They invoke the spirits of the royal ancestors and perform a long libation to cleanse and purify the ancestral house of kings, as well as ask for the protection and blessing of the king and citizenry. A priestess or priest may also enter the stool house to greet the king and the elders while the drummers play *mpintin* drums. To this end, the white sheep is sacrificed and brought out to the courtyard to prepare food for the royal ancestors. Subsequently, the king is in his full regalia to

receive greetings and gifts. Schoolchildren carrying firewood line up with their teachers, march past the king in a procession, and drop their firewood in the palace. Next in line are traders, market women with their wares (such as tubers of yam, vegetables, and eggs), and other public dignitaries who give gifts such as white sheep. The king in turn gives gifts for good citizenship.

By mid-afternoon, some of the *ahenemma* run around the town three times with war drum beats, chants, and *merenson* on their shoulders. After the third round, they walk in a straight line toward the palace singing somber songs about the fallen ancestors in wars. They carry with them *sradee* (rich soil symbolizing riches) and drop some sequentially on sheepskins in front of the king and elders, who are seated in front of the palace. Subsequently, they go and place the *merenson* under the Ohumdua; this observance symbolizes the cleansing of filth, evilness, and diseases from the town and Akyem state.

Thursday is the day that *Gyemperem Osofo* (Deacon of Gyemperem shrine) goes to the farm, prays, and harvests the first tuber of yam of the year, which he will boil to prepare *eto* for Kofi Gyemperem, a powerful river god, the next day.

Ohum and the Oracle of Kofi Gyemperem

Critical to Ohum is the solemn procession to the Oracle of River Kofi Gyemperem on Friday. Kofi Gyemperem fortifies Tafoman (Tafo territory) and the larger Okyemen (Akyem state). *Gyemperem* literally means one who takes in bullets, thunder, and canons without wounds. During wars, Kofi Gyemperem spiritually leads and protects the militia; sometimes he transforms himself into a human being to lead them to victory. Today, the saying is that no native of Tafo dies in battlefields. During the second imperialist war (World War II), for instance, all Tafo citizens returned from Abyssinia and Burma unharmed.

On the Ohum Friday, the king, preceded by certain divisional kings, drummers, priestesses, elders, and stool bearers, amid the playing of war drums, walks in a solemn procession across River Afua Taako to the Oracle of Kofi Gyemperem. The king rides in a palanquin wearing a white garment with a colorful big umbrella over his head. The priestesses, wearing white clothes, enter the

shrine of Gyemperem; they sing and dance to a special *akom* (spirit possession) music in praise of the river king. There is prohibition of shoes, sandals, and hats on the compound of Kofi Gyemperem shrine. The site is thronged with people of all ages, mostly from the eastern region of Ghana, wearing white outfits. After the customary exchange of greetings between the priestesses led by Gyemperem Osofo and the king, the latter enters the shrine, stands before the Oracle of Kofi Gyemperem, and informs him about the New Year. The king makes this solemn announcement and offers a male white sheep resting on his shoulders to the Oracle for feast and palm wine to perform a libation. The Gyemperem Osofo receives the gifts and pours libation to the river god for the well-being, protection, and prosperity of Okyeman. The libation also cleanses the state from malevolence and diseases and makes the barren women and fatherless men bear children. The priestess, on whom River Kofi Gyemperem has descended, now sitting with her head against the Gyemperem sacred odum tree, communicates through the Gyemperem Osofo to tell the king what the future holds for Tafoman and Okyeman in the year. Meanwhile, the crowd outside the encircled Oracle is entertained to *bomaa* and *asafo* (militia) drumming and dancing. The sheep is sacrificed to prepare food for Kofi Gyemperem. Afterward, the Gyemperem Osofo gives eto, prepared with eggs on top of it, to Kofi Gyemperem to eat the first yam. He comes out of the encircled Oracle and offers some of the eto to the king and the elders, and then he sprinkles the rest on the ground toward River Afua Taako.

Thereafter, the king, who rides in the palanquin, and the crowd return to the palace in a joyful mood. The procession is ushered in by cheers, music, and dancing, while the womenfolk wave their pieces of white cloth at or over the king. The current king, Osabarima (warrior king) Nana Adusie Peasah IV, has mastered the art of dancing several times in the palanquin on his feet to the cheers of the crowd. The palanquin is carried aloft by the ahenemma.

The king, in his full royal regalia, sits in state, flanked by the divisional kings and elders, with the sword bearers sitting in two open columns in front of him. This durbar is marked by merry-making, drumming, and dancing by different

groups, professional musicians, and acrobatic displays as the king receives good wishes from individuals, special groups, public dignitaries, government officials, and tourists. He gives his New Year speech, wishes everyone a happy New Year, and distributes drinks to the public as the merrymaking continues until sunset.

Kwame Botwe-Asamoah

See also Akan; Okomfo Anokye

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OKANDE

The Okande people are a small ethnic group living in Gabon. They are believed to number less than 10,000, having experienced decimation over the years due to exploitation, disease, and historic violence. Nevertheless, the Okande have managed to maintain a traditional consistency in their core beliefs. They are mostly found in the region of Booué in the province of Ogooué-Ivindo. It is not known for certain whether the Okande came from the east or the north, but there are reports that they may have come into this region of the country from outside. Yet the presence and persistence of their beliefs, in the midst of change and transformation of the social environment, represent a resilience of will.

It is thought that the strength of the Okande rests with their strong male initiation society called *Mwiri*. The role that *Mwiri* plays in the Okande resilience is only suspected, although evidence suggests that the group controls the social and religious life of the Okande people. Similar in many ways to the societies of secrets among other African people, the *Mwiri* is in effect a brotherhood of keepers of traditions. They serve the role of creating protocols and rituals, maintaining ceremonies, and ensuring the strength and power of the ancestral spirits.

Thus, *Mwiri* is responsible for masquerades that project the history and culture of the people,

the training of age group cohorts, the continuation of the religious traditions, and the keeping of customs and beliefs. Elders in the Mwiri are depended on for their wisdom, proverbs, and knowledge. Women in the society have their own communities and organizations of secrets; they are used for similar purposes in the training of young women. Each cultural tradition is interpreted through music and dance, and the young people are expected to master the tradition and transmit it to their own children. However, there is some concern that the Okande people are a vanishing group given the low numbers of people who still speak the language. In some respects, the people have been imposed on by the growing urbanization of their area and the migration to the region of other ethnic groups. One cannot truly understand the Okande without some appreciation of their attachment to the ancestors.

In this culture, the living seek to honor the ancestors and to get their imprimatur for everything. Once a person has made the necessary ceremonial and sacrificial rituals to the ancestors, it is possible to advance other ideas about health, wealth, and sustainability of the culture. For the Okande, the ancestors are the magnets for beauty, truth, virtue, and human capacity. Each person seeks to please the ancestors to be acceptable as a human who is worthy of respect. One respects the ancestors so that one will also be respected. This is the eternal narrative that the Okande are struggling to maintain.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ga

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OKOMFO ANOKYE

Okomfo Anokye, who was born Kwame Anokye Frimpon Kotobre, became the greatest lawgiver and wisest sage of Akan history. Known by historians for his tremendous abilities in healing, regulating nature, and establishing codes of conduct, Anokye was essentially a spiritual leader, hence the title Okomfo, which is usually rendered in English as *priest*.

Anokye was born around 1655 in Akwapem in the kingdom of Akwamu in an area southeast of the important Asante city of Kumasi during the early part of the 17th century. Asante historians have claimed that Anokye's mother was an Asante and his father was an Adansi. Furthermore, some scholars claim that he was related to Osei Tutu, the military leader and cofounder, with Anokye, of the Asante Empire. What is clear, however, is that Anokye was largely responsible for creating the constitution, codes, and customs of the Asante people.

At Akwapem, Anokye befriended a young man, Osei Tutu I, who was to become the first king of the Asante Empire. They became close friends and participated in the creation of the legal, political, and philosophical foundation of Asante. It was Anokye who was responsible for producing the Golden Stool that established the legal authority of Osei Tutu I as the Asantehene, King of the Asante Nation.

Anokye is the principal architect of Asante laws, religion, and supernatural powers. He is said to have buried a sword in the ground to the hilt. According to the authorities of Asante culture, the sword cannot be removed without destroying the Asante Nation. The sword remains firmly in place even now.

According to historians, Anokye is believed to have used his considerable intellectual and psychological abilities to influence the Akan people around Kumasi to gain military and political confidence to confront their enemies. Because he had strong oratorical gifts and spiritual power, Anokye was able to create within the Asante people the idea of their invincibility if they followed their own traditions.

By 1695, Anokye and Osei Tutu I had created a capital region, organized the state councils, reorganized the army according to a new martial

philosophy, and sworn unity with all minor kings of the region. To test the solidarity of the nation, Asante went to war against the Denkyera in 1699. The war lasted for 2 years, with the Asante army having to beat back the Denkyera army from the gates of Kumasi, the capital city. However, the Asante army had the special power of Anokye who, with his mighty voice, began to shout incantations toward the Denkyera army. Soon many of their generals defected to the Asante side and the war, which had been going badly for the Asante army, quickly turned in Asante's favor. From that time forward, Anokye was considered one of the greatest of all priests. It is claimed that he died in Akwapim in 1717.

Okomfo Anokye profoundly impacted the Asante Nation in its origin. He has a record of great deeds and miraculous cures that places him at the top of Asante's history. It is said that, among other things, he climbed palm trees with his sandals on and carved a game of Oware out of a stone slab with his bare fingers. The sandals and the slab of stone are on display in Awukugua. Indeed, the exploits of Okomfo Anokye include the redirecting of rivers, the restructuring of Asante institutions, fetching water in a basket without spilling a drop, and the commanding of the Golden Stool, Sika Dwa Kofi, to land on the knees of his friend Osei Tutu I, thus making him the first king. Everything that Anokye did seemed to attest to his power over nature. He even lived in a house without a roof, but he was never wet because the rain did not fall inside of his house. Almost every conceivable action that one could attribute to a priest or a magician could be claimed by Anokye.

Later the Asante wrote songs in his name, and he was honored in praise poetry. His fame and reputation grew immensely after his death, and the Asante remember his warning that if the Golden Stool were ever to be destroyed or captured by the enemies of the Asante, the nation would descend into chaos.

The Seventy-seven Laws decreed by Anokye covered birth, childrearing, puberty rites, sexual relations, installation of chiefs, legislative councils, death, burial, ancestors, and taboos. Everything spoken and established by Okomfo Anokye became law in Asante.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akan

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OLODUMARE

Ask the Yoruba “Who is God?” and they will answer by saying, “He is *Olorun*” or “*Olodumare*” or both together. According to Idowu, *Olodumare* is the traditional name of the Supreme Being and *Olorun*, although commonly used in popular language, appears to have gained its predominating currency in consequence of Christian and Muslim influence on Yoruba life and thought. As among some other African people, the concept of *Olodumare* is discernible from the names, myths, sayings, and attributes of God.

Etymology

The riddle of the word remains in doubt. Its esoteric character, however, suggests it is of ancient origin. Idowu explains that *Olodumare* is a compound word derived from two words: *odu* and *mare*, and the prefix *ol* results from the word *Oni*, which means “owner of,” “Lord of,” or “one who deals in.” The coming together of *Oni*, which ends with a vowel *i*, and *Odu*, which begins with another vowel *o* results in the elision of the vowel *i*, thereby changing *on* to *ol*; hence, we have *olodu* instead of *oni-odu*. *Odu* may mean a main heading or chapter, a scepter, or authority. When it is used as an adjective, it means large, extensive, and full. Thus, when the Yoruba say “*odu re kun*”—one's *odu* is full—it means one has blessings in abundance. With the prefix *ol*, *Olodu* means the owner of *odu*, that is, one who possesses the scepter of authority or one who encompasses the fullness of excellence. These suggest that the being described is superlative and perfect in greatness, size, quality, and worth.

The word *mare* presents some etymological difficulty. An option is to accept the explanation of Idowu drawn from Yoruba myth that the word, which is an imperative, is made up of two separate words, *ma* and *re*, meaning “Do not go,” “Do not proceed,” or “that does not go.” This suggests the attribute of stability and constancy.

In summary, Olodumare is the deity who possesses superlative qualities and who also has the attribute of remaining stable, permanent, and reliable. Hence, Idowu has coined the term *olodumareism* to indicate the monotheistic tendency of the Yoruba traditional religion.

Creation Myths

A version of one creation myth recalls that, in the beginning, the universe was filled with water. Consequently, Olodumare sent the Orisa led by Obatala (Orisa-Nla) to create solid farmland from the liquid mass. When Obatala got drunk after taking palm wine along the way, Orunmila took over the leadership and succeeded in carrying out the assignment that started from Ilé-Ifè from where the solid earth spread to cover the whole world.

In another mythology, Olodumare asked Obatala to mold the physical body of human beings from clay. When that had been done, Olodumare breathed into the lifeless bodies and they became living persons. The created beings thereafter moved to the store of *ori* (inner head) from where they chose their destinies.

These Yoruba myths portray the traditional wisdom and lore of the people that reflect their deep-seated beliefs in Olodumare as the creator and ruler of the whole universe.

Attributes

In Yoruba life and thought, the eternal existence and the incomparable greatness of Olodumare are expressed in the name Oyigiyigi. Olodumare is also *eleda* (creator), *awamaridi* (unfathomable), *alabalase kabiyesi* (the king with unquestionable authority), *oba ti ki iku* (the eternal king), *oba arinu rode* (the one who can discern all things), and many others.

Sayings

Some of the sayings denote that Olodumare is a personal God with all attributes of livingness: *Oba a se kan ma ku* (His works are done to perfection), *Oba ti dandan re ki ise* (His biddings never fail), *A dun ise bi ohun ti Olodumare lowo si* (It is easy to do what Olodumare approves of), *Eleti igbo aroye* (He is ever ready to listen to complaints), and *A rinu-rode Olumo okan* (the discerner of the heart). The Yoruba do not have altars, temples, and priests for Olodumare, but all the above show that Olodumare is real to the people.

Deji Ayegboyin and S. K. Olajide

See also Nyame

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OLOKUN

The worship and meaning of Olokun in the Yoruba religious tradition are as vast as the waters that she represents. Known as the owner of great waters, Olokun symbolizes the most unfathomable depths of the ocean and the seas. Olokun is often associated with Yemoja (Yemọṅja), the Mother of Fishes, and together they represent the abundance, fertility, wealth, healing, and source of life and its mysteries. Olokun worshippers are found in Nigeria among the Edo and the Yoruba, as well as in the Republic of Benin, among the Fon. In Nigeria, Olokun worship is found mainly along the southern regions of the Nigerian and Benin Republics, especially along their coastlines.

Among the Yoruba and Fon, Olokun appears as female as well as male, whereas among the Bini, Olokun appears solely as male. In most cases, when Olokun and Yemoja are viewed symbiotically, Olokun is related to the invisible depths of the ocean, and Yemoja is related to the visible surface of the ocean and its waves. Olokun/Yemoja is the embodiment of motherhood, whose offspring include such orisa as Oóya, Osun, and Ogun, the creatures of the sea, and children.

Outside of Nigeria, Olokun is worshipped in diasporic communities such as Trinidad, Cuba, Brazil, and the United States. In Trinidad, Olokun is frequently entreated by the name of Ajere, one of her many honorific titles, or by the name of Awoyo, one of her Fon appellations meaning “a large stretch of water.” In her worship in these regions, as in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, Olokun is associated with wealth, motherhood, and the boundless riches of the sea. In these diasporic cultures, Olokun is frequently conflated with Yemoja/Yemanya, representing both the surface and depth of the ocean and the seas. Symbolizing the ocean, both Olokun and Yemoja are associated with deep blue and foamy white waves. As Yemoja, she is a corpulent woman with mudfish limbs who holds a crocodile in one hand and a serpent in the other.

Some scholars attribute Olokun’s origin to the Edo or Bini people whose famous lost-wax bronze and terra cotta sculptures have become cultural hallmarks. Yet Olokun also belongs to the Yoruba, who are equally known for their exquisite bronze sculptures, carvings, and elaborate masquerading traditions in the arts and other cultural practices. In fact, Olokun can be viewed as the nexus between the Yoruba and Edo kingdoms. In both traditions, strong centralized, hierarchal political and religious systems preserve rich cosmological and empirical histories. In both traditions, the relationship to Ilé-Ifè and competition for dominance of Ikoye, better known as Lagos, abound. In the Republic of Benin, Olokun is also known as Awoyo. Despite variations in her name and some characteristics, Olokun is associated with the Atlantic Ocean generally, with Lagos and Badagry in Nigeria, and with the cognomen Okun Yemideregbe.

Among the Edo, Olokun worship is intimately tied to patriarchy and the court of the Oba of

Benin. In this tradition, the wealth, peace, fertility, and abundance of the deity is idealized in the regalia of the court and the king. Olokun’s abode in the depths of the ocean is emblematic of the Oba’s power in the former Benin kingdom in Nigeria.

Olokun’s wealth lies in the cavernous waters of the ocean, suggesting the unfathomable nature of wealth, as well as the struggles and dangers associated with its attainment. Bini fishermen as well as the Bini traders who first met the Portuguese in Badagry and Lagos Harbor in the 15th century found wealth as well as their struggle against wealth as they sought to attain it. The Edo or Bini were among the first to trade with the Portuguese seafarers who first sought gold and other minerals from the interior.

Whereas Olokun’s persona is male dominated in the Bini tradition, the Yoruba Olokun is distinguished by gender duality or balance. Where Olokun resides in the ocean’s depths, Yemoja, his or her spiritual twin, resides on its surface and in its waves. In this regard, each protects the other with Olokun supporting the beauty and power of Yemoja. The Olokun/Yemoja dichotomy reflects a dominant aesthetic in the Yoruba worldview that heralds duality, especially in its cosmology. The nature of Olokun is distinguished by gender duality and functional roles that not only differ from those found in Benin, but that also find resonance among Yoruba diasporic communities. Within the Nigerian Yoruba tradition, Olokun is portrayed as the last wife of Orunmila. In this role, she represents the maternal source of life, activating as it were the wisdom of Orunmila and the *ase* (also called *axe* and means life force, spiritual energy) of Olorun.

Mud, another icon of Olokun, is a quintessential element that symbolizes transformation and the porous nature of wealth and life. For the Bini, Olokun evokes ritual and Earthly power as he presides over the movement between life and death. Mud, the blend of water and Earth, signifies the ushering in of life through the birth canal and the transition out of life through the burial process, a return to the sodden Earth. In the Yoruba iconography, Olokun is the epitome of motherhood, represented by the numerous fish, especially mud fish, sea mammals, and other creatures that inhabit the ocean. In Yoruba cosmology, the ocean floor is the subterranean source of all

mineral wealth and the sea gate to orun or Heaven. These attributes signify Olokun's role as the source of all waterways, such as the Ogun River, a major trade waterway that flows into her oceanic waters.

Diedre L. Badejo

See also Yoruba

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OLORUN

The Yoruba believe in the existence of a Supreme Being who has no less than 200 names and more than 1,000 *oriki* (cognomen). The name *Olorun* is more commonly used in popular language among the Yoruba than any other name for the Supreme Being. It is used not only in the adoration of the Supreme Being, but also frequently in ejaculatory prayers: *Olorun gba mi o!* (Deliver me O God). Also, when any Yoruba wants to convince his listener of the veracity of information, he exclaims, in the form of swearing *Olorun n gbo* (God is my witness). At times, the Yoruba combine another name, *Olodumare*, with *Olorun* in their reference to God, especially in times of distress or as an exclamatory phrase. In times of trouble or danger, the Yoruba usually exclaim, “Olorun Olodumare!” (God of heaven, the Almighty!). It is generally held that Olodumare is more ancient than the name Olorun, which appears

to have gained its predominating currency in consequence of Christian/Muslim influence on Yoruba spirituality, life, and thought.

The belief in Olorun as the owner of the heavens is discernible from the name, nature, and character of God, as well as in the myths about creation.

Etymology

In relative terms, the name is self-explanatory. It is composed of the prefix *Ol* or *oni* (owner) and *Orun* (heaven). Thus, the name means the owner or the Lord of Heaven. The name is also rendered as *Olu-Orun*, which means He is the King or Ruler of the Heavens. The thought that Olu-Orun is a god in charge of the skies (and, indeed, at times Olorun is referred to as Orisa-oke) made some early writers assume that Olorun is one of the nature deities. For example, one writer asserted that Olorun is one of the Orisa(s) or nature deities. Although divinities and deified personalities and kings may sometimes be called Orisa, the term *Olorun* is applied to the Supreme Deity alone by the Yoruba and is never used in the plural. The status of the deities in the Yoruba structure might be seen as shown in the following section.

The Status of Olorun

The gradations of status in Yoruba religious structure are as follows:

1. The Supreme Deity—Olorun or Olodumare
2. The major Orisa (of whom Esu and Ifa are the most important)
3. The deified spirits of ancestors and other spirits (of whom Oro, Ehuku, Agemo, and Egungun are the most prominent)
4. The minor Orisa (examples include orisa oko, oke, and aje)

Over and above all the other deities classified above and excelling them in power, honor, and majesty is Olorun (Supreme Deity), known as a Being of unique character, possessing attributes far too noble, far too abstract and refined to have originated from the thought of a primitive people.

Unlike the Ashanti of Ghana and Kikuyu of Kenya, the Yoruba do not have temples, priests, and altars for Olorun, but nevertheless God is real to the people. Although the Yoruba have no image of Olorun, that should not be misconstrued to mean the denial or lack of belief in the Supreme Being. Rather, it is a mark of the unique position of Olorun. Although the Yoruba worship some divinities and venerate some ancestors, they consider these as intermediaries between Olorun and human beings.

Attributes

Consequently, Olorun is credited with omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The names of God among the Yoruba have immense importance and significance. Such names reveal the people's concept(s) of God. Olorun is held to be *Oba mimo*, *Oba pipe* (The Holy and Pure King). Because of these, *Olorun* is also referred to as *Obati ko leeri* (one without blemish). Olorun is also *adakedajo* (a just and impartial judge, sometimes meting out judgment on the wicked in this world). He is *Eleda* (the creator), *Alaye* (the living one), *Elemi* (owner of spirit given to human beings), *Oga ogo* (the high one or the Lord of Glory), and *Aterere-ka-ri-aye* (one whose being and influence extend over the whole Earth).

The Myth

One of the creation stories of the Yoruba states that there was a time when *Orun* (the skyey heaven) was close to the Earth. It was even possible for human beings to touch the skyey Heaven. It is believed that there was a close association between Olorun and human beings who had unhindered access to the good things in Heaven. However, the bliss was short-lived because a man with dirty hands touched and made mucky the immaculate Heaven. Instead of expressing regret for what the reprobate had done, other people were joined in washing their dirty hands after each meal with the clouds that covered the face of God. Olorun became irritated and detached the skyey Heaven away beyond the reach of human beings. Henceforth, Olorun could be approached only through intermediaries. These mediators are represented in the myriad divinities. This myth

and its implications explain why some authors have suggested that Olorun is a *deus obsconditus* (withdrawn God).

Deji Ayegboyin and S. K. Olajide

See also Nkulunkulu; Orisha; Shango

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ONTOLOGY

African ontology is the fundamental hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of African religious views and practices. Within the discipline of philosophy of religion or theology, the notion of ontology refers to that body of knowledge that deals with the question of being or the nature of reality. What is the fundamental nature of being? Is reality unified or are various beings fundamentally different from one another? This inquiry begins with the most fundamental question of all: Why is there something rather than nothing? In African religion, this is the question of origin. It is addressed within the framework of African cosmology and cosmogony. This entry leaves such a question to creation myths and focuses instead on the essential ontological question (i.e., the nature of being).

In African religion, there are a variety of conceptions of being. Water, air, fire, and Earth play a critical role in African creation myths. But the fundamental notion remains that humans share a profound kinship with the whole created world.

The most systematic studies of Bantu ontology articulated by Alexis Kagame and Mulago gwa Cikala Musharamina have generated a heated and ongoing debate that shed light on one central point: the role that the notion of "vital force" plays in

African ontology. Every being is characterized by life and dynamism. Being is not a static essence. The African notion of vital force transcends the Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents. Vital force is not a mere biological life, but that fundamental and original vital impulse that constitutes existence and is the property that underlies all things. It is in light of such a conception of being that African religious traditions see integration rather than opposition between body and soul, matter and spirit, the world of the living and the world of the Dead, the human world and the nature world. This fundamental unity of being is captured in the often misunderstood notion of animism, whereby Africans consider nature not as dead matter, but rather as a living being, in such a way that water, wind, trees, and animals become our brothers and sisters, fathers or mothers. Such is the foundation of the fundamental African reverence for nature. It stems from an ontology that establishes a basic kinship between humans and the whole cosmos. It is also this ontology that defines the African vision of reincarnation, in which a child, for instance, becomes the father of his father. African ontology rejects both monistic and dualistic views of reality. It is an ontology of kinship and solidarity in which “I am because we are,” as John Mbiti pointed out.

Because the being is not a static essence, to be is fundamentally to become. To be religious is not to hold abstract definitions of spirituality, but to act religiously. According to this ontology of becoming, a person of bad character is viewed as somebody who has emptied his humanity to become a nonhuman (Kintu, a thing). Likewise, good conduct (good thought, good speech, good deeds, and “good eye”) restores the lost or diminished humanity. Because no being stands in isolation, every act that diminishes the humanity of an individual ipso facto diminishes that of the perpetrator; hence, the ethics of personal responsibility. Every negative action carries with it an ontological break of vital force in the individual and the community; hence, the notions of forgiveness and reparation.

This also brings us to the fundamental theory of being that governs the notions of sacrifices, magic, witchcraft, and protective devices in the African world. The notion of vital force means that every being is a force that interacts with other

forces in the universe. Because forces influence one another, a powerful being (person, animal, vegetable, or mineral) can reinforce or diminish the being of another; hence, the use of amulets to protect oneself against witches or malevolent thought and words. This process can be understood only when we grasp the nature of being.

As Kagame has shown, in the Bantu worldview, there are four major categories of being:

1. Umuntu or muntu (the category of human being or force with intelligence). It includes the living humans, the Dead, and even the spirits.
2. Ikintu or kintu (the category of thing). It includes all the forces that do not act on their own, but that can act under the command of a force with intelligence. This category includes beings such as animals, plants, minerals, and any inanimate thing.
3. Ahantu (the category of place and time).
4. Ukuntu (the mode of existing).

In the world of the interaction of forces, space and time do not constitute a hindrance. A person's good or malevolent thought or speech can influence a person miles away.

It should be noted, however, that in this hierarchy of force, the ultimate power belongs to Shakahanga (the father of creation). God is viewed as the ultimate source of being, the Being of beings. God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and the supreme judge of human behavior—in other words, the source of African morality.

As for the nature of a human being, African religion does not promote the theory of the resurrection of the body. However, a human being is viewed as a set of concentric layers that include matter and spirit without any opposition among them. It is this view of being that explains the legendary tales about humans who transform themselves into lions or those who fly in the air. The notion of being as a set of energy in constant vibration (force vitale, élan vital) remains perhaps the fundamental hermeneutical device that sheds light on African ontology and the specificity of the African mode of being religious.

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Ankh; Ka; Nkwa

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OPENING OF THE MOUTH CEREMONY

The Opening of the Mouth Ceremony was a ritual corpus used to actualize the funerary statuary of a deceased person. During the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), the ceremony was also used by the priests at the ipet sut, the most holy, in the great temple to Amen at Waset.

It appears from vignettes from the tombs and especially from *The Book of the Dead* that the ceremonies involved in the Opening of the Mouth have a much older origin than the New Kingdom. In fact, a similar ceremony, referred to as an offering ritual, occurs throughout the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BC), in which the statues of the kings were ritualized on a regular basis. It was incorporated into some of the Pyramid Texts as Utterances 20–22 and usually inscribed on the walls of the burial chamber. Scholars have drawn the conclusion that the ceremony was usually performed in the temple associated with the pyramid of the king.

Because the idea of energizing statues is found throughout African religion, it appears that the notion of Opening of the Mouth might have originated prior to dynastic Egypt. The belief that it was possible to give inanimate objects power and to infuse them with dynamism through the spoken word because of its generative qualities was widespread in Africa.

By the time Ahmose had defeated the Hyksos, the ritual of the Opening of the Mouth had become a regularized code with 75 different acts or chapters. One of the earliest extant copies is found in the tomb of Rekhmire. As in other rituals in African religion, the eldest son of the deceased was responsible for carrying out this last act of piety. No heir could expect to be honored by his own descendants or treated with respect by his own children if this act was not carried out. This was equally true for the female as it was for the male. Children, particularly the eldest children, were entrusted with the solemn duty of ensuring that the statue of the parents would be energized by the ritual ceremony. The statue, in this way, became the core of the ancestral shrine.

Of course, the royal succession was also marked by the Opening of the Mouth of the statue of the deceased king as a way of indicating that the succession was complete. One of the most famous scenes from the burial chamber of King Tutankhamen is the ceremony where Ay (1327–1323 BC) is dressed as a sem-priest performing the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony on the dead king.

The Opening of the Mouth Ceremony also had the effect of preparing the statue of the deceased for the reception of the Ka. One could not imagine that the Ka would enter an unritualized statue, and the only way for the deceased to be assured of eternal life was for the Ka to live. Thus, the ceremony had to be performed whether it was done by the sculptor at his workshop, at the home of the deceased, at the funerary temple, or in the Golden Room burial chamber itself.

Only the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony could adequately protect the object from an inconsequential existence. With the ceremony, the object became energized and activated to the extent that the priests could feel the power coming from the object. In fact, one could also be able to communicate with the object in the most intense manner through incantations and rhythmic poems spoken in the intense voices of the priests. Using an ancient formula of incantations and poetry, the priests, dressed in the appropriate clothing, at the beat of drums, entered the site of the object and made their potent pleas that the mouth of the object be opened. When it was opened, the priest recognized the energy and declared that the statue or object was imbued with power.



Right section of the wall painting on the north wall of the burial chamber of Pharaoh Tutankhamen (c.1332–1323 BC) inside his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, Thebes, Egypt, 18th dynasty. Ay performing the Opening the Mouth ritual.

Source: François Guenet/Art Resource, New York.

Such an elaborate ritual would necessarily include libations, cleansing of the environs, purification of the statue, anointing with oils, laying on of hands on the statue, and touching of the statue's eyes, mouth, nose, and ears, with specialized objects to ensure that the deceased could see, eat, smell, and hear. Furthermore, the tools used in the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony were traditional, such as the *pesesh-kef*, a type of knife that had a blade similar to the axe of Shango, and the *netjeri*, a blade made of iron, and the right leg of a special ox. Without the Opening of the Mouth, no energy could emanate from the sacred objects and, hence, nothing could be accomplished. It was to the benefit of all involved that the ceremony be completed with dispatch and dignity, and the diligence with which the priests or priestesses operated suggested the relative strength of the object.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ceremonies

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ORACLES

Human beings often ask ontological questions about their health, their professions, and their financial situations. They may ask questions about the essence of life, about time past, time present, and time future. Who is my guardian-god and protector? Why did my friend die so young? Why am I not prosperous? How do I recover my health? When is my business going to flourish? What does the future hold for me? People may be able to explain or interpret certain occurrences to themselves and to peers. However, for other phenomena that are beyond their understanding and that remain a mystery, they seek answers in various ways. One way is through religion. This search for answers from the Unknown or God or gods is a

core foundation of religion. In the course of their religious practices, human beings seek, receive, and heed to communications from God or gods. In some religions, these communications are known as oracles. However, the word *oracle* can have many meanings. It can denote God, the divinities, the priests or priestesses of these deities, or the temples or dwellings of the divinities, as well as the divine messages or prophecies.

God/Gods as Oracle

Each of the divinities that human beings may consult for answers to various questions is known as an oracle. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe introduces the reader to the oracle *Agbala*, an Igbo goddess who is the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. In addition, there is the Oracle *Fa* (*Ifá* in Yoruba), the god of divination who is the youngest of all deities, the last born of Mawu-Lisa's children. In the Fon cosmology, the *Fá* is the Messenger of the Supreme God, Mawu-Lisa, and the spokesperson of all deities. The *Fá* is the spirit who enlightens, guides, and controls human destiny. It sheds light on people's past and present, predicts the future, and prescribes the appropriate conduct for a happy life. As a system of divination, the *Fá* speaks in parables, and only his priest can translate and explain these parables, recommend proper recipes, and perform relevant sacrifices.

In ancient Egypt, there were several oracular gods, including Heru of the Camp, Heru-khau at el-Hiba, Seth at Dakhla, Auset at Koptos, and the deified Ahmose at Abydos. The ancient Egyptians sought answers to big and small problems through the instrumentality of these oracles. Oracles permeated all aspects of the lives of the ancient Egyptians. Even in legal matters, the role of the ancient Egyptian oracles was fundamental. With a strong influence from ancient Egypt, oracular gods, according to Herodotus, abounded in ancient Greece as well. The most ancient Grecian oracle is the oracle of Jupiter at Dodona. Several accounts explain the establishment of the oracle of Jupiter. According to one account, the oracle was established in the following manner: two black doves took their flight from Waset in ancient Egypt. One flew to Dodona in Epirus and, alighting in a grove of oaks, proclaimed in human language to the inhabitants of the district that

they must establish there an oracle of Jupiter. The other dove flew to the temple of Jupiter Ammon in the Libyan Oasis and delivered a similar command there. Other Grecian oracles include the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, said to be the most celebrated Greek oracle, the oracle of Trophonius in Boeotia, and the oracle of Apis, in Memphis. When people consulted the sacred bull Apis, he gave answers to them by the manner in which he received or rejected what was presented to him. If the bull refused food from the hand of the inquirer, it was considered an unfavorable sign, but when he received the food, this was deemed a favorable omen.

The Diviner as Oracle

The term *oracle* can also refer to the priests or priestesses who interpret the divine responses to questions asked of God or the deities; that is, people considered to be the source of prophetic interpretations and opinions. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, is considered an oracle. Likewise, the priest of the Vodun Fa or the *Bokonon*, also called *Awonon* (he who decodes divine or secret messages), is regarded as an oracle as well; hence, the interchangeable use of the phrases *consult the Fa*, *consult the oracle*, and *consult the Bokonon*. Actually, the use of *oracle* to denote a diviner, an *Awonon* (or a *Babalawo* in Yoruba), has taken precedence in today's African traditional religion communities. In fact, when Africans say "consult the oracle," they mean "consult the Bokonon, the diviner, the Babalawo," the same way one would consult a medical doctor in modern days.

In African traditional religion, particularly in the Dahomean Vodun religion, the Bokonon holds a particular place in terms of oracular practices. The Bokonon is an exceptional diviner who, after several years of arduous and sustained training, is initiated to the Fá rituals and language. In his capacity as a noble practitioner of the Fá divination, the Bokonon is highly respected, almost deified. Before every important ceremony or function, he is consulted. He is the most important person in the king's cabinet. The king always refers to the Bokonon for all significant matters pertaining to the stability of the kingdom, and his recommendations are strictly heeded. The

Bokonon is consulted for all major decisions. For example, a chief cannot be appointed without consulting the Bokonon; the king must consult the Bokonon before sending troops to war. In marriage, the Bokonon is consulted to determine whether the union is a good one. Even in childbirth, from pregnancy through delivery, the life of a child is announced and oriented by the Fá, who, through the Bokonon, predicts the fate of the child and recommends sacrifices to be performed for the child's well-being.

The Bokonon begins his divination by invoking the names of divine ancestors, the gods of the sky, and the Earth and sea deities to receive their blessing and guidance to carry out his work successfully. As the legitimate interpreter of the Fá, the Bokonon goes through a complex and ritualistic procedure, talks in parables, and uses allegories, which may appear like rigmarole to a nonhabituated person. Throughout the consultation, the Bokonon sings prophetic songs in honor of the deities. At the conclusion of his consultation, the Bokonon pays due homage to the Fá through litanies while beating out the rhythm of the tune either on the ground or on the edge of his *fátê* (slate that bears the Fá signs) with his baton, called *lonflin*. Indeed, the Bokonon's tools include the *fátê*, *houé* (kaolin powder to sprinkle over the slate), *akpèlè* (traditional chaplet), *adjikouin* (special dried nuts), *lonflin*, *akwèkoun* (cowrie shells), 36 *dékoun* (36 dried palm kernels), *fá dôkpó* (cloth bag holding all accessories but the slate), and *zan* (sleeping mat).

An all-round Bokonon is versatile. He has a good command of all three stages of the Fá divination—*Fá titê* or *Fá kikan* (consultation of the Fá), *Vô dide* (explication of the prophecy), and *Vô sisá* or *adra* (performance of appropriate sacrifices for satisfactory results). Whereas the profession of Bokonon is considered solely the province of men, oracles are of both genders. There are women, known in Greece as Sibyls (or clairvoyants), and men soothsayers, augurs, diviners, or oracles, who, through the medium of trance, divined the future by reading the stars, interpreting dreams, examining the entrails of animals, or observing the flight of birds.

The Sacred Site as Oracle

The word *oracle* can also be used to denote the temples of the divinities, that is, the sacred sites

where answers are supposed to be given by any of the divinities to those who have consulted them regarding their past, present, or future. The earliest known oracle was in the temple at Per-Wadjet, an important site in predynastic ancient Egypt. This celebrated temple dedicated to the worship of the goddess Wadjet (often represented as a cobra) was the source of the oracular tradition that spread to ancient Greece from ancient Egypt. In many cases, the sick sought responses to their problems or concerns and the recovery of their health by sleeping in oracular temples. The treatment of the sick resembled what is known today as mesmerism.

Prophecy as Oracle

Oracle is also the name given to the divine responses to questions asked of God/gods and the pronouncements made by God without His being asked. Because oracles often probe into the future, they are prophetic in nature. However, oracles can also deal with past occurrences and decisions to be made in the present.

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See also God

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language. Africans transmit the oral text verbally in such a way that the audience not only hears it, but also bears an imprint and transcription in their mind and memory. In ancient times, the oral text was referred to as *medu netcher*, “divine speech.” Sometime later, it was referred to as *Nommo*, the regenerative word. The oral text was and still is perceived by many Africans as verbal energy that is considered an effective vehicle of power. In African tradition, the beholder and master of the oral text was believed to not only paint a picture, but also deter maladies, conjure spirits, and appease and placate demons. He or she could honor and revere the deceased as well as foment war, peace, or activism. The master of the oral text was a valued preacher, oracle, diviner, seba maat, teacher, djele, poet, or singer. The oral text in the African tradition is instructive, destructive, and constructive, a wealth of wit and transmitted wisdom.

According to Africa’s oldest myths, the oral text became the vehicle for the creator to form and fashion the cosmos, to order the world we live in, as well as to supply intelligence, values, and instructions to humankind. It has practical and mythological significance. In the mythological sense, it is at the whim, wish, and will of the oldest ancestor to create and re-create order in the universe. It was the gift of the transcendent and lower gods to humans. In the practical sense, the oral text was used to heal, instruct, teach, name, and add insight. The oral text in the African world is both sacred and secular depending on the rhetorical situation and location. It is permanent because it cannot be taken back once released. Once spoken, it imprints the memory of those who bear witness and becomes embedded in the hearts and minds of the listeners. Although spontaneous on some occasions, at other times it may be carefully presented. It has and creates form, but it also has a function, that is, to motivate and inspire. In religion, the text is in the domain of the preacher or divine and is the conduit or emissary of inspiration from the divine for the presentation of a message. In war, the oral text is the domain of the leader. The contemporary forms of the African oral text include song, rap, spoken soul, or poetry.

Khonsura A. Wilson

ORAL TEXT

A text is a verbal or nonverbal body of symbols and signs that Africans perceive and interpret as a

See also Odu Ifa

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ORAL TRADITION

The oral tradition, also termed *oral literature* or *orature*, refers to a wide body of oral discourse encompassing every subject and in every type of expression created by a people. The oral tradition is an art form that can be analyzed in accordance with an approved and recognized set of traditional standards. The nature of the African oral tradition is drawn from African belief systems and traditions. Consequently, African orature conforms to a specific African style of speech making.

The oral tradition is the complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created for the purpose of remembering the past based on the people's ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitudes, and sentiments. There are three main categories of orature—literary, historical, and erudite. The literary includes poetic genres, divination poems, and songs. It also includes proverbs, parables, and incantations. The historical includes narratives based on myths, legends, and historical plays or epics. As for the erudite category, it encompasses secret formulas, prayers, and any corpus of an esoteric nature.

The poet serves many functions in traditional African society. The *griot* or court poet for the Mandika of West Africa was charged with not only singing the ruler's praises, but also documenting through songs historical events surrounding the royal or ruling family. He is also the linguist or spokesman for the king. The *umusizi* of the Rwanda in Central Africa, the *imbongi* of the Zulu in Southern Africa, and poets in other ethnic groups all served the same purpose. Divine kingship is an important institution in many African cultures. Divine kingship is the belief that the king is the physical representation of God. This belief can be found among the people of ancient Nubia

and Kemet, as well as peoples in Southern, Central, East, and West Africa. In this way, griots perform an important religious function. History and religion merge for the griot, who has the responsibility of documenting the history of the royal family.

Ever present in traditional African orature is the productive power of *Nommo*—the Word. The African poet commands things by using words according to traditional African philosophy. Not only are these “magical” poets used at the discretion of royalty, but others consult them as well. For example, goldsmiths often call on poets to work their “word-magic” for the creation of their art.

Most African languages are strictly oral languages. This is primarily due to the fact that spoken language or the oral tradition is paramount throughout African culture. Because religion permeates African society, religion and the oral tradition have forged a symbiotic relationship. Rituals and ceremonies are performed by trained individuals who learned their craft through the oral tradition.

While appreciating the oral skill of the poet, Africans recognize their orature and its performance (one cannot have one without the other) as a functional part of society. The purpose of orature is not merely to entertain or appeal to emotions or physical senses, but to enlighten and stir the audience into some productive action or initiate or facilitate spiritual action.

African orature does not departmentalize literature into poetry, prose, and drama, but just language use by the speaker or poet. Examples of the use of language rooted in the indigenous African culture are copious. This is important because it demonstrates that there is no line drawn between a speech act and a performance in African communities. They are one and the same. To speak *is* to perform. Traditional African literature, or African orature, exists alongside or within African languages. It is not compartmentalized into separate and distinct categories. Thus, the whole notion of public speaking or rhetoric is not separated from performance. Therefore, when we discuss the African oral tradition, we are speaking of artistic verbal expression and its performance in the form of poems, songs, proverbs, myths, legends, incantations, sermonizing, lecturing, testifying, signifying, and other modes based on a complex worldview

designed to elevate and transform society. In Africa and the diaspora, past and present, the spoken Word dominates communication culture. This is part of the continuity with the ancient African past.

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See also Nommo

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ORI

Ori refers to the physical head among the Yoruba of Nigeria; it is the symbol of Olodumare, the creator, and of the essential personality—the soul of each individual. Ori is that spiritual essence that wields the greatest influence on a person's life from birth to the grave. For the Yoruba, this means that one's life is predetermined by the type of Ori chosen or the one affixed by Olodumare.

The essential part of this principle is that events happening in the individual's life are not due to chance, but to the type of Ori that the individual chooses in Heaven before entry on Earth. Ori is the spiritual "head" that a person chooses from *Orun* (Heaven) after being moulded by Ajala. The choice is made in any of the following ways: *Akunleyan*—that which is received kneeling; *Ayanmo*—that which is affixed; *Adamo*—that which is affixed at creation; or *Akomo*—that which is written and sealed. After the choice has been made, the portion is doubly sealed, first by Olodumare through conferment and then by Onibode, the keeper of the gate between Heaven and Earth. This choice is unalterable once it is made and is sealed by Olodumare and the Onibode.

After acquiring an Ori, the individual begins the journey to Earth. On arrival on Earth, those who have chosen good Ori will quickly prosper, whereas those who have chosen bad Ori will be condemned to failure. However, the Yoruba believe in having a good character—*iwa rere*—for a good Ori to come to fruition. Most events in an individual's life—for instance, if a person dies prematurely or becomes rich or possesses a special skill—are all traced by the Yoruba to the person's Ori. The belief of the Yoruba in Ori as the symbol of predestination is manifested in their sayings; for example:

Eni t'ò gbon
Ori e lo ni o gbon
Eniyan ti o gbon
Orii re lo ni o go j'usu lo

He who is wise
Is made by his Ori
He who is not wise

It is his Ori that decrees that he should be stupid.

Without Ori, human experiences and our understanding of them and of the continuous interplay of experience and understanding is not complete. However, it should be noted that Ori is not Ayanmo; Ori is believed to represent the structure of destiny.

The content of Ori is Ayanmo; it is Ayanmo that is revealed in destiny, and Ori is of the human creator. As the Yoruba would say, *Ori l'o ni se, eda la' ayanmo*: Ori is the creator, the human being is its fulfillment. Ori is a fundamental concept of the Yoruba thought. It provides the Yoruba a means of resolving some of the significant puzzles of the human condition for which there are no explanations.

Kunbi Labeodan

See also Destiny

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ORIGIN OF RELIGION

Religion does not appear as a separate word in Africa. In fact, there are no words in African languages that refer to religion as a specific activity. To a large extent, this is a borrowed concept in African culture coming from the influences of Europeans and Arabs with the religions of Christianity and Islam. In Africa, what one calls *religion* is simply the way that a particular people live their lives. For example, the origin of what one calls Yoruba religion is the people themselves. The religion and the people are coexistent. One cannot be Yoruba without also practicing the naming patterns and certain rituals of identity, music, dance, and festivals of the Yoruba people. Thus, there are no separate identities of the Yoruba people.

The question of polytheism or monotheism is not an African question and has limited value in trying to understand how Africans came to view their lives and those of their neighbors. One does not have to draw sharp distinctions between those who believe in many deities and those who purport to believe in one deity to gain an appreciation of the complexity of the African way of life. In fact, most Africans accept a belief in one creator deity, although there may be many spirits. Thus, in reality, this is similar to the later forms of "religion," which followed the African pattern in many respects. Africans were the first humans to conceive of a concept of monotheism, and Akhenaten has been considered the first person to have commented on the idea of one God. Of course, there is ample evidence to note that many African traditions accepted that the Supreme Deity was too distant to deal with daily issues; these were left for the interventions of ancestors and other spirits. It appears that the idea of responding to the environment, relationships, and mysteries might have occurred so far in antiquity that we will never know the precise origin of human response to the universe. Nevertheless, these early attempts to explain the environment may be called the origins of religion when defined as a way of life.

The Psychological Theory

In general, the psychological theorists maintain that early human beings created gods or supernatural

beings as a result of ignorance, fears, and intense anxiety. The psychological theories branch into two directions: intellectual and emotional. A few representative interpretations are presented here.

The Intellectual Theories

This interpretation of the origin of religion suggests that the explanation of humans being religious is to be found in early Africans' attempt to discover (principally by reasoning) the real explanation of things in the world. The theory claims that early human beings reasoned ultimately that if they could not control such "strange" things as thunder, lightning, seasons, birth and death, and so on, these must be controlled by spirits more powerful than human beings. To the intellectualists, therefore, religion was early humans' attempt to control things that were catastrophic and indecipherable.

The Theory of Animism

One theory of African religion was set forth by Edward Burnett Tylor. In 1871, Tylor's book *Primitive Culture* gave currency to the term *animism*. Tylor maintained that the belief in spirits and gods arose from the experience of dreams, visions, disease, and death. From these experiences, humans concluded that material and non-living objects had souls. Tylor claimed that from the concept of souls arose the idea of nonhuman spirits and eventually a belief in gods.

Magicoreligious Theory

In 1890, James G. Frazer advanced a theory of the origin of religion built on magic. In his encyclopedic work *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Frazer argued that magic preceded animism in the evolutionary development of religion. According to Frazer, there are three stages of intellectual development: magic, religion, and science. Frazer maintained that the earliest human beings tried to cope with uncertainties and bid for good fortunes by means of magic. When they discovered that magic did not always work, they evolved religion, that is, a belief in spiritual beings who will be able, at all times, to deal with all situations. Frazer

concluded that the third and last stage in humans' development is the age of science.

In African religion, some rituals follow certain set patterns in consequence of their long tradition. Also, some medicine men attach the practice of their medicine to some tutelary spirits/gods like *Esu* (Yoruba), *Agwu* (Igbo), and *Sasabonsam* (Akan). However, many divinities like *Soponna* (Yoruba), *Sagbata* (Dahomey), and *Tano* (Asante), among others, loathe magic. The Asante say *suman* (fetishes/magic) "spoil the gods." The Asante believe that the possession of bad *suman* is a sin punishable by some deities with death.

The Emotional Theories

Emotional theorists propose that religious beliefs arose from emotions. They maintain that early African religion was not something "thought out," but rather "danced out" to forestall the mounting of fear and anxiety in conditions where success is uncertain.

Peter Sarpong observes that the African approach to the Supreme Being is practical. The Asante call God *abomobuafre* (the one you go to with your problems). The deities are also easily available to attend to their adherents. Second, crude emotion of fear alone cannot account for the universality of religion. Among the Yoruba, *Ogun*, the god of iron, also known as *Gu* in the Republic of Benin and *Ogun* in Brazil, is the most feared deity. However, this deity is worshipped particularly by drivers, hunters, and blacksmiths during the *Ogun* festivals. The worshippers acknowledge through names like *Ogunbiyi* (*Ogun* gave birth to this) and *Ogundeyi* (*Ogun* turned out to be this) that *Ogun* blesses his adherents with exceptional things. It is only when fear is considerably modified by wonder and submission that there can be the acceptance of ritual.

Fear tends to abate as one gets acquainted with or subdues the object that inspired the fright. For instance, *Soponna*, the goddess of smallpox, is an awful dread to the Yoruba. When there is smallpox, the goddess receives a great deal of devotion, but when the danger subsides, the dedication diminishes. In such circumstances, fear could at best have given rise to occasional or seasonal gods. Consequently, there will be no gods when there is nothing to fear.

Oedipal Complex

The psychologist Sigmund Freud contributed to the debate on the genesis of religion when he theorized that the earliest religion grew out of what he termed a *father-figure neurosis* or the *Oedipus Complex*.

He argued, first, that religion is a neurosis because it arose from repressed desires and unconscious guilt feelings (as demonstrated in his Oedipal story). He held, second, that religion is an illusion, implying that it is through projection that the idea of God was derived from that of the father figure who was magnified to infinity. Third, it is because of early creatures' helplessness and needs that they personified the forces of nature to protect human beings against the strange superior powers of nature. These powers were then assigned with functions parallel to humans' wishes.

Many theorists believe that Freud may have made up the practices of the early people he had in his mind. Besides, the neurotics that Freud had in his clinic are in a class apart from the people he wrote about. Freud's psychoanalytic hypothesis has been criticized by prehistorians and anthropologists who have declared that the historicity of the "Oedipal situation" in the primal horde is untenable. Also, Freud's theory that religion is a vain illusion has also been denounced. Some scholars argue that it is purely philosophical speculation that is not rooted in empirical methods.

The Sociological Theories

These theories seek an explanation of the genesis of religion in certain needs and features of religion in the society. They explain religion essentially in terms of its functions and persistence as a social phenomenon rather than its origin.

Religion as the Worship of the Society

Émile Durkheim is probably the best-known representative of the sociological school of thought. In his monumental work, *Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*, he observed that religion is essentially a social and purposeful institution. According to him, three features demonstrate clearly the social character of religion. First, it is passed on from one generation to another. Second, it is accepted and believed by all especially in the

primal society. Third, it is compulsory; hardly anyone can default in participating in the collective religious rites.

Religion as the Opium of the People

Marxists' interpretation of religion is compatible with sociological theories because Marxists maintain that religion arose only at a definite stage of societies' development because of its role in the society. This role, Marx contends, is antirevolutionary. First, Marx considers that the rich and the nobles believe in God for economic reasons. They take advantage of religion to maintain the status quo. Second, for Marx, religion is utilized by the exploiting class as a tool to defend exploitation and strengthen the rule of the exploiters. Third, religion is effectively manipulated to "drug" the working class to keep them in perpetual slavery. This is why he calls religion an opium. Fourth, by doing the above, religion effectively diverts the attention of working people from the most burning issue of reality, from the revolutionary struggle against exploitation and for a just and humane society. Fifth, the working class or proletariat believes in God and perpetuates religion because of economic pressures. In Africa, it is a person's incorporation in the society that makes one a real person.

As far as scholars have discovered, the traditional cultures of Africa—whether Yoruba, Igbo, Kikuyu, Zulu, or any others—are dependent on the first ancestors for religious inclinations. Thus, the earliest ancestor or ancestors create the context for rituals, ceremonies, sacred places, acts of valor, and ideas concerning life, birth, death, and ethics. These are the central concerns in the origin of African religion.

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See also Ontology

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ORISHA

The term *orisha* refers primarily to the indigenous deities of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, but also extends beyond this ethnic group. Some of the Yoruba orisha—such as Ifa, Ogun, Shango, Eshu, and Olokun—appear in the religion of the Bini of southeastern Nigeria (who also call them orisha), in the religion of the Ewe, and among the Fon of the Benin Republic, who call them voduns. Although there is much variation in the details of the rituals and mythology of these deities among these West African peoples, the underlying religious concept is essentially the same.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, thousands of Yoruba, Bini, Ewe, and Fon people were enslaved, uprooted, and imported to the Americas. In some locations in the Caribbean Islands and South America, they were able to reestablish the worship of the orisha and maintain it during slavery and after its abolition. In these places, worshippers use the term *orisha* up to the present day. In the social and cultural environments of the Americas, the orisha concept underwent some subtle but significant changes. This entry, however, is devoted to an explanation of the traditional West African religious conception.

A Complex Unity

Defining *orisha* simply as deities does not do justice to the concept. Viewed in symbolic terms, an orisha may be said to arise from the convergence



Shrine figures with the elongated hairstyle typical of the Yoruba orisha Eshu, the messenger and carrier of sacrifices to the other gods. Eshu presents problems and issues before both humans and gods. He is often depicted playing a flute. Nigeria.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

of a divine power to command and make things happen, with a natural force, a deified ancestor, and an object that witnesses and supports that convergence and alignment. An orisha, therefore, is a complex multidimensional unity linking people, objects, and powers.

Ori and Orisha

The word *orisha* is related to several other Yoruba words referring to the head. The main one, *ori*, refers, first of all, to the physical head atop a person's body. This visible *ori*, however, serves as the vessel for an invisible *ori*, the *ori-inu* or internal

head, the indwelling spirit of a person and the kernel of their personality. The *ori-inu* exists before birth; it comes from God and determines an individual's character and fate. Just as the physical head perches atop the body, the *ori-inu* stands over and rules, guides, and controls a person's actions. The witnessing object for the *ori-inu* is a shrine for the head called *ilé ori* (house of the head), a pointed crown-like container covered with cowrie shells whose white color indicates purity and good character. In themselves, the cowrie shells symbolize wealth because they were once a medium of economic exchange. The white cowrie shell covering of the *ilé ori* also alludes to

the white-feathered bird called *eiye ororo*, the symbol of the mind that God puts into the head at birth. The ile ori seems to say: A good head (i.e., good character and a good mind) are true wealth.

The head also has other values associated with it that derive from the hierarchical nature of Yoruba social life. Yorubas use the head as a metaphor for supremacy and chieftainship; it means the first in rank and status, the most important and influential person or official. Age, which is priority in time, is highly valued and respected, and it is also an important aspect of status and ranking.

The concepts and values related to the head form a web of meanings that extends to and includes the divinities. The honor due any head is enhanced by its distance from one's own status. As that head ascends the hierarchy of age and rank, and that distance also increases, so does honor amplify to adulation, praise, and then veneration; with the orisha, it arrives at worship. The orisha are heads of the first rank, influence, and importance; they are also the most ancient of heads.

Kinds of Orisha

Yoruba scholar J. O. Awolalu divides the orisha into three categories: primordial divinities, deified ancestors, and personified natural forces and phenomena. In some cases, these categories may overlap.

Primordial Divinities

Primordial divinities existed long before the creation of the Earth or the creation of the world as we now know it. Some of these orisha (such as Obatala, Oduduwa, and Orunmila) are primordial in the sense that they existed before the creation of human beings. They emanated directly from God without any human aid. They are *ara orun*, people of Heaven. They came from Heaven, and they still reside there. Other orishas are *irunmale* or *irunmole*. These orisha were the Earth's first inhabitants; they are sacred beings that now dwell on and in the Earth.

Deified Ancestors

Deified ancestors are people who lived in this world after it was created and made such an

impression that their descendants have continued to promote their memory. They were kings, culture heroes and heroines, warriors, and founders of cities who had a major impact on the lives of the people and on Yoruba society through their contributions to culture and social life. In the Yoruba tradition, these were people who were able to establish control over a natural force and make a bond of interdependence with it, attracting its beneficent action toward themselves and their people while sending its destructive aspects on to enemies. To achieve this, the ancestor made offerings and sacrifices. Later these people disappeared—and according to Yoruba tradition, often in a remarkable manner: They sank into the ground or rose into the heavens on chains; they committed suicide and did not die; they turned to stone. Their disappearance was not true death; rather, it was the occasion of their metamorphosis into an orisha. Several primordial divinities have oral traditions stating that they were once the chiefs or kings of still existing Yoruba towns.

When these orisha disappeared, their children began to sacrifice to them and to continue whatever ceremonies the orisha had performed when they were on Earth. This worship was passed on from one generation to the next. In their native areas, people formed groups that worshipped and venerated these orisha and secured a place for their cult group in the religious and social organizations of the towns where they lived. Eventually a local orisha's cult might spread to other towns and their orisha's worship would become more widely known. The worship of other deified ancestors, however, remained confined to the towns where it originated, even sometimes restricted to particular families or lineages.

Natural Phenomena

From the Yoruba point of view, any element of the natural world that has manifold and useful functions for human beings has a spirit dwelling in it. There are many spirits of this kind, but some of them are so preeminent that they supercede all others; these are orisha. Among these orisha are the Earth; rivers, lakes, and lagoons; and mountains, certain trees, and the wind. Worship is directed at the orisha that dwells within the natural phenomenon, often at the site where the natural phenomenon manifests itself.

These specific forces of nature mentioned are part of the orisha because the cult of the orisha directs itself toward them. The orisha, however, are only one aspect of these natural forces. An orisha is that part of a natural force that is disciplined and controllable and that can be cultivated by people using ritual means. There is always the other part—the part of the natural force that can be explored but never completely known, the aspect of nature that will always remain wild and escape definition. To the benefit of mankind, the orisha mediate between humanity and these forces of the natural world by putting the tamable aspects of nature under human control while standing between humanity and that part of nature that cannot be tamed, hemmed in, or controlled by human beings.

Witnessing Objects and the Priesthood

Orisha worshippers see the tamed natural force and the deified ancestor as indissolubly linked. This unity is represented by a witnessing object that acts as the material support of the orisha's power to command and cause things to happen. A collection of these objects, even if it is not permanent, constitutes an altar where the orisha is present and can be addressed through prayers and offerings. In this context, the altar may be referred to as the orisha or as the orisha's face. Everything that went into forming these witnessing objects—from leaves, Earth, metal, pottery, or animal bones to the incantations and sacrifices that praised and coerced the orisha's many powers to lodge in one place—becomes part of the object's (and the orisha's) secret.

Priesthood translates the general idiom of descent and the idea of the orisha as a deified ancestor into referring to the members of an orisha cult group's priesthood as that orisha's children and undergirds a practice of secrecy that excludes from some part of an orisha's ceremonies people who have not been initiated into its priesthood. However, it becomes the responsibility of the orisha's human descendants to transmit to subsequent generations the objects and secrets through which human beings can interact with the orisha. Because each orisha has particular occupations, places, skills, preferences, diseases, problems, capabilities, and misfortunes with which it is

closely associated, devotees—through the orisha's priesthood—can make appeals to the orisha best able to resolve the problem they are experiencing. It is the orisha who are the guardians and explicators of human destiny; despite the ascendance of Christianity and Islam, many Yorubas and other West Africans still turn to the orisha for help, aid, and advice in the great and small problems of life.

George Brandon

See also *Odu Ifa*; Yoruba

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ORISHA NLA

Orisha Nla was sent to create the world by the Supreme Deity of the Yoruba, Olorun. It is said that at the beginning there was nothing but a marshy wasteland with no definite Earth or water. There were many deities surrounding and attending to the Almighty Olorun, but only Orisha Nla was selected to carry out the task of creating a world.

Olorun gave Orisha Nla several gifts for his task. These gifts included a shell filled with Earth that had been infused with special energy, a five-toed hen, and a pigeon. These gifts were to

accompany Orisha Nla wherever he went in his work of organizing the wasteland into an ordered world. The task was difficult because to bring order from chaos is not an easy activity.

Nevertheless, Orisha Nla threw the Earth down on the marshy wasteland, and the hen and pigeon began to scratch it until the sea and land were separated. The work of Orisha Nla was investigated by a chameleon who reported to Olorun. It was approved and accepted by Olorun, and Orisha Nla was given permission to continue his task. Of course, the first place that was made was Ilé-Ifè, the house of Heaven, the most sacred city of the Yoruba people.

Orisha Nla worked for 4 full days to create the Earth and then on the fifth day he took a rest. Thus, the Yoruba culture recognizes a 4-day work week and a fifth day of rest. Once Orisha Nla had completed the task of bringing order out of chaos to create the land, he was ordered by Olorun to plant trees on the Earth. Soon Orisha Nla was planting seeds that grew into trees and made huge forests. He sent rain to ensure the continued growth of the forest.

This was not the end of creation. People had to be made, and so Olorun created the first people in Heaven. Orisha Nla followed the model of Olorun and created people on Earth according to the pattern shown by Olorun. Once people were made on Earth, Olorun gave them the breath of life. Soon Orisha Nla wanted to have the secret of giving life. He hid in the forest that he had made and watched from afar to see how Olorun gave the breath of life. However, because Olorun was almighty and omnipotent, he knew that Orisha Nla was hiding and caused him to become unconscious so that he was unaware of Olorun's gift. Thus, even until now only Olorun has the ability to give life.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Oduduwa; Olorun

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ORUNMILA

Orunmila is the Yoruba deity of wisdom, knowledge, and omniscience who is also known by several cognomens that further highlight his nature and role in the Yoruba pantheon. Thus, Orunmila is known as Eleri Ipin, that is, the “witness to creation and destiny,” and as Ibikeji Olodumare, “second to the Creator, Olodumare.” From this position, Orunmila speaks to the complexities of life. Renowned for his wisdom and understanding of humanity and divinity, he is also called Agbonniregun, “a wise man without bones (in his body),” thus emphasizing his omniscience and compassion. Consequently, he is knowledgeable of all human and divine matters, the ways of the world, and all related phenomena. Orunmila is one of the major orisa or IrunMole in the Yoruba pantheon, and indeed he is considered the spokesperson for all orisa. Most significant, Orunmila is the patron and guardian of Ifa, the extensive oral tradition of Yoruba knowledge and thought, a responsibility given to him by Olodumare. As the master diviner, he is patron of all babalawo (male Ifa priests) and iyanifa (female Ifa priestesses). The philosophical complexity and meaning of Orunmila is revealed through many Odu Ifa (Ifa chapters) and through Orunmila's interactions with other orisa, including his several wives, especially Odu Iwapele, Apetibi, and Osun. Orunmila also consults Ifa as well as guards its integrity; hence, he is the avatar of Yoruba ways of knowing and being.

Ilé-Ifè, the cradle of Yoruba civilization, is known in the oral tradition as the original site of human habitation. In Yoruba *itan* or narratives, the IrunMole or the 17 premier deities, Orunmila among them, are charged with the preliminary

task of preparing the site at Ilé-Ifè for human life. Ilé-Ifè is also considered the home of Orunmila and the center of Yoruba spiritual and political power. The Odu Ifa notes that Orunmila is originally from the Igeti Oke section of Ifè and lived in many towns such as Ilesa, Ado, Owo, and Ijumu. His many travels reflect the itinerant lifestyle of the babalawo, the mobility of the Yoruba people, and the spread of the Ifa oracle throughout the region. In fact, Ifa or Fa is known among the Bini, Ewe, Fon, and other ethnic cultures along the coastal Atlantic and forest regions between Ghana and Nigeria. Since the 18th century, it has been transmitted across the Atlantic and can be found in Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, Trinidad, and the United States. In places where African religious practices were prohibited in the diaspora, adherents masked the deities, including Orunmila and Ifa, under the guise of foreign religious practices.

Patron of the Ifa Divination Corpus

Orunmila is primarily known as the master caretaker of Ifa divination and its corpus of knowledge. In this role, he is often referred to as Ifa. Because he is witness to creation, he knows its secrets (*awo*); hence, he epitomizes wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of all destinies great and small. He is the master babalawo, father of the secrets of all things, and patron of all babalawo and *iyani* who must know Orunmila through extensive study before they can access Ifa through the practice of divination. The training of an Ifa priest can take 20 or more years before mastery is achieved and confirmed. Ifa trainees are required to master 16 major *odu* before they are permitted to practice. Many also specialize in various aspects of Ifa's vast cornucopia of knowledge and information, becoming historians, herbalists, musicians, and counselors to Yoruba rulership, as well as Ifa priests. Orunmila owns the special Ifa paraphernalia that includes the *opon Ifa* (divination tray), *ikin* (palm nuts), *opele* (divining chain), and *ebo* (object of sacrifice). These are carried in an *opon Ifa* (divining board) by which diviners are well known. His acolytes are trained to communicate with Ifa and, thusly, with Orunmila through the art of casting 16 sacred palm nuts (*ikin*) or the divining chain (*opele*). The Ifa adapts and then writes and interprets the *odu* signatures or

chapters on the divination tray (*opon Ifa*). In consultation with clients, Orunmila speaks to the issues presented, offering insights and requiring offerings or *ebo* (sacrifices) that are meant to mitigate the problem.

As the chief exponent of Ifa and guardian of its practice, Orunmila connotes intelligence, insight, worldview, cultural norms, and value system. Orunmila is a master linguist who is capable of speaking all world languages, an indication of his universal wisdom. The Odu Ifa over which Orunmila presides are admittedly a cornucopia of Yoruba history, culture, spirituality, and philosophy organized in 256 chapters, each of which includes more than 600 poems (*awon ese*). As a wise man, Orunmila represents the ideal model of Yoruba intellectualism, critical analysis, understanding, and engagement in the world. Orunmila's Earthly manifestation emulates the joys and challenges of being human and unites humanity and divinity in a synergistic struggle for cosmic harmony, prosperity, balance, and immortality. Often Orunmila and Ifa are used interchangeably to refer to both the deity and the oracle.

In the Ifa corpus, Orunmila plays both active and passive roles. As an active figure in several narratives, Orunmila consults Ifa for guidance and resolution to his own challenges. His earliest babalawo are often mentioned as performing divination for him and prescribing the *ebo* or sacrifice that he must perform to solve his problem. As a passive figure, he is the voice of Ifa who cites the precedence for the client at hand. In this mode, Orunmila as the voice of Ifa relays to the diviner and client the one who previously consulted Ifa with a similar matter, regardless of whether they performed the required sacrifice, and the outcome. As sacred texts, Ifa represents Yoruba spirituality, whereas Orunmila represents the manifestation of spiritual creative wisdom and power on Earth.

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See also Obeah

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OSHUN

Oshun, or Osun (pronounced “aw-shoon” or “aw-shung”), is said to be one of the first of the Yoruba goddesses created. Oshun is commonly called the river goddess in the Yoruba religion and is typically associated with water, purity, fertility, love, and sensuality.

Several myths exist concerning Oshun and her significance as a Yoruba deity. Oshun is one of the estimated more than 400 spiritual guardians and deities of what is called Ifá, the Yoruba religious tradition of the people of West Africa. Oshun is an orisha, meaning “spirit” or “spirits of divine origin,” also referred to as a force of nature. Each orisha has its own followers who are responsible for erecting shrines, paying tribute, praying, and providing offerings. Oshun is considered one of the most powerful of all orisha, and like other gods, she possesses human attributes such as vanity, jealousy, and spite. The orisha handle all issues related to humanity and serve as enforcers of justice and retribution, each possessing its own unique powers. In most Yoruba stories, Oshun is generally depicted as the protector, savior, or nurturer of humanity. Oshun has also been described as the maintainer of spiritual balance or mother of sweet things.

The Yoruba people believed that the orisha were sent to populate the Earth. Oshun, being one of the original 17 sent to Earth, was the only female deity. She was said to be the central figure in the creation of human beings. As the myth suggests, the creation of humankind was incomplete until Oshun was summoned. The other

gods, all male, failed at their attempts to revive and populate the Earth. Even with the collective forces of the 16 orisha, their powers were inadequate without the life-giving forces of Oshun. When the other gods realized they were unable to complete the task given to them by Olodumare, who is considered the Supreme God in Ifá, they tried to persuade Oshun to help them. Oshun agreed and brought forth her sweet and powerful waters, bringing life back to the Earth and humanity and other species into existence. As this Yoruba myth suggests, humanity, specifically the universe of Yoruba, would not exist if Oshun, the goddess of life and fertility, had not acted. Oshun is also believed to speak to the Supreme God on behalf of the people and to ensure their protection and livelihood.

In yet another Yoruba story, Oshun is depicted as the goddess who not only gives life but also takes it. When angered, Oshun may flood the Earth or destroy crops by withholding her waters, thereby causing massive droughts. In one myth, Oshun is incensed by her devotees and sends down rain, nearly flooding the world. Yet once she is appeased, Oshun saves the Earth from destruction by calling back the waters.

In the Yoruba religious tradition, the orisha grant a multitude of blessings to their devotees and intercede with the Supreme God on their behalf. Oshun plays several key roles. In Yoruba culture, deities are revered, and devotees must strictly adhere to the prescribed modes of worship and other rituals so as not to anger or fall out of grace from the gods. The Festival of Oshun is one such example. The first recorded interaction between Oshun and human beings takes place in Oshogbo. This city is considered sacred, and it is believed to be fiercely protected by the water goddess. Oshun is said to have given the people who came to her river permission to build the city as long as they would honor and worship her as prescribed. Oshun and the people made a covenant: The people would set up their homes along the Oshun River, and Oshun would provide for them, protect them, and grant their prayers if they worshipped her dutifully, making the obligatory offerings, prayers, and other rituals. Out of this first encounter between the people of Oshogbo and Oshun evolved the Oshun festival, which is still practiced today by the Yoruba people of Oshogbo

and all over West Africa. Every year Oshun devotees and other people of the Yoruba religious tradition come to the Oshun river to pay homage, make sacrifice, and ask for a variety of things such as wealth, children, and better health. Although other orisha are honored during this festival, the climax of the festival is centered on Oshun.

Oshun has also been described as the goddess of wealth and art and the leader of women. Again, even in this depiction, Oshun's existence is central to the creation and safeguarding of all humanity (i.e., balance and harmony, which are central to the African conception of cosmology). Oshun is extremely important to the Yoruba culture and throughout the African diaspora not only because of her continuity after the transatlantic slave trade, but also because of her continued symbolic importance to Africa and the life-giving and healing qualities she embodies.

Oshun is especially important to femininity and the power of women in West African cultures. Healing, water, honey, and brass are all power sources associated with Oshun. Those who want children and who may suffer from infertility usually call on Oshun for assistance. Moreover, she is sought after in times of drought or severe poverty.

Oshun, like the other orisha, is the Earthly representative of God; she is the mediator between humans and the Supreme Being. On His behalf, she is one of the deities who rule the forces of nature, providing gifts when she is pleased and punishing at will. Oshun is typically defined as the source of good and abundance, as well as famine and destruction. With the expansion of Yoruba culture and the impact of the transatlantic slave trade, Oshun has taken on many names. She is known as Oxum in Brazil and Ochun in Cuba. There are countless stories about the origins of the orisha, particularly of Oshun. One myth commonly told involves her relationship with Shango, god of thunder. Oshun is the second wife of Shango and is considered a shape shifter who is able to take on the form of a peacock or a vulture. She is commonly described as the favorite of all orisha by the Supreme God, Olodumare, because of her beauty and sensuality.

Bayyinah S. Jeffries

See also Goddesses; Obatala; Orisha; Orisha Nla; Rivers and Streams; Santeria; Shango; Yoruba

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OUMFÒ

An *oumfò* (sometimes spelled *houmfort*) is the place where Vodou rituals usually take place in Haiti. It is regarded as a Vodou Temple or a spiritual center.

An *oumfò* is made up of several parts. The first one, the *peristyle*, is located at the entrance of the *oumfò*. Its size may vary from *oumfò* to *oumfò*, but it is usually a rather large and semi-open space where Vodou ceremonies take place. The *peristyle* is typically decorated with mystic paintings on the walls and colorful banners hanging from the ceiling. The ceiling of the *peristyle* usually rests on four pillars, which represent the four cardinal points. The most important part of the *peristyle*, however, is the *potomitan* (which literally means “pillar in the middle”), a pillar located in the center, usually decorated with a spiraling snake, and connecting the ground to the ceiling. The Lwa (spirits) are believed to ascend or descend through the

potomitan, which is therefore seen as a magical axis. Given this, the potomitan plays a critical role during Vodou ceremonies.

In addition to the peristyle, the oumfò also includes a number of small rooms that are sanctuaries dedicated to the Lwa honored in the oumfò in question. One of them, the *djèvo*, is the most sacred and secret of those sanctuaries: It is indeed where the *pé*, a stonework altar, the Vodou shrine, is located. Important items of the Vodou cult are placed on the *pé*, such as the *colliers* (sacred necklaces), flags, *govi* (jars that contain spiritual elements of the initiates), and books. Furthermore, the *djèvo* is also the room where initiates are secluded for several days, thus undergoing symbolic death there. It may also be the place where a large enough basin filled with water is kept for aquatic Lwa such as Danbal-Wedo and Ayida-Wedo. Other chambers are dedicated to the Lwa served in a particular oumfò, containing all the symbols associated with the Lwa. Thus, there might be a room for Papa Ogu, with his cutlass, hat, and bottle of rum; or there may be one for Ezili Fréda, with her expensive perfumes, delicate attires, and so on. Sometimes, due to space constraints, several Lwa may have to share a room.

Outside of the peristyle and spiritual chambers that make up the oumfò, one may observe additional items devoted to the Lwa, such as a big black cross for Baron-Smaedi or sacred trees usually decorated with Vodou spiritual items. Also noticeable is a profusion of white doves, pigeons, and chickens. These may be animals that will be sacrificed at a later date or were previously called on for rituals and then set free.

In addition to being places where spiritual ceremonies are held, oumfòs also function as communes. Indeed, attached to the Mambo or Houngan, who presides over the oumfò, are a number of persons who were initiated by her or him or who have come to gravitate toward them, that is, *Houngans*. The latter owe total respect and complete devotion to their Papa or Manman. In fact, they form a society, with clear rules, centered on the Houngan or the Mambo. They usually spend a significant amount of time at the oumfò, may even sleep there at times, and certainly must come when called for help, especially during ceremonies, when dancers and singers are needed. They may also be called on to cook for the Lwa or

the Houngan/Mambo to clean the peristyle and, generally speaking, get things ready for ceremonies. In return for their loyalty, the Mambo or Houngan must act as their counselor and protector and is ultimately responsible for their needs. If necessary, she or he must feed them and help pay for their hospital bill or their children's school tuition. In other words, the oumfò is an important place of comfort and support for all attached to it. Outside of Vodou ceremonies, the peristyle is used as a living space, where houngans socialize and may perform their various duties. It is where visitors wait or even sleep. Oumfòs vary in size: Some may be big and others small depending on the Houngan/Mambo's resources and success. In any case and regardless of its size, an oumfò is always kept clean because it is a most sacred place.

Ama Mazama

See also Vodou in Haiti

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OVAHERERO

The Ovaherero belong to the Bantu linguistic group. The population is about 500,000, and they are found in Angola, Botswana, and Namibia. It is believed that the Ovaherero migrated from Central Africa to Angola and from Angola to the present settlement in Namibia at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century.

The Ovaherero include subgroups such as Ovahimba, Ovambanderu, Ovazemba, Hakawona, Ovatjavikwa, and Ovakuvare. It is difficult to define the Ovaherero as one homogeneous group because

they live in different parts of Namibia and some have adopted practices that are different because of the area in which they live. This explains why the Ovahimba from northern Namibia dress differently from those in central Namibia, who are heavily influenced by Europeans and other foreign cultures. However, there are some aspects that are common to the Ovaherero religion, as discussed in this entry.

The Pastoral Lifestyle and Social Order

The Ovaherero are pastoralists who keep a large number of herds, mainly cattle. Their life centers on cattle keeping; without cattle, a Herero person is regarded as a nobody. Everyone must work to have cattle because the cattle represent the coin of the society. Ovaherero keep different kinds of cattle.

More connected to the religion of the Ovaherero are the sacred cows (*ozongombe ozondere*). These are special cows designated by the homestead or small village founder as special, sacred cows. A certain cow is selected by the founder as *ondere*. The offspring of such a cow will be known as *ondere*. Their milk cannot be consumed by anybody apart from the people (mostly boys) authorized by the owner of the cows. When such a cow dies, its meat must not be eaten or consumed by the people; it is usually left for dogs and aliens. Established by the founder of the small village, or homestead, as *ondere*, the cow and all of its descendants become sacred for the purposes of the people. This creates order, harmony, discipline, respect, and ceremony around the founding of the settlement.

The Ovaherero community is characterized by its dual system of descent. This means that every Herero is linked to a series of male ancestors through his or her father and a series of females through his or her mother. When someone is born into a Herero family, he or she belongs automatically to a certain lineage depending on who the mother or father is. The matrilineal descent is called *eanda*, whereas the patrilineal descent is called *oruzo*. The matrilineal descent, although linked to the actual original female ancestor, is mostly a social organization and has no value to religion. Unlike some African communities where women serve as priestesses, among the Herero, women do not take leading roles in religion.

The *oruzo* (patrilineal descent) has a religious significance. Most (if not all) religious activities are determined by one's own *oruzo*. People of the same *oruzo* are believed to be the children of the same ancestor (father). Hence, they are to follow the religious instructions and practices that were handed over to them by their ancestors. In the case of females, they must follow the path of their own patrilineal ancestors until they marry and take on the patrilineal ancestors of their husbands.

The Concept of God

Ndjambi Karunga is the name of the Supreme Being, who is generally regarded as the Creator of all things. He is the source of all things, both curses and blessings. There have been lengthy debates among some scholars on the names of the Supreme Being. Ndjambi Karunga refers to one identity and cannot be separated. The name Ndjambi means reward, and may refer to the Supreme Being as the source of all good things.

Ndjambi, however, is not directly worshipped, and no rituals or sacrifices are directed to Him. According to the Ovaherero system, the ancestors are the mediators between Ndjambi (Supreme Being) and the people. The ancestors are believed to be directly involved in the lives of the people. It is believed that they can cause people to be sick, they can bless or curse people, and they can punish those who act contrary to the practices of the *oruzo* descent.

Mukuru, meaning the Old/Ancient One, is believed to be the first ancestor. In the Ovaherero worldview, Mukuru is the closest to Ndjambi and is the one directly worshiped through rituals and sacrifices. Because Mukuru is the closest to Ndjambi, he is also the one who is the mediator between humans and Ndjambi. People speak to him so that he can speak for them before Ndjambi. In this system of belief, maintenance of harmony is important. There should be harmony between humans and the ancestors and Mukuru. In this way, the people are assured of the blessings from Ndjambi. Nothing is worse than disharmony, meanness, chaos, disorder, and disrespect of the traditions of the *oruzo*. A society that allows such disaster to exist without repairing the damage to the traditional order will dissolve into eternal chaos; therefore, the Ovaherero do all within their

power to maintain the consistency of the spiritual relationships among all entities.

The Sacred Fire (*Okuruuo*)

Each oruzo has its own sacred fire generated by special sticks called *ozondume*. The fire consists of a stump that is left to lie in the ashes, and only when there are important rituals is it stirred into flames. In the evening, some burning charcoals or a stump of fire are taken into the main house. From this fire the sacred fire is lit in the morning. This is done by the mother of a virgin.

It is important for this fire to be burning at all times because it represents the contact between the living and the Dead. It is believed that the ancestors would feel insulted and may inflict some form of punishment on the community if the fire is not burning. The fire inherently has a spiritual value, and this is the contact point between the deceased members of the family and the living. At the fire, prayers, offerings, and other important functions are taking place. To put it in simple language, this is where the activities of the day are reported to the ancestors.

Some of the common rituals that take place at the sacred fire (*okuruuo*) are the following:

- *Name giving*: A child who is born is brought to the fire and given a name. This is like introducing the new member of the family to the ancestors. After the naming, the occasion is celebrated with the slaughter of a cow or a sheep.
- *Circumcision*: Before a boy is taken for circumcision, he is brought to the sacred fire where the ancestors are asked to bless the boy and give him protection. A prayer is offered for protection and that the pain will not harm the boy.
- *Marriage*: A newlywed couple is brought to the fire to announce to the ancestors that they are now married. This is to ensure that the ancestors will know where the bride is. When the bridegroom brings his wife to his father's homestead, they are brought to the fire. The lady is introduced to the new ancestors. Fat is applied on her, and she is given sour milk. This shows that she has changed oruzo.
- *Sickness and healing*: The sick are brought to the sacred fire. The ancestors who are believed to have caused the sickness are asked to remove

the curse or punishment. When something is terribly wrong in the homestead, someone from the other oruzo will come and perform some rituals that will remove the evil. This is called *okuhubura* (take off, cleansing).

Visiting the Graves

The Ovaherero belief system is based on ancestor worship. The ancestors are regarded as part of the homestead, and they play an important role in the lives of the people.

There are two ways in which the Ovaherero people visit the graves of the ancestors. The first is when a person is buried or someone who did not attend the funeral requests to visit the grave. In this case, the visit is for the purpose of seeing the grave and giving respect. The people who visit the grave will place there some small stone or small leaves. This is to give respect to the deceased. The second way is when someone who was a hero or an important person is buried at a certain place. People will visit the place to give their respect to the fallen hero. This is called *okuyambera* (to put green leaves on the grave).

Okuyambera is a highly religious ritual, and people are only allowed to go there on the permission of *ondangere* (a traditional high priest). During this time, people are paying respect to the deceased, but also praying for many things, such as the removal of sickness, rain, wealth, and prosperity. When a Herero person is traveling and he knows of a place where there is some important person/ancestor buried in the area, he is expected to get out of his car and kneel at the place to please the spirits of the ancestors. It is believed that failure to do this could result in a terrible accident.

Godwin Uetuundja Murangi

See also Zulu

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OVAMBO

The Ovambo people live in northern Namibia. They are part of the larger Bantu-speaking people of southern Africa and have kinship with many of the people who migrated from central Africa. There are eight major clans that comprise the Ovambo. They are the Ukuanyama, Ondonga, Ukuambi, Ongaqndjera, Ukualuthi, Ombalantu, Eunda, and Onkolonkathi.

In fact, the Ovambo people live in the top third of the country of Namibia and reach to the Angolan border. They are the largest population in the country. It is believed that they migrated from the Zambezi region over the past 600 years. They found in Namibia a fertile land and soil that could support a growing population. Although the Ovambo do not number more than 250,000 people, they remain the dominant ethnic group of the land. The language of the Ovambo is called Oshivambo.

Namibia has a unique topography to which the Ovambo have made great adjustment. The people have organized their religion, customs, and values on the basis of their environment. For example, the flat sandy plains of the area called *Ovamboland* in Namibia are often bisected by water courses called *oshanas* during the rainy season. However, the average rainfall is no more than 20 inches annually. Yet the *oshanas* appear each year and influence the way the people respond to the vegetation and water. The Ovambo adapt to the weather patterns in an effort to maintain their society's values by discovering in the *oshanas* and other areas the spirits of the ancestors that assist them in keeping evil at bay and bringing about good. As expert artisans and blacksmiths, the Ovambo people are known as good farmers, fishers, potters, and artists.

The Supreme God of the Ovambo is called Kalunga. Nothing escapes the eye of Kalunga, who looks after the creation of all of the creatures and objects in the universe. It is the belief that Kalunga moves among the people as a spirit who determines what is necessary for the people to survive. In this way, the Ovambo, who believe in their own ability to make a difference in their lives, accept the power of the great Kalunga to assist them in ordinary activities such as basketry, pottery, the capture

of elephants, relationships with community people, and the fertility of the soil.

According to some authorities, the spirit of Kalunga takes the form of a human and can move invisibly among the people. Famine especially calls Kalunga into action. The people make rituals to celebrate all of the ancestral spirits as well as the almighty Kalunga. When an Ovambo person seeks to visit the king, he or she must remove his or her sandals. If one does not show this type of deference, it means that death will come to one of the royals. Therefore, it is expected that the person would remove shoes. Furthermore, if the fire goes out in the king's kraal, then the people would also withdraw.

When the harvest is completed, the Ovambo have one of their greatest festivals to celebrate the end of the harvest. At such a festival, the *akwanekamba*, or royal family, presides, and only the members of this family can be named to the kingship. Because the Ovambo are matrilineal, it means that the inheritance is on the mother's side.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ovaherero

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OYA

Oya is one of the seven primary orisha in the Yoruba religion, which originated in the Old Oyo Empire of Ancient Yorubaland, present-day Nigeria. The name Oya is defined by the action "she tore," "O-ya" in Yoruba. The River Niger, the thunderbolt, fire, tornadoes, buffalo, and the wind represent this female orisha. Guardian of the gates of death, she stands at the gates of the cemetery, yet she does not represent death. She is only the keeper and guardian of the gates, allowing souls to enter. Because of her post, she has a special relationship with the ancestor world (*egun*

and egungun). Oya is actually the opposite of death; she is symbolic of the air that humans breathe, and she can perpetuate life or death with her wrath (i.e., hurricanes, tornadoes). Practitioners of the religion believe she is Olofi's (Oludumare: God in the Yoruba tradition) secretary, informing him of all Earthly events. Because this is the aspect of Oludumare that governs the affairs of man, Oya is also a master of disguise. Occasionally, she is masked, allowing her to play numerous roles in her relationship with humans and the egun (ancestors). A common disguise is that of a buffalo.

Because the Yoruba tradition has spread to the Caribbean as well as South, Central, and North America and was preserved by enslaved and free Africans, Oya can be found in the Western Hemisphere manifested in Santeria, Lucumi, and Candomble. In the Western Hemisphere, she may be referred to as Odo Oya, Yansa, Yanza, Yansan, Oya Odu Oya, Oya Funka, or Oya Bi, as well as several other names. A multiplicity of colors and the number 9, symbolizing transitions and completion, represent Oya. Of the seven primary orisha, Oya is considered one of the warriors. In the context of ancient Kemetic worship, she has been known to be equated with Aset.

Veneration of Oya

God (Oludumare, Olofi) in the Yoruba tradition manifests through the orisha, and each orisha represents an aspect of nature. Oya is the manifestation of the wind, fire, and the thunderbolt. Those initiated into the priesthood (ocha) under Oya have one of the most elaborate ceremonies in the religion, followed by several days of ritual and ceremony. Because of the European trade and enslavement of Africans to and in the Western Hemisphere, the Yoruba tradition and the veneration of Oya as one of the seven primary orisha has survived and planted itself in the Americas as Lucumi, Santeria, and Candomble. Oya is still recognized as one of the elder female orisha, younger than Yemonya, but older than Oshun. Among the seven primary orisha, she is the only "female" warrior. To appease her, practitioners of the religion have been known to make offerings of eggplant; pigeon peas; rice with fish, corn, or sesame seed; black beans; yams; grapes; okra;

pomegranates; and cornmeal. However, offerings of palm oil and ram, Shango's sacred animal, are not made because it is believed that Oya hates them. Her festival day, on the continent of Africa and in the Americas, is February 2.

Divination

In the Yoruba tradition, the orisha speak through a process called *divination*. The divine communicate with the living through the Odu Ifa, which are 256 configurations (odus), in which the orisha advise humans in all of their affairs. This process takes place when a practitioner speaks to the orisha using a divination tray. Each odu is referred to as a "path" given by a specific orisha; Oya speaks in many odus with the numbers 9, 5, and 11.

Each orisha has a method to remedy the problems and affairs of humans; these would be ebbos (sacrifices). Practitioners of the religion can receive help from Oya to dispel evil, acquire money, or cleanse themselves and obtain blessings by executing various sacrifices that require prayer, offerings, and ritual.

Legends and Paths to Oya

In the context of the Yoruba, Santeria, and Lucumi traditions, there are many legends that detail Oya's relationships with other orisha and her acquisition of power. These legends are often referred to as *pataki* or *apataki* when they appear in the Caribbean and South American contexts of Santeria and Lucumi. One primary legend details how Oya obtains the ability to spit fire like Shango; this ability is a key characteristic of both orisha. The legend states that, after observing Shango for some time, Oya realized that the secret to Shango's ability to spit and breathe fire was contained in a gourd given to him by another orisha, Osain. Oya secretly locates the gourd, tasting its contents, which allows her to breathe and spit fire like Shango. Shango returns to discover that Oya has uncovered the source of his secret and commences to have a battle with the female orisha. Another legend states that Oya is the one who lends the ability to spit and breathe fire and wield the lightning bolt to Shango.

Oya is the other love interest of Shango; Shango stole her from Ogun. They are counterparts: He is

the thunder and the bolt that reaches Earth; she is the aspect of thunder that electrifies the sky. She stole Shango's secret to make fire and thus was allowed wine and sometimes the color brown. Consequently, the relationship between Oya and Shango as husband and wife or mistress exists throughout the Yoruba tradition and its legends.

Oya is also known as a master of disguise; she wears a mask to conceal her identity when doing her bidding or in the case of battle. She is a fierce female orisha, a known warrior who joins Shango in all of his wars. In these battles, she is likely to fight with a sword in each hand or bring along some symbolic attributes such as a machete and hammer. Oya is also known to carry a black horse-tail, which is used to bless and clean her followers.

Representations of Oya

Oya is the owner of the number 9, the number of completion. Therefore, nine copper bracelets

are worn on her right arm, and a copper crown with nine points adorns the head of her human personification. Her elekes (necklace made of beads) are brown and red beads with white and black stripes. It is believed that she finds favor with most colors except black. She is known for a multicolored skirt and bandanna in the Lucumi context.

Tyrene K. Wright

See also Shango

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P

PALO

The religion known as Palo by practitioners in Cuba, the United States, and parts of the Caribbean is essentially the traditional spiritual system of the Kôngo people (Bântu-Kôngo, Bâkôngo). The Bâkôngo are a sub-Saharan people who extend from southern Cameroon, through Angola, Bas-Zaire, and Gabon, to Mozambique. Also included are non-Kôngo groups such as the Teke, Suku, Yaka, and Punu, found in the BâKôngo and Angola regions because of the similarities in language and religious beliefs. The legends of the culture, the commonality of socioreligious practices, and the roots of the language identify the Bântu-Kôngo cultural group as originating from ancient Kemet. Before spreading south in later migrations, they settled in western Africa.

Worldview

Consistent with Kemetic influence throughout Africa, the cosmological underpinning of the Bântu-Kôngo philosophy rests on the relationship between the living and the Dead. Within this union, the soul and mind live on after physical death and manifest through dreams and visions and through waves and radiations. This division of the cosmos is an actualization of the origin of the world, in which a world without life (*mbûngi*, *mwâsi*, or *mpâmpa*) became dominated by a fire or life force. After cooling and solidifying, it fused

to produce water (*kalûnga*, “a door; a wall between two worlds,” the origin of life, the symbol for vitality and change), which, in turn, became rivers and mountains. From this, half of the world became Earth and the other half water or the spiritual world (*Ku Mpèmba*).

The major template of the Kôngo spiritual system is the altar, which takes many forms, but is particularly illustrated in the Bâkôngo geometric cosmogram (*Tenwa Nzâi Kôngo*), given to humans by the supreme deity *Nsâmbi Mpungu* to illustrate the relationships between the living and the Dead. This cosmogram is depicted as a vertical and horizontal cross known as the *yowa*, which represents the continuity of life and the point of interception between the living and ancestors; the *kalûnga* line, as referenced above, represents the realms of the living and the abode of the ancestors; and the *dikenga*, a circle surrounding the cross figure marked on the ground, represents the soul (*n’dunzi*). The Kôngo belief is that humans live, die, and live in a continuous motion through four stages of the sun. Thus, the sun revolves around the cross and marks the four moments of dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight. These moments are represented in the cosmogram, with small circles at the end of each axis mirroring life as birth, full adulthood, waning adulthood, and rebirth. Revolving arrows trace a path around the intersection of the axes that are directed in counterclockwise motion and further emphasize the process of reincarnation. The singing of sacred songs and chants encourages the manifestation of the spirit of ancestors (*simbi*).

The essence of human existence is the concept of *Kala* (the presence of light in the physical world, character, leadership). The process of *kula*, which is to mature and take one's rightful place as a leader, must occur for one to become an *n'gunza* or spiritual person, thereby entitling one to enter the realm of ancestors. Following the *tukula* step, one must descend into the deepest world by crossing the *luvèmba* or death barrier, the symbol of the reincarnation/transformation process where the life/death struggle takes place. (This process is also true of communities, institutions, etc.) The transformed entity now becomes the authority of his or her own mind and body (*musoni*), as well as principles and systems of higher knowledge (*ndoki/kindoki*). From here, the Bâkôngo believe that the body dies to move toward the upper world, although the spirit of that being remains with the ability to speak and act.

The *ngânga* or initiated individual is a specialist in perception of the spiritual world and is expected to be a positive contributor to his or her community. Kôngo philosophy posits that the focus of one's life is centered on healing (*kînsa*). The *n'kisi* (plural *minkisi*) or healing agent may be minerals, plants, animals, or objects that protect the human soul, guard against illness, and preserve life. Bâkôngo legend recalls that the first *n'kisi* was Funza, who was the progenitor of all subsequent *n'kisi* and is represented by a twisted tree root. Each *n'kisi* contains medicines and a soul that give it life and power. *Minkisi* may also include leaves, shells, packets, sachets, bags, ceramic vessels, wooden images, statuettes, cloth bundles, and feathers. Some contain spirit-embodying medicines such as cemetery earth, white clay, or powdered camwood, which are usually wrapped or concealed in the charm and may have pieces of mirror or porcelain attached. Seashells, pottery, porcelain, and mirrors reflect the significance of the water *kalûnga* line, as well as the flash of light (*mpézomo*) that represents the spirit of an ancestor or victim of witchcraft captured in the charm by its owner and under the owners' control to do his bidding. Other *minkisi* may contain spirit-directing medicines such as seeds, stones, herbs, or sticks, which may instruct the spirit of the *n'kisi* to hunt down evil or may direct a person to perform some act. Some significant *minkisi* are called by Kongo clan names

and are used for particular purposes such as protecting from specific diseases, preventing having things "thrown" at them, creating natural phenomena, or inflicting illness on enemies.

The broad area known as ancient Kôngo and Angola, with its highly developed state at the center of an extensive trading network, was raided by Portuguese and Arab slave traders beginning in the late 15th century. By the 1800s, the empire had collapsed, and those former citizens now comprised approximately 40% of the total number of enslaved Africans kidnapped and brought to the Americas between 1500 and 1870.

Palo: The Cuban Practice

Of the more than 20 ethnic groups brought to the island of Cuba, the six major groups were the Lucumí, Mandingo, Arará, Gangá, Carabalí, and Congo. The Bântu-Kôngo spiritual philosophy was strengthened by the ongoing importation of newly acquired humans who produced variations on the name Palo (Palo Mayombe, Regla de Palo, la Regla Conga/Reglas Congas, and Palo Monte Mayombe), which denotes the "sticks" or "branches" of the "mountain" used in the making of the *nganga*. Kôngo-Cubans of the 19th century also made *minkisi* figurines to mystically attack slaveholders and other enemies.

It is assumed that the practice of traditional Bântu-Kôngo religion was altered after its arrival in the Americas. However, although it is true that many of Reglas Congas adopted or fused the Lucumí (Yoruba) names of orisha along with Catholic saints for the gods of the Bântu-Kôngo (*mpungi*) and the *minkisi*, many others maintained Palo as a distinct and separate system, including intact Bâkôngo names. (An example of the interchange is the Cuban *ngânga* "Sarabanda," associated with Orisha "warriors" Oggún, Ochosí, and Elegguá, but deriving its name from the Kôngo *nsala-banda*, the cloth used by Bâkôngo in their *minkisi*.) The religious practices were also able to flourish as a result of the urban guilds or brotherhoods of free Africans of the same nations, referred to as *cibaldos*. Often led by the eldest members and referred to as "kings and queens," these associations might pay for funeral expenses of members, purchase manumission of enslaved elders, and disseminate information on African culture.

The Palo system in Cuba continues to emphasize the relationship between the living and the Dead. In practice, the lines in the Palo ground designs represent the pulling of spiritual forces inward to the center while extending outward toward the four cardinal points of the universe. The *nganga* contains the spirit it calls or controls, along with its cosmogram signature, indicating the *nganga's* centering force. Here, the *nganga* may refer to a spirit *n'kisi* or to a clay container, gourd, or sack (*jolongo* or *macuto*) or the iron cauldron (also called *prenda*, a pledge to not break taboos) that contains the spirit. Through the thought-transmitting *nganga* cauldron, the "palero" becomes a medium for the *nganga*, and, in trance, utters words he may not understand, but that are directed by the *nganga*. In some Palo communities, practitioners also utilize Kardekian *espiritismo* techniques for their dealings with the Dead.

Practice of Palo in the United States

Remnants of the Bantu-Kongo religious practices are most notably seen in the southern part of the United States, where Africans often fused or masked the supreme deity *Nsambi Mpungu* with a Christian god and utilized the healing and protective *minkisi* in daily life. The twisted tree root in particular became a major object associated with the *n'kisi*; thus, the "healers with roots" became known as "root-workers" or "conjurers." Other examples of the system can be found in the Sea Island region of South Carolina, where the importation of enslaved ethnic groups from Kongo-Angola formed the Kikongo linguistic patterns known as Gullah Creole. For example, the term *ndoko* refers to bewitching, *n'zambi* refers to God, and *Gullah* is most likely a shortened form of "Angola." Pottery found in the Carolina low country often contained cosmograms and ideographic signs.

Throughout the South, the greatest evidence of the spiritual systems of the Bâkongo is found in cemeteries. Often mistaken for decoration, the personal belongings or last object touched by the deceased, such as broken pottery and porcelain, playthings, lighting utensils, food, water, white chickens, pieces of colored glass, shells, wooden figures, planted trees, lamps, and containers that hold water, are not uncommon items on graves

in Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, and the Carolinas. These objects have the purpose of warding off evil and assisting the Dead in their journey to the other world. Expressions of ancestors (*simbi*) such as broken crockery, bone discs, pieces of quartz, coins, and twisted roots can also be found in homes. Classic African American "yard art" is symbolic of the altar; objects such as pinwheels, bottle trees, and shiny reflective objects (flash and light are equally effective weapons against spiritual loss) can be found in the yards of homes as protections against evil.

Practice of Palo in Other Parts of the Americas

In the late 1900s, Yoruba and Kongo-Angolan people represented the majority of the enslaved brought to Brazil. Later, the Kikongo-speaking groups incorporated the combined religions of Dahomey and Native America (Amerindian) with Catholicism and European spiritualism to construct the religious practice of Macumba. In practice, cruciforms chalked on the floors of shrines, and the presence of certain medicinal spirits attest to the Kongo-Angolan influence. Many Macumba priests "mark points" (*pontos riscados*) in the manner of the Bâkongo to "center" consecrated water. The Afro-Brazilian term *pontos cantados e pontos riscados* (simultaneous singing and marking points) provides further evidence of the Kongo custom. A *Ponto de segurar*, a small charm in a cloth container, is used to stop a malevolent spirit or to attract a person to the owner of the charm.

The practice of Umbanda, first seen in the mid-1920s in Brazil, spread into Uruguay and Argentina and arrived in New York with the migrant population. Also an amalgamation of Roman Catholic, Yoruba, Bantu-Kongo, and Native American practices, the Kongoese influence can be seen in the presence of the *pretos velhos* or black elders who retained their Kongo names. Drawing on ground with white chalk is also commonly found in this group.

On the island of Haiti, where the primary African spiritual influence is essentially Dahomian *vodun*, *n'kisi* charms, often wrapped in silk, ancestral cotton, or raffia cloth and decorated with

flashy sequins or beads are known as *pacquets-congo*. The *simbi* or Kôngo spirits of the Dead are believed to guide the making of pacquets.

Bottle trees, as seen in the southern United States, are also found in the Berbice area of Guyana and among the Djuka of Surinam and Trinidad.

Patricia E. Canson

See also Nganga; Nkisi

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PEDI

The Pedi are a southern African people often called the Northern Sotho because they are a branch of the large Sotho people. However, the Pedi have established their own identity throughout their history. They developed as a separate group in the 16th and 17th centuries through a series of wars and political arrangements. Like so

many larger groups in Africa, the Pedi combined with smaller kingdoms to create a larger confederation for defensive and social reasons. The fact that they shared the same language and customs made it easy for them to have a confederation.

When the Pedi were defeated by the armies of the Ndebele king Mzilikazi on his way north, they were scattered until a great king, Sekwati, restored their unity and revived the Pedi people. Of course, they were then engaged in battle against the invading European Boer armies pushing toward the Limpopo River.

One must not assume that the Pedi are a relatively young people, because they have a long history as a part of the body of the Sotho-speaking people. They migrated southward from the region of the Great Lakes in Central Africa around the 14th century and settled in southern Africa. Among the people who settled in what is now South Africa were the Hurutse. The Pedi are related to this group of people. There was a great king named Mokgatla who gave his name to the people called Bakgatla. According to history, Mokgatla withdrew from the group that he had created, and another king, Tabane, split from the main Pedi group as well. Tabane was succeeded by Mostsha, his son, who was then succeeded by his son, Diale.

The Pedi developed a strategy for defending their homesteads that depended on surprise. They were the masters of surprise during encounters with other ethnic groups. The soldiers would march for 2 days in a direction opposite the enemy, giving the impression that they were not going to attack, but were engaged elsewhere, and then suddenly, like a leopard, they would turn and pounce on the enemy's territory. Because they had been defeated by many groups, the Pedi, who were not military in the sense of the Zulu, Ndebele, or Xhosa, had to develop an alternative strategy. The military organization of the Pedi was not a science or a way of life. The Pedi people practiced neighborliness and lived as much as possible in harmony with their closest neighbors.

An independent people, the Pedi encouraged each man to be responsible to his family, provide for his children, follow the ideas of his ancestors, and take no prisoners in any warfare. Thus, a king might hold a council with the elders of an

area, but in the end, the king's authority was curbed by the will of the majority. In a way, the Pedi represent one of the most nonviolent philosophies in Africa. They have learned to accept their condition as part of their inheritance. Few strive to achieve superiority over their neighbors or to desire the land or wealth of their neighbors. However, in past times, the Pedi have been known to capture women and children and bring them to Pedi territory. These days are long gone, and the Pedi people have established themselves as one of the great peoples of southern Africa. In fact, they believe in their own deities and ancestors and have built much of their ethical life around their faith.

The Pedi moral and ethical system is based on devotion to ancestors. They have always believed that the presence of the ancestors is necessary for a society to prosper in terms of children, fertility, and harmony. Consequently, a part of the initiation process of young men and women is dedicated to teaching them the traditions, customs, and behaviors of Pedi people. It is required that every boy and girl go through initiation training. It becomes impossible to have a celebration of initiation without the proper training. Among the things that children learn is that violation of the traditional behaviors means that the person should be banished from the community. Taking a person from the village is a way to demonstrate that the people in the village do not want to be associated with a person who will bring harm to them. The ancestors cannot be pleased when they see that the traditions have been violated and that the proper rituals have not been performed.

Marriage among the Pedi is arranged. The elders are responsible for choosing a partner for young people. Once someone is identified for a person, the family members go and arrange for a meeting of the two people. Family members are introduced, and they discuss the amount of cattle to be paid to the girl's family for the opportunity to marry her. If a man marries a woman and then dies, his unmarried younger brother would marry the widow to support the children and the woman. During a marriage, when the wife is ready to deliver a child, she will go to her parents' house. After the baby is born, she will return to her husband, who will usually build her a new homestead.

All marriages and births are accompanied with joy and merriment. The Pedi believe that the ancestors share in the beauty of the expansion of the community. Villagers will usually bring food and drink to the party for the new mother and child.

The Pedi believe that a person who dies should be buried within 7 days. This allows the family time to inform everyone, and it also allows the relatives who live afar to return home for the going-away celebration. The day prior to the burial of the deceased, they cover the corpse with cows' skins. Everyone who wants to see the corpse can see it for the *go tlhoboga*, the last time, because on the next day they bury the body.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors; Marriage

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PERSONHOOD

Personhood in the African religious system begins with the question, "Who is a human?" In effect, personhood is the quality of acquiring the status of being human. One example of this African notion of personhood is seen in the case of the Akan people. Those who have little conception of the role that humans play in the social reality may have distorted the entire issue of the Akan's relationship to the community or the African connection to the collective group. There are those who maintain that the African view, including that of the Akan, makes being primary. In fact, the notion that ontological primacy trumps community primacy is anathema to most of these thinkers. Actually what this means is that the reality of the person is secondary and derivative and the community is basic, original,

and generative. Africans have even articulated this with “it takes a village to raise a child” as if to imply that the meaning of a person is derivative from the community.

Some may say that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be. From the supposed primacy of the reality of the community, one can say that (a) in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory; (b) the African view supports the notion of personhood as something acquired; and (c) it is possible for personhood to fail or, rather, that someone cannot gain personhood ever. The position of Kwame Gyekye, the philosopher, on this point is that these premises might need to be reexamined.

There is a view that the social conception of the African social order is communal through and through, and therefore one denies the notion of individuality in African thought. Historically, this was the idea promoted by Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, and others who argued for a relationship between African socialism and African communalism in the spirit of the socialist movement of the Cold War.

Thus, Nkrumah observed that if one sought the sociopolitical ancestor of socialism, one could find it in African communalism. In socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances. Senghor believed that African society was collectivist or, more exactly, communal because it was rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals. These ideas led to the belief that African social order was communal in the traditional situation. Indeed, this would mean, if it were true, that the direct path to socialism was natural. In the period of the persistent and unrelenting quest for socialism, the status of the individual person in the eyes of the world was simply communal. In fact, perhaps only Senghor spoke a little about the individual in ways that differed from the general trend. The idea that the individual is, in Europe, the man who distinguishes himself from the others and claims his autonomy to affirm himself in his basic originality is a different idea from the African conception. The member of the community society (by which one means African) also claims autonomy

to affirm self as a being. But one feels and thinks that human potential can only be fully expressed in union with other humans. This is the African ideal in many discourses. Nevertheless, the idea of the individual is not carried through in the writings of most African intellectuals, and this may be a minority view.

Thus, many interpretations of the metaphysics of the person and the status of the individual person in the African social order grant primacy to the community vis-à-vis the individual person: Metaphysically, the reality of the person is held as secondary to the reality of the community; socially, the individual is held as less significant, or rather his status has been diminished, whereas that of the community is augmented and made more prominent.

Ontology

We have learned enough from philosophers such as Maulana Karenga, Kofi Asare Opoku, and others that the traditional African philosophers and thinkers often spoke in proverbs, so we do not need to make an argument for that here. One understands that the world of social, political, and ethical ideas was a world of folktales, proverbs, and wise sayings. It is possible that the fragments that come to us from the times of the ancestors might be used to understand how they understood human communication. One can reconstruct African thought by using these wisdom fragments.

Consider the wisdom fragment “All persons are children of God; no one is a child of the earth” (*nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma; obiara nnya asase ba*). It can be inferred from this fragment that a person is conceived in Akan thought as a theomorphic being, having in his or her nature an aspect of divinity. This is what the Akan people call *okra*, soul, described as divine and as having an antemundane existence with divinity. The *okra* is held as constituting the innermost self, the essence of the individual person. A human person is thus metaphysically conceived as more than just a material or physical object. As a child of divinity, a person must be held as intrinsically valuable. As an end in him- or herself, and, therefore, as self-complete, this makes it strange, in the Akan sense, to speak of the community conferring personhood (or selfhood) on a person.

In Akan conceptions, each person is unique because each soul is unique. Ontologically, then, the individual person must be self-complete in terms of his or her essence because it requires nothing but itself to exist (except for the fact the he or she was held as created by divinity). If this is so, it cannot be the case that the reality of the person is derivative and posterior to that of the community. Therefore, it would not be correct to maintain that the notion of personhood is conferred by the community, nor would it be correct to assert that the definition of personhood is a function of the community.

The pronoun *it* does not exist in the Akan language for animate things. Thus, “he is in the room” is translated in Akan as *owo dan no mu*, “she is in the room” as *owo dan no mu*, and “it (referring to a cat) is in the room” also as *owo dan no mu*. However, it exists for inanimate things. Thus, the answer to the question “Where is the book?” will be *ewo dan no mu*, that is, “It is in the room.” Because the Akan pronoun *o* applies to all three genders (strictly only to a part of the neuter gender, however), it would follow that the answer to the question “Where is the old man?” (if we want to use a pronoun) will be *owo dan no mu*, that is, “he/it is in the room.” Clearly, then, the neuter pronoun in the Akan language for animate things makes no commitment to the ontological status of its designatum. A child or baby will be as much a person as an adult or a grey-haired old man. The argument that *it*, used of children (in the English language), implies that they are not yet persons therefore collapses, for the Akan “it” (= *o*), as we have observed, is used also of adults and older people. In English, one could say of the baby, “It is a beautiful baby,” but never of an older woman, “It is a beautiful woman.” Are those older people persons or are they yet to acquire their personhood after it has been conferred by community?

Some have argued that, because children who die get simpler funerals than adults, it shows that community must confer personhood. But it is not true that every older person who dies in an African community is given an elaborate burial. The type of burial and the nature and extent of grief expressed over the death of an older person depend on the community’s assessment, not of his or her personhood as such, but of the dead person’s achievements in life, his or her contribution to the welfare of the community, and the respect he or she commanded in the

community. Older persons who may not satisfy such criteria may, in fact, be given simple and poor funerals and attenuated forms of grief expressions. As to the absence of ritualized grief on the death of a child, this has no connection whatsoever with the African view of personhood as such, but stems rather from beliefs about the possible consequences for the mother of the dead child of showing excessive grief. One belief among the Akan people is that excessive demonstration of grief will make the mother infertile because it will make her reach her menopause prematurely; another belief is that the excessive show of grief over the death of a child will drive the dead child too far away for it to reincarnate, and so on.

A human person is a person whatever his or her age or social status. Personhood is thus not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are habits and character traits: he or she, qua person, thus becomes the subject of the acquisition and is not fully defined by what he or she acquires. One is a person because of what he or she is, not because of what he or she has done or acquired.

We also know for a fact that children not only should have rights, but that they do have rights in African society. Let us once again refer to the Akan phrase: “All persons are children of divinity; no one is a child of the earth.” Note that this statement makes no distinction between younger and older persons; it speaks of all persons; it does not suggest either that babies or younger people are not children of divinity. Second, this phrase has ethical overtones because there must be something intrinsically valuable in divinity for the insistent claim to be made that everyone is divinity’s child. A person, inasmuch as he or she is a child of divinity, must also be thought of as having intrinsic worth and should be accorded dignity, respect, and importance. From this it can be inferred that a person has moral rights that are anterior to the community—rights that are therefore not conferred by society, but are concomitant to the notion of personhood. Children have rights because, like adults, they are persons.

Nature of Community

Let us turn to the nature of community. A human community is, of course, a community or a group of persons who are linked by interpersonal bonds,

biological or otherwise. This means that without persons and therefore interpersonal relationships and communication there will be no community, and this means, in turn, that it is the reality of the community that is dependent and derivative, the community not having a life of its own. The community cannot bestow personhood on the individual in some pontifical manner. Neither can the community be used to define and confer personhood on the human being. Furthermore, one cannot have a community without communication. It does not exist apart from human communication, that is, persons communicating.

Person in Community

The ontological completeness of the human person is not by any means to be regarded as paralleled by social completeness. In the social context, the individual person is not complete. To say that the human individual is self-complete in his or her being does not in any way imply that he or she can be conceived as essentially without relations to other human individuals. This is where communication enters the picture more fully. Just as the community does not have a life of its own ontologically, so has the individual person no life of his or her own socially. Although complete in his or her nature, the human person has needs, desires, ambitions, visions, and hopes that can be realized only within the community of other persons. Socially, then, he or she remains incomplete.

In Akan philosophy, the human person is conceived as originally born into a human society, and therefore as a social being right from the outset. This conception is expressed in the wisdom fragment, "When a person descends from heaven, he/she descends into a human society" (*Onipa firi soro besi a obesi onipa kurom*). It is held that the human being is created by the Supreme Being in the sky (*Soro*). Created in the sky, the reality of the person is prior to, not derived from, the community. However, the person who "descends" into a human community cannot live in isolation because he is naturally oriented toward other persons and must communicate with them to be in relation to them.

The Akan artistic symbol of the chain is a symbol of human relationship. It means "We are linked together like a chain; we are linked in life,

we are linked in death; persons who share a common blood relation never break away from one another." The symbol depicts unity and interdependence, the idea of each person as a unit in the chain. This symbol is thus intended to indicate the fundamentally relational character of the person and thus the interconnections of human individuals in matters of their basic needs and expectations.

Despite his or her ontological completeness, the individual person's capacities, talents, and dispositions are not sufficient to meet his or her basic needs and requirements. The reason is formulated in the statement, "A person is not a palm tree that he/she should be self-sufficient" (*Onipa nnye abe na ne ho ahyia ne ho*). Because the human individual is not self-sufficient, he would necessarily require the assistance, good will, and the relationships of others. He must be a communicating human to fulfill his basic needs.

Another statement makes it pretty clear that "the well-being of man depends upon his fellow man" (*obi yiye firi obi*), a fragment that is logically related to, or is the consequence of, others such as "One finger cannot lift a thing," "The left arm washes the right arm and the right arm washes the left arm," and "If the lizard is a blacksmith, the monitor does not lack a cutlass." The reasons for the existence of the community are thus clear: The individual's capacity is finite and limited without the community. This fact diminishes the individual's self-sufficiency and enthrones the need to emphasize the value of collective action, mutual assistance, and interdependence.

The community (or communitarian) life maintains that the good of all determines the good of each or, put differently, that the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all. It follows from this that the success of the individual person's life is linked with him or her identifying him- or herself with the community. What emerges, then, is an organic, symbiotic relation between the individual person and the group (i.e., the community). This organic relation has given rise to several questions, false impressions, invalid inferences, and outright condemnation of the communal system of social arrangement.

It must be noted, however, that having relations with other human persons does not diminish or subvert the ontological completeness of the individual person, nor does it rob him of his personal

autonomy. The notion of relational character (in respect of persons) is not logically incompatible with the notion of personal autonomy. Those who think differently on this suppose that there is an antithesis between the two—that is, the individual and society. Perhaps it is undeniable that the organic character of the community as held in African social thought and practice is more pronounced, the interpersonal bonds between persons much stronger. Consequently, community life is real, becoming the focus of the activities of the individual members. From this phenomenon, some scholars have concluded that the relational character of persons is so excessively stressed and its limits pushed to such extremes that the social role and status of the community in African social thought are augmented, resulting in the diminishing of the status of the individual person who, in the sequel, is bereft of initiative, personality identity, and originality. Individuality, it is erroneously supposed by others, is smothered by communality.

Conceptually, communality cannot be opposed to individuality because, after all, the well-being and success of the group would depend on the unique qualities of its individual members—that is, on the intellectual abilities, talents of various kinds, characters, dispositions, shareable experiences, and so on of each individual person. If communalism were to fail theoretically to provide free rein for the development, full realization, and exercise of the individual's unique qualities, it would be an inconsistent social theory because it would, as it were, be sawing off the branch on which it was going to sit. However, communalism, as conceived and understood in Akan or African social philosophy, is a consistent theory, one that is not opposed to the fundamental interests of the individual. To participate in communication activities that would enhance one's own good as well as the good of others is surely not to have one's identity and personality submerged or ignored by the group.

In the communal social order, it is impossible for the individual to feel socially lost or insignificant; on the contrary, the individual feels socially worthy and important as his or her role and activity in the community are appreciated. The individual also benefits materially from the good will of members of the group.

Let us consider, to begin with, the ideas expressed in the following wisdom fragment:

“The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which could be seen to stand individually when closely approached.” This fragment has been explained in the following way: “If one is far away from a cluster of trees, he sees all the trees as huddled or massed together. It is when he goes nearer that he recognizes that the trees in fact stand individually. The clan (group) is just like the cluster of trees.” The fragment gives the impression that the community or group is a mere abstraction, a mental construct, not a reality. This is not so, however, because the cluster of trees is real, implying that the community is a reality, although this does not mean that its reality takes precedence over the reality of the individual. The fragment makes it clear that individuality cannot be diminished or subverted by the reality of the community or social group. The fragment implies further that the individual has a separate identity, and that, like the tree, the individual is separately rooted, possessing an autonomy and uniqueness. Just as the tree is not in any way sucked up by the cluster, although some of its branches may touch those of other trees (thus the relational character of the individual trees), so the individual is not in any way absorbed by the cluster, that is, the community.

Individuality is well understood in Akan social thought as seen in the well-known Akan fragment, “the clan (group) is merely a multitude” (crowd: *abusua ye dom*). The fragment does not reject the reality of the group as such, but it stresses the idea that the individual cannot always depend on the clan or the group for everything, but should try to be independent and be responsible for him- or herself. The fragment is thus intended to deepen the individual's sense of responsibility for him- or herself. Thus, it repudiates social parasitism, which is also rejected in the popular Akan saying, “Life is as you make it” (*obra ne woara abo*). The “you” here is, of course, the singular pronoun. The meaning of the saying is that it is not the group that will organize one's life for him or her despite the assistance that one may get from other members of the group. It is the individual who, in the final analysis, should strive for his or her interests, welfare, and happiness. There is no suggestion in Akan thought, however, that the individual should practice ethical egoism.

The individual's sense of responsibility for him- or herself is, in fact, expressed explicitly in the maxim, "It is by individual effort that we struggle for our heads" (*ti wopere no korokoro*). This underlines the idea of individual effort as a necessary condition for struggling for our interests.

My aim has been to show that Akan social thought holds that the human person is complete in his or her nature and that he or she is a unique individual, with particular interests, wills, and desires; capacity and dispositions for self-expression; and ability to think and act autonomously. Akan thought also maintains that this individual person is, by nature, a social being so that he or she has a natural proclivity to relate to other persons. Interpersonal relationships are thereby formed, and it is these interpersonal relationships and connections that constitute a community. In its being, therefore, the community is secondary to the being of the persons. The being or reality of the individual person takes precedence over that of the community. However, in a social sense, the person is not an island. Indeed, the Yoruba seem to agree with the Igbo on this, because it is written in the *Odu Ifa*, Oyeku Okanran, "On the day that Olodumare would think that a star was being arrogant, we would see the star suddenly fall and disappear into darkness." The assumption has always been that the African society is communal and collectivist through and through, an assumption that is not wholly correct because it ignores individualist elements in African social thought. What Akan/African social thought attempts to do is to integrate individual desires and social ideals, which can best be explored in a communicative framework that privileges ethics. *Oye onipa paa* is one way to say that the good communicator is indeed a good person within the context of community.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akan; Ontology

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PETWO

There are more than 1,000 divinities, or *Lwa*, in Vodou, as practiced in Haiti. The *Lwa* are grouped in several pantheons, or *nanchon*. *Petwo* is one of those *nanchon*, along with 16 others. The most important *nanchon* include, in addition to the *Petwo* pantheon, the *Rada*, *Nago*, *Kongo*, *Juba*, and *Ibo* pantheons.

Of these, the *Petwo* pantheon is arguably one of the two most important, in terms of both size and the role played by *Petwo Lwa* in Vodou. The other main pantheon is the *Rada* pantheon. In fact, the *Rada* and the *Petwo* pantheons have integrated other *nanchon*. Thus, the *Nago* and the *Juba Lwa* are often thought of today as *Rada*, whereas the *Kongo* and *Ibo* are commonly assumed to be part of the *Petwo Lwa*.

Many scholars have not hesitated to suggest that *Rada Lwa* were "good," whereas *Petwo Lwa* were "bad," if not outright "evil." Such a sweeping characterization is not appropriate because it fails to do justice to a somewhat more complex reality. In fact, there are constant overlaps between the different pantheons of *Lwa*. The same *Lwa* may appear as *Rada* and then as *Petwo*. What seems to distinguish the *Petwo* pantheon from the *Rada* pantheon is, above all, the general character, attitude, or persona of the *Lwa*. *Rada Lwa* are often associated with a peaceful demeanor and benevolent attitude. However, this is not always the case. When displeased or offended, they may also turn out to be quite vindictive. In contrast, *Petwo Lwa* are commonly thought of as forceful, aggressive, and dangerous. Yet they may also be protective of the living and quite generous. For example, *Ezili Dantò*, a *Petwo Lwa*, is appealed to by those wishing to have children. She is also known for "giving" money. Thus, one must resist the easy temptation of a simplistic classification and labeling.

The word *petwo* may have come from a powerful Houngan, a Vodou priest, by the name of

Don Petwo or *Don Pedro*. The latter is believed to have lived in the region of Petit-Goave in the late 18th century and to have distinguished himself by actively participating in the struggle for freedom, which eventually led to the independence of Haiti in 1804. More specifically, according to some, Don Petwo would have created a fast-paced dance that could bring about the mounting of a whole assembly by the Lwa. Furthermore, Don Petwo was said to have great psychic powers because he was gifted with clairvoyance.

The famous ceremony of Bois Caiman, which took place on August 14, 1791, and which initiated the revolutionary war in Haiti, was led by the Houngan *Dutty Boukman*. During that ceremony, a pig was sacrificed, thus clearly indicating that the whole affair was a Petwo ritual because the pig is the typical sacrificial animal in Petwo rituals. In fact, and without this being surprising, given their hot energy, Petwo Lwa are widely believed to have played a major role in providing the enslaved Africans with the ability to organize, fight, and triumph over the French slave regime. For example, one may discern on paintings of Ezili Dantò two parallel vertical scars on her right cheeks. Many believe and repeat that it was while fighting against the white colonists during the revolutionary war that Ezili Dantò's face was thus wounded. Also, sometimes Ezili Dantò is represented with a chopped-off nose, and this is assumed by many to be as a result of a wound suffered in combat as well. Another example worth mentioning is that of *Ogu Shango*, a Petwo Lwa, who would have, according to the oral tradition, inspired and protected Dessalines, a major player in the Haitian revolution, during fighting. Not only are Ogu Shango and Ezili Dantò important Petwo Lwa, but so are other spirits such as Legba Petwo, Danballa Flangbo, Ogu Petwo, Ezili Mapyang, Marinette Pye Chech, and many others.

Ceremonies devoted to Petwo Lwa are common occurrences. They include, like all Vodou ceremonies, intense drumming and dancing. A typical Petwo drum set consists of two drums: *Ti Baka* and *Gwo Baka*. Those two drums are quite similar and only present a difference in size, with the Gwo Baka drum being larger than the Ti Baka drum. Furthermore, they are both made out of soft wood, with their upper extremity covered in goat hide. They are played with both hands.

Dances for *Petwo Lwa* include the *Makiya* dance, the *Bumba* dance, the *Makanda* dance, and the *Kita* dance.

Ama Mazama

See also Lwa; Rada; Vodou in Haiti

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PEUL

The Peul (also Pular, Fulani, Fulfulde) are a large ethnic group that reaches from Senegal to Chad along the high plateau of the Sahel. Their numbers are more than 40 million and are spread from the Sahara to the rainforest. Among the first West Africans to become Muslims, the Peul have lost many of their traditional practices and rituals, but they have become adept at Africanizing their Islamic practices. In many respects, the Peul, alongside the Wolof and Serer, have articulated a special relationship to Islam and Christianity. Their languages, probably influenced by and influencing Arabic in West Africa, have grown to show an affinity in expression and attitude.

According to some scholars, such as Moussa Lam, the origin of the Peul is ancient Egypt. His argument is that the Peul, because of chaos and disorder, found their way from East Africa, out of the Nile Valley, across the Sahel to Senegal. One only has to examine the towns and villages in a straight line from the Nile Valley region to the Senegal Valley to see the reality of the presence,

the same presence, of the Peul in the nature of burial markings and place names along the way.

Most contemporary scholars place little confidence in the old reports that there were two groups of Peul, the blacks and the reds. They argue instead that the Peul contain people who are of many shades and complexions due to their interactions with many people in their pastoral lifestyle. Indeed, the Peul have always had a special regard for cattle, but this is not something unusual in Africa given that the Nuer, Dinka, and Maasai are also noted cattle raisers. The pastoral way of life does not preclude agriculture, and many of the Peul have mastered the agrarian lifestyle found in the rainforest regions of West Africa.

The Peul tend to be highly patrilineal. It is difficult to discover any hint of a matrilineal tradition among the Peul. Most of their societies are based on a patrilineal endogamous kinship pattern where each of the families is responsible for the administration of its share of the cattle inheritance. When they have found communities among the Tamashek or Serer that have influenced their pattern, the Peul have been able to settle and engage in agriculture and cattle-raising. They are known as pastoralists, but they are not all nomadic. Many of the Peul groups have found that they can be quite successful as agriculturalists, although it is safe to say that they have never found this style of life as rewarding as the pastoralist traditions for which they are famous.

It is believed that although there is a strong patrilineal descent system, because of the influence of Islam, there are no ceremonial or religious rituals to ancestors. Some authors believe that Islam has almost completely eradicated any form of traditional pastoral religion among the Peul. Yet there are revivalist elements among Peul intellectuals who are searching for pre-Islamic traditions.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Burial of the Dead

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PHOENIX

Animals and birds have been regarded in African religion and philosophy as teachers of wisdom and knowledge for a long time. In ancient Egypt, especially at the sacred city of On, the Benu bird, known in Greek times as the phoenix, was closely related to the benben stone, which was known by the Greeks as the obelisk.

The benben stone was associated with the supreme deity in its Ra and Atum manifestations, and therefore rituals were developed that projected the ability of the benben to rise (the verb in ancient Mdw Ntr, *weben*) above circumstances. Indeed, the Greek word *phoenix* comes into being long after the Egyptian use of the Benu bird to reflect this activity related to renaissance.

One of the oldest presentations of the Benu bird appears in the Pyramid Texts, where it is seen as a yellow wagtail reflecting the supreme deity of the city of On, Atum. In Utterance 600, it is written that the god Atum is "risen up" as the benben in the mansion of the Benu in On.

However, there are other manifestations of the Benu bird as Ra and Ausar. In those examples, for instance, in *The Book of the Dead*, the Benu bird is shown as a gray heron (*Ardea cinera*) that has a long straight beak and a two-feathered crest. One can see this quite explicitly where the scribe Nakht admires the Benu bird by touching it gently with his hands in one of the registers in *The Book of the Dead* written during the 19th dynasty, around 1280 BC.

The ritual for transformation into a Benu bird was a highly developed oratorical formula that involved, among other things, a depiction of a Benu bird. This desire, in fact, longing of per-aa (the pharaoh) and others to be transformed into Benu birds was a serious undertaking for immortality. Indeed, it might have been connected to the wish to be a star in the firmament. This is not far-fetched, because it has been said that the Benu bird might symbolize the planet Venus and the transformation might relate to the various phases of Venus.

It should be noted that birds were plentiful in ancient Egypt, and the association of the Benu bird with the benben stone and with transformation

was quite in keeping with Egyptian thinking about the world. There are almost no areas of Africa where birds do not exist, although there are areas where it is difficult to find mammals. Hence, the presence of a bird to represent transformation would be automatic, that is, natural because the bird is always able to fly away from local circumstances.

Ancient Egypt, therefore, was like many other parts of Africa where birds were used in religious or cultural expressions. One finds that the Mossi of Burkina Faso, the Bahamba of Congo, and the Eton of Cameroon are just a few of the ethnic groups that use headdresses of birds for ceremony. The Benu bird of ancient Egypt was ceremonial, ritualistic, and spiritual in its ultimate meaning of transformation. As the Egyptians understood, one should seek to rise as the Benu bird and witness the change that comes with having lived a life of good character, which is the only way to ensure immortality.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Animals; Birds

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PLACENTA

Physically, the placenta is a membranous sac in which a human fetus develops. It is a vehicle by which oxygen, nutrients, and blood necessary for the baby's development are transmitted from mother to child. It is thought that, spiritually, the placenta carries vital energy that may be used to positively or negatively affect the child or its mother. Because of its spiritual potential, the treatment of the placenta following the birth of a child is an area of important religious attention.

In ancient KMT, or Egypt, the placenta was considered to be a spirit double of the child. The Igbo of Nigeria associate the placenta with the infant, but not with the baby's spirit double, or *chi*. The Baganda people view the placenta as a second child that is stillborn and becomes a ghost. Because the placenta is thus tied to the well-being of the infant, the proper handling of it must be performed to ensure the protection of the living sibling.

The placenta may be burned, preserved, or buried according to the family's particular belief system. In some places, including, but not limited to, the United States, Jamaica, and Haiti, the placenta is buried. It is not uncommon for a fruit tree to be planted over the placenta so that the child never becomes hungry. Among the Ngoni, the baby's first bath is given over the spot where the placenta is buried, along with the cloth used to deliver the infant. The Edo ethnic group requires that water from the infant's first bath be poured over the site, and mashed yam is offered to the location by an elder woman. Some other African diasporic populations bury the placenta not in the yard or courtyard, but inside the home or beneath the threshold of a doorway.

In African cosmological understandings, the physical environment is a critical component in man's own existence. As such, nature is revered and respected. Additionally, the immediate geographic location of a community is honored because it provides the sustenance necessary for the survival of the people. Inasmuch as this is the case, Africans seek to unite both spiritually and physically with the land on which they reside. The burial of human placentas is an essential ritual that serves this purpose throughout the African diaspora.

It has been said that the immediate location of a family links that family to the portion of the spiritual realm that helps to maintain their familial dynamic. Accordingly, the ancestral land's physical location provides a spiritually sacred place where family members may return to reunite with the energy found there. Africans of Zimbabwe and the Caribbean both bury the navel string, another name for the placenta, so that the baby will always choose to come home. The mother's future fertility is also closely related to the proper disposal of the placenta, further ensuring the preservation of the family's lineage.

Babies born with portions of the membrane covering their head are said to be born “with a veil” or “with a caul.” These children are considered, throughout the diaspora, as being born with the ability to see and hear ghosts and other spirits. The only method for allowing the child to escape the responsibility that accompanies such a gift is to keep the caul. Because the caul’s well-being is directly related to that of the child, if it is torn, the child will die. If the child becomes sick, the caul is damp; and if the child is well, the caul will be firm. Similar beliefs exist in West Africa, Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti, and the U.S. Southern and Sea Coast areas.

Protection of the placenta is imperative because it may be used by evildoers to manipulate the life and energy of the newborn or its mother. There are tales of midwives selling placentas to those who wish to invoke the life energy of the membranes to achieve desired effects.

Placental disposal and preservation rituals are currently threatened as Westernized health care providers often prevent families’ access to the placenta following the birth of an infant.

Tiffany D. Pogue

See also Birth; Children; Rituals

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PLANTS

Plants occupy an essential and diverse space in religious beliefs and practices. Plants are the source of foods such as seeds, nuts, grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables that nourish humans, living-dead, and deities. Plants provide the herbs used to make medicines that heal physical and spiritual bodies. Plants provide reeds,

gourds, dyes, and fabrics used for shelter, creating rhythms, and adorning the body. Without these things, African religions would be one-dimensional and austere.

The life of a plant from seed to maturation back to germination mirrors the process of creation and echoes the cyclical return of the sun, moon, seasons, and human life. It is no wonder that many traditions hold that people were created from plants. The Zulu creator god Mvelinqangi emerged from a reed and subsequently brought from it men, women, animals, and the fruits of the Earth. The Xhosa, Lenge, Shangana, and Tonga of South Africa also maintain that God created humans from reeds. The Tonga call this reed *Lihlangu*, and the marsh of reeds from which other peoples emerged is called *Nhlanga*.

There are many rituals associated with sowing, harvesting, and consuming plants because they provide the primary source of nutrition for so many communities. The rituals can involve a sacrifice to ancestral and nature spirits before sowing, a blessing of seeds by chiefs or priests, and a ceremony to ensure adequate rainfall. Finally, the first-fruit celebrations at the harvest are where the bounty is presented for blessing, storage, distribution, consumption, and celebration of the yield.

The use of plants in the form of medicine for healing and well-being is universal on the continent. Africans have understood the principles and powers of plants for millennia and have been able to treat a variety of spiritual and physical illnesses. Much of this knowledge exists in the oral tradition and, unfortunately, much has been lost with the transition to more Western lifestyles. In the Sande women’s secret society, women advance in prestige and standing as they master an increasing knowledge of plants. But even the pubescent initiates are taught to distinguish specific herbs. Experienced herbalists look for *néku*, a young shoot or sprout, when making any herbal preparations because it is considered to have the most life force and greatest therapeutic properties. Specific herbs can be rubbed on the ear so that a person can understand the language of the birds. Also, when there is a dispute among Mende women, the parties involved are made to undergo a ritual bath with herb-infused water as part of the restitution. Malidoma Some relates the story of a blind healer who was able to understand the

language of trees and plants, a skill that baffled even his healing colleagues. The plants would tell him which ones to use to cure illnesses, how and when to prepare them, and which to avoid. Plants have supernatural powers; the leaf is the manifestation of the divine life force. It can be a lifelong study to learn how to access and apply it properly.

Denise Martin

See also God; Healing; Medicine

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POCOMANIA

Pocomania, sometimes referred to as Revivalism, is more than 200 years old in Jamaica. This is an African form of religion with elements of other religious traditions. Enslaved Africans brought this form of religious practice to the Caribbean region. In the rural areas of Jamaica, the influence of African heritage is more noticeably present in the Revival movement than it is in urban settings. Pocomania is viewed by many as a form of rebellion and protest against European religions and the political status quo.

There are now two types of Pocomania. A reformed version is called Revival Zion. The original form is still referred to as Pocomania or Pukumania. Pocomania is a more African form, whereas Revival Zion is a more European-oriented form of religion. The word *Pocomania* comes from the Spanish for “small madness.” Pocomania is a Jamaican spiritist religion whose worship services are characterized by singing, dancing, spirit possession, speaking in tongues, and healing rituals.

In Pocomania, the leader is always a man who is known as the Shepherd, whereas in Revival

Zion, the leader can be either a man or a woman. In the Revival Zion movement, the male leader is referred to as Captain, whereas the female leader is called the Mother or Madda.

Women play an important role in Pocomania. They serve as members, healers, and preachers. They act as recruiters for the religion and as leaders of small groups interested in learning about the religion. They remain the backbone, that is, the strength of many African traditions in the religion.

Pocomania worship revolves around music and spirit possession. In addition, the worship service combines moral teaching, singing, and movements invoking the spirits to enter the ceremony. Along with teaching values and morals, and the singing of hymns and choruses, a large part of the worship is devoted to tramping or trumping. As an essential part of the Pocomania meeting or worship, “tramping” is an African inspired dance that is accompanied by the playing of cymbals or tambourines. Tramping occurs after the singing has become intense and the percussive element has reached a peak. The members of the Pocomania group move around in a circle, counterclockwise, each using forward-stepping motions with a forward bend of the body. This is much like the ancient ring-shout form often seen in the Gullah regions of Georgia and South Carolina.

Typically, members of the Pocomania meeting are dressed in white robes, heads wrapped in blue, red, white, or green colors, as they chant and move to the rhythm of drums and tambourines. The music is hypnotic, inducing hips to gyrate to its steady beat. This is an individual form of self-expression, where the participants’ minds are attuned to sounds only they can hear.

Pocomania follows the African pattern of not dividing the present world from that of the after-life. All things are circular and reciprocal. In fact, the living and the Dead are part of the same moving force in the universe. Those who have passed away have merely gone to another part of the same community. Thus, the deity expresses love and justice in the present life, not only in the after-life. The followers of Pocomania believe that God is everywhere and so are the spirits of their ancestors. In addition, they believe that the spiritual world is experienced through the natural physical world. Invoking the spirit is an integral part of Pocomania. Votarists often go into trances where

the spirits come to reside permanently in the ones possessed.

Annette M. Gilzene

See also Ancestors; God

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PORO SOCIETY

Hale is defined as a religiolegal institution, a sodality, a secret society. In West African societies, there are two great hale: *Poro* for men and *Sande* for women. The societies exist to serve the needs of the community, but only initiated Poro and Sande members are permitted to attend the secret ceremonies.

Ntu is a complex philosophical concept in African societies. From a ntological platform, there is no real distinction between sacred and secular; hence, theology, politics, social theory, land law, medicine, psychology, birth, and burial are all logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item is to paralyze the structure of the whole. Hence, members of Poro societies are concerned with all aspects of social life, which include the individual, family, community, and society. They are responsible for religious traditions and ceremonies. Maintaining social order is another responsibility of Poro. In addition, they are responsible for carrying out the ancestral customs and lineage.

Traditionally, initiation (social education) was aimed at teaching skills toward adulthood and productivity. *Mu bere* or *ko ni ipilefe* is the Yoruba word for initiation, and it implies being physically and mentally immersed and then cemented or bonded together. Young males ages 7 to 12 make up the first age set, and males between ages 12 and 18 make up the second age set for the *mu bere* (initiation) experience. An age set is a social grouping of individuals of the same

sex and age. There may be as many as 99 phases of the initiation process, but it begins with the child's grade of discovery. The initiation process takes several years. In keeping with tradition, the educational institution of Poro initiation is designed to transform children into adults and to develop leadership and productivity skills.

Ubuntu is a concept that defines a reciprocal relationship between the ancestors and the living. In the grade of discovery, the young initiates deepen their knowledge of ubuntu and how their ancestors founded their village and established a settled way of life for themselves and their descendants. Initiates are also introduced to various rituals and masks. Masks include the helmet, ceremonial, communication, and judgment. Other sacred objects associated with the initiate's ancestors and the meaning of each are also introduced during this phase. Upon the completion of this grade, which takes several weeks, young initiates are considered adults and members of Poro. As they progress from one class to another, initiates learn agricultural skills, ceremonial use of herbs, and laws. The culmination of a class is celebrated by a ritual. The final phase of the initiatory process takes place in the sacred wood or forest.

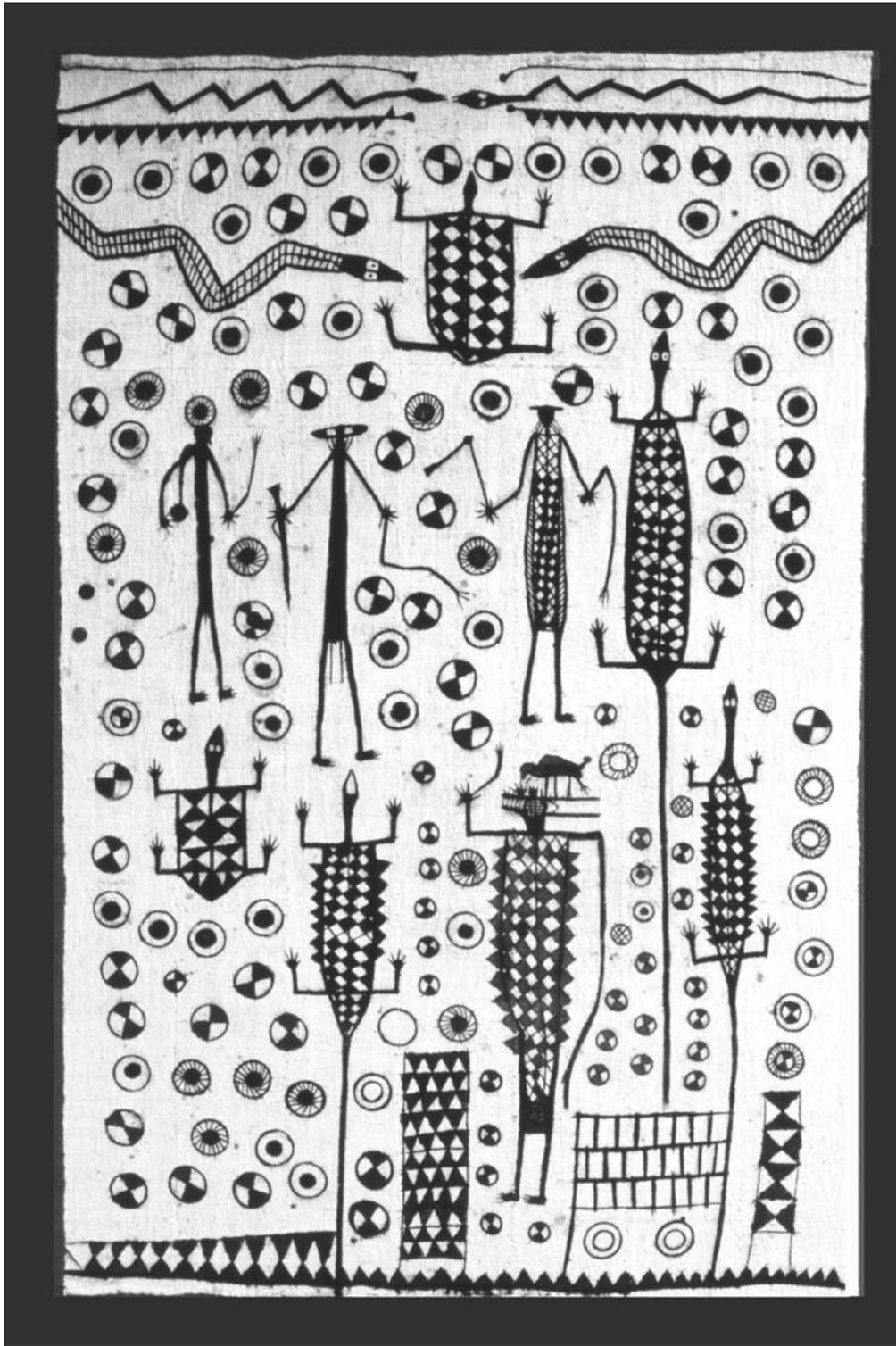
In their work *The Dances of Africa*, Michael Huet and Claude Savary explain the initiatory phases of the Senufo of the Ivory Coast (Sinematyali, Korbogo, and Bundyali regions). The first phase is the junior class (*plaga, plawo, nyara*) or Poro for children between 7 and 12 years of age. The second age group (*tyenungo, nayogo, kwonro*) is for boys between 12 and 18 years of age, which proceeds from the initiatory phase of the sacred wood (*tyologo*) and completes the young men's training after age 18. When the initiates return from the sacred wood, their initiation is complete. Then public ceremonies, tantamount to modern-day graduation, take place.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Initiation; Mende

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Painted cloth costume worn by Senufo Poro society masquerader. Similar cloths were also worn by hunters. The designs, regarded as protective, are painted onto locally woven narrow strip cloth using green paint made from boiled leaves, then outlined with a mud solution. Senufo, Ivory Coast.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

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POTOMITAN

The potomitan (also spelled *poteau-mitan* or *poto-mitan*) is the round pillar that stands in the center of the peristyle, that is, that part of the *oumfò* (Vodou temple) reserved for spiritual ceremonies in Haiti. The potomitan is usually made of concrete and extends, at least in its physical form, from the ground to the ceiling of the peristyle. Etymologically, *potomitan* is a Creole compound word made up of *poto* “pillar” and *mitan* “middle,” and it means “the very strength.”

This name should be enough to signal the paramount importance attached to the potomitan by Vodouists in Haiti. Indeed, the potomitan is thought of as the axis of the spiritual world. As such, the potomitan serves as a magic conduit between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. More specifically, it is literally through the potomitan that the Vodou spirits, the *Lwa*, enter the world of the living when called on during Vodou services. The potomitan then becomes charged with the energy associated with the *Lwa*. The potomitan is able to fulfill that function because, according to Vodouists, it draws its roots in the sacred cosmic place known as Vilokan (i.e., Africa, the place of residence of the *Lwa*) and stretches far up into the spiritual abodes above the Earth.

Quite predictably, the potomitan is reserved a special place during ceremonies. It is always saluted with great respect and awe at the beginning of Vodou services. Also, for example, participants in a Vodou ceremony dance around it. Similarly, *Vèvès* (cosmic drawings for the *Lwa*) are drawn around the potomitan. The base of the potomitan is built like a round altar, which is used as a table where important items are placed during services, such as candles, the Mambo's or Houngan's *asson* (their sacred rattle to call the spirits), water and other drinks for libations, and

so on. It is also where offerings and sacrifices are placed. Animals soon to be sacrificed, such as a red bull or red chickens to the *Lwa Papa Ogu*, will be first attached to the potomitan and then sacrificed once the *Lwa* has come through the potomitan.

The potomitan is easily recognizable, not only given its central location but also because it is usually painted with bright colors, such as red, and often decorated with a snake. In fact, the potomitan is called by many the *Poto-Danbala*, that is, the “pillar of the *Lwa Danbala*.” It must be remembered that the symbol of *Papa Danbala*, as that spirit is respectfully called in Haiti, is the snake. In Haiti, just like in Benin, where Vodou draws its immediate roots, the snake's sinuous movements and ability to coil itself are intimately associated with the dynamic, yet subtle, motion that characterizes life and its incessant flow, that is, eternity. Thus, *Danbala* is the sustainer and giver of life. In that context, the potomitan, *Poto-Danbala*, is like a cosmic penis, erected as it participates in the gift and sustenance of life. According to Fon mythology, *Danbala* set up four pillars, one at each cardinal point, to literally support the Earth. Interestingly, in addition to the potomitan, the peristyle also rests on four cardinal pillars. Some other scholars have also suggested a particular affinity between the potomitan and the *Lwa Lègba*. Like *Lègba*, whose primary responsibility it is to facilitate and allow contact between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, the potomitan, it is argued, serves a similar role because it is through it that the *Lwa* ascend or descend into the visible world. Furthermore, and most important, *Papa Lègba*, the guardian of the crossroads, is also the legitimate guardian of the potomitan. The latter, then, coincides with *Lègba's* erect phallus.

Ama Mazama

See also *Lwa*; Rituals; Vodou in Haiti

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PREDESTINATION

Predestination is a term of many meanings. It is the divine act of predetermining by which God eternally decrees that which She or He intends to bring to pass. In essence, people have no control over events because these things are controlled by God. The belief in predestination shows that individuals are subject to variations in endowment, fortune, and circumstances that are beyond their control. People therefore attribute these variations to the hand of God, who is omnipotent and controls all.

The belief in predestination has no monopoly in any religion or culture. Most religions of the world are of the opinion that, prior to creation, God had predestined the fate of men and women, whereas some other religions hold the opposite view that people determine their fate.

Not only is destiny a common feature in the conception of a person in most African cultures; it is also a fundamental part of the African traditional religion. It is believed that a person's destiny, whether by choice or imposition, predetermines for that person what he or she will be. It further determines a person's success, failure, personality, luck, and ill luck.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the belief in predestination is depicted in *Ipin Ori*—Ori's portion or lot. It is believed that anything that happens to a man or woman on Earth, or anything that a man or a woman does on Earth, has been predestined even before their having come into the world. People's portion is predestined by *Olodumare*—Almighty God. Predestination is expressed in the following ways among the Yoruba

of Nigeria: *Akunlegba*—"that which is received while kneeling" or *Akunleyan*—"that which is chosen while kneeling," *Ayanmo*—"that which is affixed," *Adamo*—"that which is affixed at creation," and *Akomo*—"that which is written and sealed." The destiny is sealed and unalterable, whatever a person does achieve, or whatever happens is a fulfillment of destiny.

Among the Ibos of Nigeria, it is believed that each person has *chi*—a spiritual double given to him by God before coming into the world. This is an indication that humans have been predetermined, and what a man or a woman becomes is determined by his or her *chi*.

The Akan and Ga of Ghana believe that the almighty sent *sunsun*—human essence or the personality soul—into humans and assigned them their destiny. It is for this reason that the Akan say: "The destiny given by God cannot be avoided." What this means is that what has been predestined by God cannot be altered.

From the aforesaid, it can be seen that different cultural groups believe that people have been predestined by God before coming into the world. However, the Urhobo of the Delta State of Nigeria take a different view from the others. They are of the opinion that humans predestine themselves before coming to life. In other words, what a person wishes to be in the world is determined by the individual.

According to those groups, given that whatever happens to people has been predestined by God, efforts should be made to alter an unfavorable destiny. The Urhobo too are said to pray to God to help change a bad destiny, which is said to have been chosen by the individual. In predestination, there is both a human and a divine hand at work.

Kunbi Labeodan

See also Destiny; God

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PREGNANCY

Within the context of African religion, pregnancy is always a special, much hoped for, and therefore cherished event. Although marriage is certainly one of the critical moments in the human life cycle, along with birth, puberty, and death, the main, if not only, purpose of marriage is procreation. In fact, in some African societies, marriage is not considered final and complete until the couple's first pregnancy has occurred. This is the case because so much emphasis is placed on the affirmation and perpetuation of life as the highest value and priority in African culture.

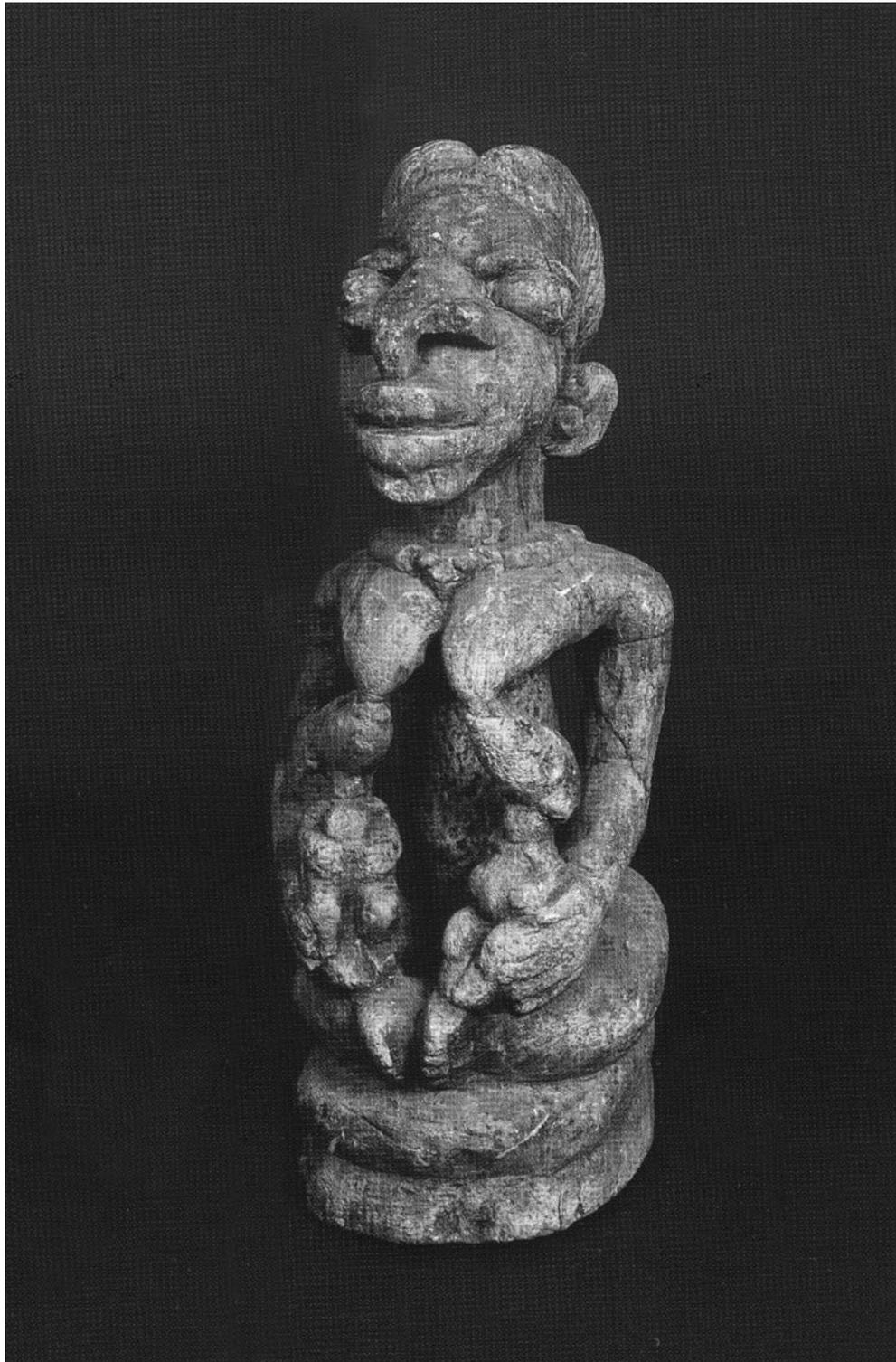
Pregnancy is of critical significance for women in Africa. Indeed, it marks the passage from the status simply of "woman" to that of mother. One's demonstrated ability to bear a child confirms one's creative power as a female and, thus, one's ability to participate in the cosmic drama of life transmission and regeneration. From this, African women draw a sense of self-worth that can hardly be underestimated; they also gain a new identity and great social prestige. Conversely, a woman's failure to achieve pregnancy will be a source of great sorrow and sometimes a cause for divorce. Clay pots are commonly used, in a metaphorical sense, to represent the woman's womb waiting to be filled with life. It must be remembered that clay is widely associated with the stuff of life, with human beings often reported, in creation stories, as having been molded out of clay.

Men's social identity is also, of course, greatly and positively affected by pregnancy. Pregnancy enables a man to establish his virility. Among the Manyika people, from the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, for example, a man's failure to have children will preclude him from becoming an ancestor. In many other African societies, childless men will not be entitled to full burial rites, if any at all. Certainly, because one of the primary duties of children is to remember their parents when the latter die, childless men (and women) cannot expect to continue being members of their community much longer after dying because there will be nobody to speak their name.

Finally, pregnancy is also quite important for the family and the community as a whole because both are expected to be strengthened by the arrival of a new member. Pregnancy, therefore, is never the concern of just the couple, but also of all those who surround them.

Children, and therefore pregnancy as well, are believed to be gifts from the ancestors. In fact, in many African societies, a child to be born is an ancestor returning. As a result, many will seek, with the help of a diviner, to identify that ancestor. When the child is born, he or she may bear the name of the reincarnated ancestor or a name linking the child to that ancestor. In the case of infertility, the ancestors are also, quite predictably, automatically suspected of interfering with a couple's ability to get pregnant. Appropriate rituals will be performed to appease the ancestors' anger and get them to change their mind and allow a child to come.

Given the importance attached to pregnancy, it is easy to understand why pregnant women become the object of much care. Failure to maintain spiritual balance could result in the abortion of the pregnancy or the death of the mother. Thus, many steps are taken, throughout African communities, to protect the unborn child and the mother. Among the taboos associated with pregnancy, one must mention those related to sexual intercourse. Although some societies will not permit a pregnant woman and her husband to have further intercourse after the pregnancy is discovered, other societies may permit sexual relations to continue up to a certain point. For example, among the Gurunsi of southern Burkina Faso and northern Ghana, sexual relations are prohibited between a pregnant woman and her husband beginning around the third month of the pregnancy. At that time, an elaborate ritual, known as the *legume* ritual, is performed by the husband's sister or the sister of the husband's father to protect the pregnancy. Shea leaves are thrown onto the couple lying in bed. Their hair is then shaved or cut shorter, while a bow is placed at the man's feet, as a metaphorical acknowledgment of his virility. It is understood that when the *legume* ritual has been completed, sexual abstinence must be observed. The violation of this proscription, it is believed, could result in the death of the child.



An ancient soapstone sculpture in the traditional African abstract form suggests the nurturing power, humanity, and strength of the first ancestral spirit. This religious figure was found in Sierra Leone.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

Sexual taboos are not, however, the only restrictions faced by a pregnant woman and her husband. In fact, among the same Gurunsi people, the woman and the man must avoid dealing with the cultivation of the Earth or touching metal. Similarly, among the Ingassana people, carrying fire is prohibited for both the expectant mother and father. Tools or weapons made of iron must also be removed from the sleeping quarters of a pregnant woman to avoid attracting lightning, as is the case among the Akamba and Kikuyu people.

Another set of taboos, quite common in Africa, are food prohibitions related to pregnancy. For instance, a pregnant Lele woman will not eat fish to avoid upsetting the spiritual world. This is due to the association of fish with spirits known as *mingehe*, which play an essential role in daily Lele affairs. The *mingehe*'s abode is the deepest part of the equatorial forest, where they like to dwell in streams, thus their affinity with fish.

Finally, in some other societies, a woman must be secluded following some point in the course of her pregnancy. For instance, a pregnant Ibo woman must live in isolation after the fifth month of her pregnancy.

Again, all those measures are taken to protect the unborn child and the mother because pregnancy is highly valued by all.

Ama Mazama

See also Ancestors; Fertility; Taboo

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PRIESTS

Priests and priestesses first appeared in Africa. The earliest priests were the *hem-netcher*, that is, servants of the god, in ancient Kemet. They were officials in the sense that their offices were determined by the authorities of the state. The purposes of the priests were numerous: They were responsible for ensuring that the state was well run and that the proper ceremonies and rituals were performed for the ancestors and deities.

The priesthood was a powerful caste. Kings and leaders of local communities appointed some priests, whereas others inherited their positions from their fathers. Still others, it is said, could purchase the priestly office for a price. Once a person occupied the post of priest, he could maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Among the duties of the priests were copying texts, proofing the copies of others, ensuring that a certain number of people learned to write the language, and looking after the economics of the particular temple to which they were assigned. Inasmuch as the temple was the place of the god, it meant that the activities inside the enclosure were all related in some way or another to the god. Workshops used to repair statues, building blocks, blacksmith shops, and food vendors all had a role to play in maintaining the economic order of the temple. In fact, the temple served as hospital, library, and residence for some of the higher priests.

Duties of the Priests

Although the duties of the *hem-netcher* were varied, they were also standard and consistent. The priest prepared offerings to the god and led processions and rituals devoted to the god. As keepers of the gates, they maintained order and discipline throughout the temple grounds, thus creating a spirit of piety. They were the only ones who could access the area of the divine image.

The high priest, or *hem-netcher tepi*, was in charge of the administration of large temples where there were many *hem-netchers*. This person was a high-ranking official usually associated with the *per-aa* (the pharaoh) in some respect. Various, the high priests were the sons-in-law of the king, and at other times they were related to

the royal family through blood. In effect, this was a political position of the highest stature. Thus, a vizier, next to the per-aa, might be seen running the post of high priest. No one wanted the high priest to fail in his responsibility because he was at the heart of the society, and those individuals who depended upon the proper administration of the temples, the per-aas, looked to the high priest for guidance.

Another function of the priest, at the level of *wa'eb*, was to clean the offering rooms and ensure that tools and equipment that would be used in ceremonies were clean and well placed so that the officiating priests would be able to find all the necessary accessories for the rituals. Actually, it was recommended that all priests learn the office of the *wa'eb* in the event that it became necessary for a higher ranking priest to perform the duties of the *wa'eb*. Making the ritual and ceremonial cloths and instruments ready for use became a major part of the priestly functions during the New Kingdom.

The office of the *kheri-heb*, the priest who knew the formulaic responses, was an active one because the *kheri-heb* was the chief producer of sacred actions and activities. He would sing the sacred songs, chant the rites from the sacred books, explain the rituals and ceremonies, and lead the processions. Sometimes called lector priests, these *kheri-hebs* knew all of the special prayers, ways to beseech the gods, and particular likes and dislikes of the god they served. One could also act as an oracle for those who wanted direct appeal to the deity and were not afraid of the answers. Wearing a broad band diagonally across their chests, the *kheri-heb* sported their roles in bright colors. They were the main players in the circle of the gods. Nevertheless, one of the most important functions of the priesthood was to serve as *sem* priests. This office was responsible for mummification and burials. They are associated with the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, where the awakening of the god ceremony is performed. The *sem* priests could wear leopard or panther skins.

Purification

Prior to entering the inner sanctum of the temple where the god resided, priests had to purify themselves in a series of rituals. They would shave their

bodies of all hair and then bathe themselves with natron so as to stand before the god in utter purity. They were then permitted to wear only white sandals and white linen. The higher ranks may have worn leopard or panther skin like the *sem* priests.

Before entering the temple's most sacred sites, the priest would bathe in water and rinse the mouth out with natron and water so as to leave nothing of ill-smelling scent in the holy of holies. As the dawn rose over the hills, the priest would approach the sanctuary with the words, "Awake in peace, great god." At the door, he would break the seal and then a sacred chant would be made four times over the image of the god to give the god back his soul so that he could continue to assert his form. Now that this ceremony had been performed, the breakfast meal was placed before the shrine and god. Bread, meat, roasted fowl, fruit and vegetables, and jars of beer and wine were placed before the god. Everything was prepared in the temple's kitchen according to the health standards established by the priesthood. No blood was to be spilled on the god's altar, and all food was to come from the temple's farms. No animal could be slaughtered in front of the god.

The god finished the food after a while, and the remaining food was removed to the shrines of lesser deities in the temple complex. When the deities had their fill, the rest of the food was taken to the kitchen and given to the workers who had prepared it. The priest then went into the sanctuary and sprinkled the entire place with water, five grains of natron and resin were placed on the floor, and incense was lit and left burning. This was done three times a day. Thus, at morning, noon, and dusk, similar to the three meals a day regimen of many people, the god was fed. After the evening meal, the god's clothes were removed and returned to the shrine, and the Evening Hymn was recited. The doors of the inner sanctum were closed and then resealed.

In addition to these activities, the priests also officiated at feast days inside the temple during the First of the Month and the New Moon Festival. Some believe that the statue of the god was paraded around the temple during these festivals in an effort to receive offering from the people who came to stand at the gates to see the

statue. They would be blessed by their offerings, and in some cases people would stand for hours just to glimpse the statue. However, in most cases, the god would not be moved from his site. People assembled in the outer court to receive blessings, but were not admitted to the inner sanctum.

Priestly Work and Family

Most of the priests had two jobs. They were priests who worked at the temple for a month every 4 months. Only the high priest, because of his rank, had a regular occupation as a priest, but even the high priest had a separate job. All other priests had to put in more time as farmers, business leaders, administrators, or traders than they did as priests. Prior to returning to the temple, the priests were forbidden to engage in sexual activity. Abstinence was seen as a sign of discipline. In ancient Egypt and throughout Africa, priests married, had children, and participated in normal life.

Priests in Other African Societies

African societies recognize priests and priestesses just as the ancients along the Nile had men and women performing in the great temples. The work of the priesthood shifted with the decline of ancient Kemet. The priests in other parts of Africa saw themselves not just as the keepers of the gods, but as the keepers of the people. When people needed support from their spiritual leaders, they found that support in the work of the priests. Usually a person became a priest through apprenticeship, family connections, or inheritance. Nevertheless, one had to be trained to serve the role of priest or priestess, and this remains the case. A person selected for the role is required to know all of the formulaic prayers, the moral and ethical behaviors of the priesthood, the taboos of the societies, the history of the community, the roles and duties of each individual, and the general philosophy of cleanliness. In some societies, the priesthood and the medium are separated. One can discover in such situations a person who is a keeper of the secrets of the deity, but has little to do with healing or advising. On the other hand, you can find someone who is adept at healing and advising, but knows little about the way the god is manifest. In

summary, the priesthood of Africa draws its strength and longevity from the most ancient of all African classical civilizations, ancient Kemet.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Initiation; Rituals

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PROCREATION

Procreation, the ability to reproduce and have children, is a central feature of the African value system. A premium is placed on childbearing because children are seen as the medium by which the ancestral name and heritage of the family is perpetuated. In other words, children ensure the personal immortality of families and the continuity of human existence. Indeed, in most African societies, children are seen as reincarnations of ancestors. A person who bears no children, and therefore has no descendants, in effect terminates social reproduction and extinguishes the family line. For this reason, procreation is celebrated, and having many children is highly honored. Fertility is therefore a fundamental prerequisite in marriage. The ultimate purpose of marriage is procreation: Without procreation, marriage is not fully consummated. Not surprisingly, there is a general abhorrence of barrenness and sterility in African societies. Barrenness carries a heavy social stigma because it constitutes an incomprehensible upsetting of the social and religious order. Almost everywhere in Africa, the inability to have children after several years of marriage was legitimate grounds for divorce. The quest for children and the value of procreation may help explain the persistence of polygamy in traditional African communities. The importance of procreation is emphasized during rites of passage, when fertility and healthy deliveries are prayed for. During marriage rites among the Kgatla people of South Africa, for example, a young bride, when taken home on the first afternoon of the wedding

ceremonies, is given a young baby to hold as she enters the household compound to signify the importance of procreation. Even long before marriage, girls, in some societies, prepared for procreation by carrying carved fertility dolls. Such dolls are said to be imbued with a special kind of magic and must be protected and cherished if they are to fulfill their purpose. Among the Ashantis of Ghana, a fertility doll with a flat moon-shaped disk is carried in anticipation of a male while a smaller headed doll with other particular features is kept and carried for a female. Death rites in Africa also reinforce the centrality of procreation. Abortions, miscarriages, and still births are all given special burials to prevent the mother from becoming sterile in the future. It is notable that a person, no matter what contributions he or she has made to society, is said to lose a place among honored ancestors if he or she dies childless. The salience of procreation in the African belief system is best captured in this summary of a Nupe (Nigeria) folktale. According to this story, God created the tortoise (turtle), men, and stones. Of each he created male and female. God gave life to the tortoises and men, but not to the stones. Neither turtle nor men could have children, and when they became old, they did not die, but became automatically rejuvenated—becoming young again! The tortoise, however, wished to have children and went to God. But God said: “I have given you life, but I have not given you permission to have children.” But the tortoise came to God again to renew his request to procreate, and finally God said: “You always come to ask for children. Do you realize that when the living have had several children they must die?” But the tortoise said: “Let me see my children and then die.” Then God granted the wish. When man saw that the tortoise had children, he too wanted children. God warned man, as he had the tortoise, that he must die. But man also said: “Let me see my children and then die.” That is how death and children came into the world. Thus, the desire for procreation and the ability to achieve posterity is so high for the living, in this case the African (as exemplified by man and tortoise), that they are willing to undergo death.

Kwame Akonor

See also Ancestors; Birth; Children; Fertility; Marriage; Rites of Passage

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PROVERBS AND TEACHING

Proverbs play a crucial role in the education of people in the path of wisdom. There are more than 1,000 written collections of African proverbs, and scholars estimate the sum total of African proverbs at more than 1 million. This is an incredible body of wisdom. Proverbs are the repository of the most precious philosophical and religious ideas of Africa. Proverbs are memorable sentences of traditional wisdom reflecting a keen observation of human existence and conduct and a long experience of life throughout the ages. African proverbs transmit fundamental values of life. They deal, among other things, with education, moral teaching, the concept of God, marriage, government, the relationship between individuals, and the meaning of life and death. Proverbs are a particular form of a skillful literary genre. They tend to be a compact statement of wisdom expressed in a poetic and enigmatic fashion. The meaning of a proverb is often hidden, cryptic, or elliptical. They can take various modes of expression. Some take the form of a short maxim, dictum, adage, aphorism, or apophthegm. Others take the form of a riddle or even an allegory, legend, or song. The words for proverbs among the Baluba (nkindi, bishintshi) emphasize the esoteric and enigmatic aspect of their message or meaning. Among the Akan, *ebe* (plural *mme*), the word used for proverb, is etymologically linked to *abe* (plural *mme*), the word used for palm tree. It highlights the richness of its meaning in reference to the tremendous wealth of a palm tree, which produces palm oil, palm wine, palm-kernel oil, broom, salt, or even soap. Because these products are a result of a process of distillation, the proverb stands as a refined product of the reflective process; it is the result of

an elaborate and complex thinking process that involves a higher level of imagination and synthesis of human experience. Like palm kernel oil or palm wine (which are not obvious to the eye as the juice of the orange), the meaning of a proverb is deep, profound, and hidden. It is not obvious or direct. To better grasp the meaning of a proverb, one has to dig deeper in his thought. “Proverbs are excellent didactic sayings and precious storehouse of ancestral wisdom and philosophy. They well exemplify the power and beauty of African oral tradition.” By endorsing a symbolic, metaphorical, and poetic form of language, proverbs skillfully abstain from direct talk. In so doing, proverbs help smooth tensions and enable people in conflict to debate issues while avoiding ad hominem attacks. Thus, painful issues can be discussed without anybody feeling directly vilified. In this way, proverbs are not merely didactical; they are a powerful tool of conflict resolution and peacemaking.

The following is a brief survey to illustrate the value of the wisdom of African proverbs. The first category of proverbs deals with the nature of proverbs and the issue of knowledge and wisdom. The Fulani teach that “A Fulani will lie but he will not make a lying proverb.” This vision illustrates well the normative and transcendent nature of proverbs as a reliable source of wisdom. This wisdom is understood as available to all because, as two interesting Akan proverbs have it, “Wisdom is not in the head of one person” (*Nyansa nni onipa baako ti mu*) and “Wisdom is like a baobab tree; a single person’s hand cannot embrace it.” In a world where the use of knowledge for negative or harmful purpose is rejected as mere witchcraft, the Baluba teach that genuine knowledge is to know how to live in harmony with our fellow human beings (*Bwino bonso ke bwino, bwino I kwikala biya ne Bantu*). Thus, Africans value not any kind of knowledge, but that “knowledge wisdom” called by the Baluba “Bwino.”

With regard to the African understanding of knowledge and wisdom, applying this wisdom to specific areas of human existence, we can examine human nature and moral conduct, as well as ethics in government.

Anthropological proverbs teach us that a genuine human being is the one who succeeds in

maintaining that delicate balance between individuality and the sense of community because a genuine human being is, in the beautiful expression of the Mande, a *Fadenya-Badenya*, an individual and collective being. Thus, numerous proverbs teach emphatically personal responsibility: *Vidye wa kuha buya nobe wa mukwashako* (“God gave you beauty and good character but you must help him, by taking care of yourself and constantly cultivating your virtues”—Luba proverb). To a lazy person, the Baluba remind through the following proverb: *Kalele Kadia Tulo* (“Let the one who sleeps eat his sleep”). To one who hates hard work, another Luba proverb says: *Kwamwene malwa udye bufumu*. (“If you want to be a King, you must first learn the art of suffering and hard work”). Likewise, the Ifa corpus of the Yoruba teaches that each individual must use his or her own hands to improve his or her own character (*Owo ara eni, Là afi I tunwa ara enii se*). Good character is emphasized as the essence of personhood as a Yoruba proverb put it explicitly: *Iwa rere l’èso eniyan* (“Good character, good existence, is the adornment of a human being”).

This notion of personal responsibility stems from the acknowledgment of the sacred nature, and therefore the dignity, of each individual, because as an Akan proverb has it, “All human beings are children of God, no one is a child of the earth” (*Nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma, obi nnye asase ba*). To those who suppress individuality, many proverbs remind them of the uniqueness and dignity of each individual in the eyes of the ancestors: “Human beings,” says a Chewa proverb, “are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain” (*Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika*). Likewise, the Baluba emphasize the value of individual privacy: *Munda mwa mukwenu kemwelwa kuboko, nansha ulele nandi butanda bumo* (“No one can put his arm into another person’s heart, not even when sharing the same bed”). Yet the individual is advised to value the community: “If you do not let your neighbor have nine,” says an Akan proverb, “you will not have ten” (*Woamma wo yonko antwa nkron a, wo nso wonntwa du*). Respect for the community emphasizes in a particular way respect for people with disabilities: “Do not laugh at a crippled person,” warns a Luba proverb, for “God is still in the creating process” (*Koseha lemene*

Vidye muntanda ukihanga). It also commands hospitality and respect for the stranger because, as a Luba proverb put it, “Your guest is your God” (*Mwenyi obe I Leza obe*). In this era of globalization and reactionary ethnocentrism, African proverbs convey a great wisdom on universal brotherhood.

It should be noted, however, that proverbs do not claim an extraordinary divine revelation and authority. They are a product of human experience and reflection, and subsequently their wisdom reflects the limitations of human frailty. Thus, feminists rightly point out that, in a patriarchal society, sexist proverbs have been canonized to sanction the status quo of male dominance. In this context, fidelity to the will of the ancestors implies a dynamism that creates new proverbs conducive to the ancestral imperative of harmony and respect for all life. Indeed, African proverbs have always been dynamic in their development and their polysemic structure. An absolutization of one single interpretation or one single set of proverbs would be tantamount to the betrayal of African tradition.

Finally, it is worth noting that the wisdom of African proverbs has a universal character that facilitates dialogue between African traditional religions and other world religions. Needless to say, the impact of African proverbs of ancient Egypt on the Bible is a subject well acknowledged by Biblicists, and the mention of Amenemope in the Bible is a glaring testimony to that impact, along with the influence of Egyptian religion on Moses as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament.

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Oral Tradition

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PTAH

The priesthood that developed around Ptah was based in the capitol constructed to administer Kmt (ancient Egypt) as a new nation. The name of that municipality was *Mn-nfr*, which literally means “Beautifully Established.” *Mn-nfr* (called Memphis by the Greeks) was the spiritual and administrative center of Kmt. It was established soon after the southern Federation of Upper Kmt successfully welded itself to its northern neighbor, the Federation of Lower Kmt, into a world power known globally by the following names: Kmt, the Black Nation, Ta-mery, the beloved land, and Tawy, the two lands. *Mn-nfr* was the central base of the Ptah priesthood, and the city’s strategic location on the Nile River would eventually give the priesthood access to a magnificent world trade port of goods and exchange of ideas.

The world became familiar with the God Ptah and the wisdom distributed by his priesthood. Ptah was declared the God of original creation and the first official godhead of ancient Egypt (Kmt). The priests of Ptah, following the dictates of Kmt’s leaders, established Ptah throughout Kmt as the unifying concept linking all regional and functional deities and priesthoods. This initiative was launched some time around the year 3400, more than 5,000 years ago, within Kmt’s Early Dynastic period and remained through the period of Kmt’s Old Kingdom (circa 3100 through 2160), for a period of almost 1,300 years.

The high priest was referred to as *wer-kherep-hemu*—Greatest of the Controllers of Craftsmen—reflecting the importance and status of the professional crafts at that time. The Ptah priesthood of the newly formed nation ministered a unifying ideology that sought to fortify the social order, ensure stability, and generate eternal life. The priesthood of Ptah provided the philosophic underpinnings of this ideology in cooperation with Kmt’s royal and civil administrators (Pharaoh families, ministers, and municipal leaders). Ptah,

acclaimed for ingenuity and inventiveness, was embraced by influential guilds of the professional class such as scribes, stonemasons, metallurgists, shipbuilders, physicians, pharmacists, and architects. The credo of Ptah is illustrated by his relationship with Imhotep, the celebrated multitiered genius and 4th-dynasty prime minister, who was eventually deified and added to the Ptah-trinity as Ptah's son. The Old Kingdom of Kmt was the era of Ptah's preeminence, and it would not be until the reign of the Late Period, specifically under the Kushitic dynasty, that Ptah would shine again in such prominence within the religious order of Kmt.

Ptah was the declared God of original creation and the first official godhead of ancient Egypt (Kmt). The priests of Ptah, following the dictates of Kmt's leaders, established Ptah throughout Kmt as a unifying concept linking all regional and functional deities and subdeities. This initiative was launched sometime around the year 3400, more than 5,000 years ago, within the Early Dynastic period of the nation, and remained through the period of Kmt's Old Kingdom (circa 3100 through 2160), for a period of almost 1,300 years.

The other powerful priesthoods during the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods were encouraged to adjust their creation stories to see Ptah as the overall creator. Compromise and compensation, as can be seen by Mn-nfr's trinity, were twin concepts employed between priesthoods throughout Kmt. The other two components of Ptah's trinity, Skmt and Nfrtm, were firmly rooted with other priesthoods.

After this time, Ptah remained an important deity, albeit demoted before other declared primogenitors. Besides being the creator god, Ptah was known as the overarching patron of the crafts and skilled professions. Kmt's 3,000-plus years as a nation included geographic location shifts of its capital along with shifts in the designation of its principal priesthoods. These changes impacted Ptah's primogeniture role in Kmt's belief system. With the ascension of the Kushitic dynasty, Kmt's oldest prime deity experienced a resurrection. Throughout Kmt's long history, Ptah's description went through inevitable modifications.

Ptah's physical representation also underwent modifications as his description as a deity was modified. One of the most symbolic transformations

that Ptah's image would undergo was the straightening of his beard after the Old Kingdom. The curved beard was the preserve of principle deities while the straight beard usually indicated royalty (kings and queens). His most consistent glyphic and painted presentations show him as a male figure wrapped in burial linen and standing on a dais that is shaped in the same form as the shorthand glyph for Maāt the concept encompassing truth, justice, reciprocity, right ordering, balance, harmony, and precision. Ptah holds three symbols before him, often combined into one scepter, representing life, stability, and dominion. Ptah also wears a pectoral around his neck with a visibly profiled tassel. In painted presentations, Ptah is often displayed with the blue skullcap common to craftsmen. Ptah was also incarnated as the sacred Apis bull.

Ptah, like other deities throughout Kmt's history, was known to be part of a familiar triad. His triad included his wife, Skhmt (called *Sakhmis* by the Greeks), whose name literally meant the powerful, and his son, Nfrtum (called *Iphtimis* by the Greeks and later identified with Prometheus), a deity affiliated with both the solar deity, Ra, and the primeval lotus. It is significant that Nfrtum was originally popular in Lower Kmt as Ptah was a gift to Kmt from a southern-based priesthood and unity through absorption was a theme of Kmt. Also significant was Nfrtum's symbolic representation of Atum, the acclaimed primogenitor according to the priesthood based in Iwnw (called *Heliopolis* by the Greeks). This latter point is significant because the Ptah priesthood relegate Atum to a descendant of Ptah along with Hrw (called *Horus* by the Greeks). All deities were said to be manifestations of Ptah.

Much of what is currently known about Ptah has been learned from the glyphic presentations in temples and an engraved tablet commissioned by King Shabaka of Kmt's 25th dynasty. The tablet was to be a more permanent replica of an earlier papyrus that was decaying. In its more permanent form, this important literary piece, often referred to as the Shabaka Stone, is housed in the British Museum. The text on the tablet makes clear that Ptah was considered by Kmt's earliest rulers as the embodiment and the first to emerge from the Nun (the watery voidless form). He was declared the uncreated self-conscious creator of all.

Life was created through Ptah's utterance, a scenario and sequence that would be mimicked in the later Hebrew creation story. Ptah was described as a creative source and generator of the holy Ennead, which was referred to as his "teeth and lips." The Ennead was referred to in this way because the deities of the Ennead were also responsible for implementing aspects of creation, but their existence was the result of Ptah's heart (the center of thought and conception) and tongue (the commanding organ of execution). Because Ptah created the Ennead, the subsequent actions of Atum, asserted by the priesthood of Iwnw (called *Heliopolis* by the Greeks) as the heart of life's creations and Djehuti, asserted as the tongue of life's creations, were chronologically dependent on Ptah as initial creator.

Early on, Ptah was syncretized with the Earth god, Tatenen. As Ptah-Tatenen, the deity takes on the characteristic of the primordial mound that rises out of the watery Nun providing land for the creatures that depend on it for life. Tatenen, from this point on, is associated with creation. Depiction of Ptah-Tatenen shows Ptah in a green flesh tone reminiscent of vegetation. Ptah kept this flesh tone as he was later syncretized with Asr (referred to as *Osiris* by the Greeks) and Sokr, another caretaking deity of persons on the journey to the "next life." Occasionally, Ptah would be merged into Ptah-Sokr-Asr depending on the prevailing politics of the ruling classes and priesthoods.

The vision of Ptah as the patron deity of the medical profession also seems to have remained constant throughout the history of Kmt, and that vision may have been shared by the masses as indicated by the popular appeals to his support when desiring good health. In this role, Ptah's image was transformed into a naked dwarf that had the ability to cure poisonous bites and repel the creatures that could cause such discomforts.

As indicated previously, the time between the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom covered a diminution in Ptah's status in relation to other acclaimed primogenitor deities. The Wst (Thebes according to the Greeks) priesthood rose to principle status during the New Kingdom, but Mn-nfr was reestablished as a major entrepot and political capital for Kmt. During this time, and especially during the reign of the Rameses dynasty, Ptah's was syncretized with Asr and was declared

the father of Rameses II. Ptah was added to a collective god force that included Amen-Ra, the primogenitor according to the Wst priesthood. The rule of Akh-n-atn brought all of this to an abrupt halt for an interlude as he chose to break with tradition and form a priesthood and capitol around Atn, the solar disk.

The Shabaka stone, commissioned nearly 500 years after the Rameses dynasty, provides evidence that Ptah arose as the primogenitor deity at least once more in Kmt's long history. The reunification of Kmt after its Third Intermediate period, which came again from the south of the country, brought an end to a blasphemous era in which Kmtic traditions were being abandoned by foreign interlopers. In an effort to reinstall a way of life rooted in the traditional heyday of Kmt, the leaders of the Kushitic dynasty ushered in the Late Kingdom. This leadership returned to the source of Kmt's unity and resurrected the recognition of Ptah as the creator god. During the Kushitic reign, Mn-nfr was reestablished as the capital of Kmt and the priesthood of Ptah was restored to its primary position.

Ptah, as described on the Shabaka stone, would later be resurrected in part by the Hebrew tradition in which Yhu (Yahweh according to linguists and Jehovah according to clergy) conceives of the world first and then brings those concepts to life by uttering their names. This process is a replica of Ptah's creative acts, which began in the heart as the seat of conception and intention and became material reality through the utterance of Ptah's tongue. Hebrew tradition pulled heavily on Kmt tradition and within that borrowing only Ptah shares this begetting process with the God of Jews. Ptah also shares with the Hebrew god, Yhu, the need for order and establishment. Here it is important to remember Ptah's role as a patron to the craft guilds and his declaration as the supreme artificer according to his priesthood.

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See also Priests

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PUBERTY

Puberty is widely acknowledged throughout the African continent as one of the most critical moments in a person's life, along with birth, marriage, and death. This is the case because puberty marks the beginning of sexual reproductive capacity, and is therefore intimately linked with fertility and procreation, two major concerns of African religion. Given the significance of puberty, there are, throughout Africa, specific rites of passage meant to facilitate the transition from childhood to adulthood. It must be noted that rites of passage, in general, have played a major role in African communities for hundreds of years. They are well-thought-out and effective programs designed to allow a person to move with minimal stress to the next phase of his or her existence. As people go through a series of transformative processes that are a natural part of life, rites of passage, set up by the community, will assist them in their development as human beings. Furthermore, because Africans only exist in community, any personal development necessarily takes place within a collective space, rather than being an individual affair. Indeed, the expected and desired outcome is that the community will be enhanced as its individual members gain in knowledge, consciousness, and wisdom. Their new insights will allow them to contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of the traditions and social order on which their community was established.

More specifically, puberty rites mark the passage from a relatively asexual world to the adult sexual world. Puberty rites are characterized by specific religious observances and their own set of rituals. Most puberty rites are associated with initiation. The latter, indeed, provides the usual context within which puberty is acknowledged as a pivotal moment, when special instruction becomes necessary. The novices are usually taken away from their daily environment and secluded

in a secret place away from the community. There they are taught about life issues, especially as they relate to sex, marriage, procreation, social responsibilities, rules and prescriptions, taboos, and violations. The purpose of initiation is, above all, educational. Through initiation, young adults further learn about the traditions and expectations of their community and will therefore be able to contribute to the maintenance of social order. The notions of symbolic death and resurrection play a key role in the initiation process. The initiates must die to their child self in order to be reborn into an adult self, one characterized by greater knowledge of the world, deeper consciousness, insight, and maturity. Also, those undergoing initiation must take a vow of secrecy. The novices are also tested, which is a critical part of initiation. The testing usually involves demonstrating physical endurance, mental strength, and intelligence. It is often the time when males are circumcised and females excised. Circumcision distinguishes a man from a boy. They must undergo the whole operation without showing any sign of fear and without expressing any discomfort. Failure to demonstrate fortitude would bring shame and dishonor to them and their family.

After the period of seclusion is over, the initiates are reincorporated into their community, and this marks the time of their official rebirth. Their hair may be shaved off, their old clothes may be thrown away, and they may receive new names—all symbolic gestures indicating that they have become new, mature individuals. The reunion of new initiates with their family and community is a communal festive time. All rejoice now that the new initiates are ready to assume their new place in the community.

One of the major responsibilities and prerogatives associated with the successful completion of initiation is marriage. Initiation, in fact, prepares the young adults for marriage. Indeed, in most African societies, one can get married only after having been initiated.

Among the Maasai, for instance, the Eunoto ceremony, which lasts for a whole week, is the rite of passage that marks the transition from childhood into adulthood for the males. It is an elaborate ceremony that marks the end of a relatively carefree life and the beginning of greater responsibilities. The new initiates are then

expected to watch over the community's cattle (which are highly regarded as God's unique gift to the Maasai), participate in cattle raids, and kill a lion with their bare hands. At the end of the Eunoto ceremony, the young men's hair is shaved, thus formally indicating the passage to manhood. In addition to having their hair shaved, they also have their skin painted with ochre in preparation for marriage. They may then marry and start families.

Among the Twa, when a girl's first menses appear, which is considered a special blessing, the girl participates in a rite of passage known as *Elima*. Secluded in a house for at least a month with other girls who have also just started menstruating, the Twa girl is instructed by an adult woman about being a Twa woman. She is taught, among other things, the history of her people and how to be a good mother and a good wife. When the instruction is over, the girls come out dancing, and the whole community takes part in the *Elima* festivities. Having been properly instructed and trained, the girls are now eligible for marriage.

Among the Anlo-Ewe people, female puberty rites are known as *Nugbeto*. Like everywhere else in Africa, they are communal and provide the forum within which young women learn about the social responsibilities that come with womanhood. *Nugbeto* rites are conducted by highly regarded older women, who share and impart their wisdom and life experiences onto the young women under their care.

In summary, puberty, the beginning of the capacity to reproduce, is regarded as a moment of paramount importance in African religion. Thus, as children mature physically and therefore sexually, a special puberty rite of passage, initiation, is designed to help them move smoothly from childhood into adulthood and contribute to the welfare of their family and community.

Ama Mazama

See also Circumcision; Fertility; Initiation; Marriage; Procreation; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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PUNISHMENT

Punishment generally refers to the act or instance of imposing a penalty on a person or group of persons who are in breach of the laws, rules, or customs of a society. In many African communities (despite the existence of modern judiciary institutions), African traditional religion functions as an important source of normative moral behavior and social conduct. It does so mainly through the imposition of taboos or prohibitions and provides sanctions for their infraction, as well as procedures for redemption. Punishable offenses in traditional African communities or societies range from grievous ones, such as the practice of sorcery and witchcraft and murder, to less egregious ones, such as falsely accusing a neighbor of wrongdoing or failing to restrain one's sheep from destroying a neighbor's crops.

In African traditional religious belief, God is considered as the utmost upholder of moral order and justice. He or she therefore wields the ultimate power to punish those who do evil acts, such as harming their fellow human beings or destroying the environment. Among the Akan of Ghana, a person who has been wronged will often say to the offender *Onyame betua wo ka* ("God will pay you back [bring retribution on you]"), especially when he or she lacks the ability to punish the offender. The Barundi and Banyarwanda people also say in a proverb, "God exercises vengeance in silence." Mysterious diseases and accidental deaths are sometimes considered evidence of God's punishment.

However, the responsibility of enforcing day-to-day morality through punishment is largely exercised by divinities and ancestors (and other spirits), as well as by human beings. They are believed to do so at the behest of God.

Divinities are essentially spirits believed to have been created by God to take charge of various spheres of life. Each divinity is assigned a specific

territory or area of life and performs specific functions. There are therefore divinities for the Earth, the seas, rivers, hills, rocks, and other habitats in the environment. Others control the wind, the rain, and so on. Depending on the nature of the offense committed, a divinity may bring disaster on not only an individual, but also an entire community. The Earth Spirit (known as *Asaase Yaa* among the Akans, *Ani*, *Ala Ana*, or *Ale* among the Ibos, and *Maa-ndoo* among the Mendes), for instance, could withhold its fertility and thus bring famine to an entire community if an abomination such as having sex on the bare ground in the bush is committed.

The powers of these divinities and other spirits are sometimes invoked by human beings through the use of the curse. A curse may be pronounced by a chief, a traditional priest, a clan or family head, or any aggrieved person against an unknown offender. In this case, the person seeking justice calls on a particular divinity to bring evil such as sickness, misfortune, or even death on the guilty person.

Ancestors, that is, the spirits of the righteous dead, are also believed to punish the living especially when their death wishes are not carried out. In such cases, the aggrieved ancestor often possesses another person and reveals what should be done to appease him or her.

Moses Ohene Biney

See also Ancestors; Divinities; Maat

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PURIFICATION

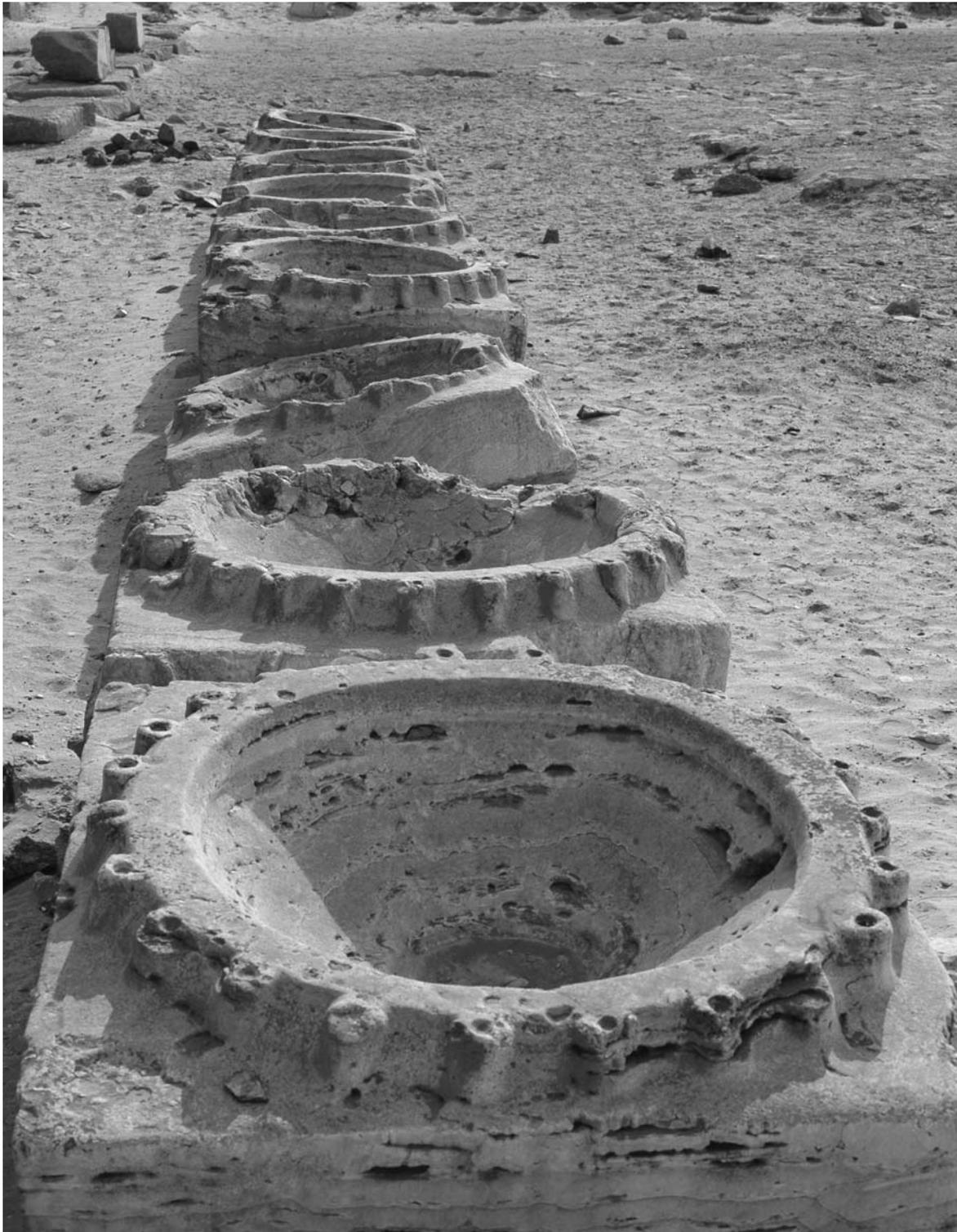
Purification, the process of rendering a person or a thing free of pollution or contamination, is pervasive in the structure of thought of most Africans. Like all

religious rituals, purification seeks to provide communion between the individual or community and the divine or spirit(s). Purification rites in Africa have an ambivalent character: They are performed to both drive away evil and confer divine life. Purification, performed to remove pollution from either an individual or the society as a whole, is associated with emissions from the human body, life crises and transition events, and maintenance of sacred boundaries. Examples of pollution associated with bodily functions include blood encountered during warfare or menstrual blood. Major life transitions (birth, adolescence, marriage, and death) are said to be periods when persons are especially vulnerable to attacks by evil spirits and pollution. Among the Ndembu of Zambia, for example, an uncircumcised male is considered permanently polluting and a threat to survival of the culture. Still, purification rites were necessary to cleanse oneself for future ritual. For instance, purification was necessary before individuals were allowed to enter sacred places or approach deities. In ancient Egypt, three categories of people in particular were required to be pure: the king, the priests, and the Dead.

Africans believe that pollution and the breach of taboos by individuals caused harm to the collective good and that to promote public welfare and restore the natural cosmic order, purification rites are necessary. The rationale for this is that failure to purify contaminated persons and places would herald the misfortunes and anger of the spiritual beings and ancestors, who are believed to have been also offended. Thus, until purification takes place, the entire community (and not only the individuals directly involved) stood in real and imminent danger of suffering a disaster.

Entire communities also required periodic rites of purification. Such community rites of renewal took place annually, and at other times they were performed on the recommendation of a diviner. The belief is that the passage from one time period to another creates special opportunities for the community to rid itself of the accumulated sins of the past year and enter a new year or period refreshed and morally reformed.

Purification rites are normally addressed to specific divinities, such as the Earth and ancestors. Some symbolic acts of African purification include the burning of incense, the dragging of animal (in



The Sun Temple of Niuserre at Abu Ghurab, Egypt. In the area previously known as the Great Slaughterhouse, it is now thought that these alabaster basins were used for the ritual purification of offerings. 5th dynasty, 2500–2350 BC.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.



Sacred bathing spring near Elmina in Ghana. Used originally for medicinal and spiritual purposes; however, during the 18th century this spring was used as a bath for captives before they were taken to the slave ships at the coast.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

some cases, human) sacrifices through the entire community before being disposed of, the shaving of all human hair, the burning or scrubbing of property and places thought to be contaminated, the exiling of offenders, bathing in special medicated water, confession of sins and atonement by offenders, and communal celebration after purification rites.

Kwame Akonor

See also Rituals

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PYRAMIDS

Pyramids appear first in Africa as ancient monuments used initially for the burial of the Dead. Egypt and Sudan have the most pyramids. Egypt has 96 great pyramids, and Sudan has more than 200 pyramids; the Sudanese pyramids are more recent than the Egyptian ones. It was Egypt, that is, Kemet, that defined the pyramid for the world long before the Nubian kingdoms of Meroe, Napata, and Kush began the building of pyramids



Two Egyptians lead three camels past the Great Pyramid at Giza.

Source: Mark Goddard/iStockphoto.

in what is now Sudan. The pyramids are among the most fascinating and monumental structures ever built. The pyramids, as symbols, are a testament of the genius and craftsmanship of the ancient Kemetians. Moreover, evidence inscribed in the monuments demonstrates clear signs of organizational structure and the skills of engineers and laborers at their peak.

The Kemetian term for pyramid is *mer*, meaning “light.” One can contrast this with the Greek word *pyramid*, which means “wheat cake.” A pyramid is a solid stone figure with a polygonal base. Its sides come together to form the base, and their triangular surfaces join once again to form a common vertex. The decision to use pyramid shapes may have occurred to Africans because of the landscape of Upper Egypt, which has many natural mountains that appear in the shape of pyramids. The fact that they had stood for millions of years may have inspired the early builders.

Of course, we do not know this for certain, but we do know that their creations have become the most magnificent examples of spiritual inspiration in the ancient world.

In African religious traditions, rites of passage and initiation ceremonies are part of daily life and signify transformations such as birth, marriage, or death, all of which are associated with a process of shedding the old and welcoming the new.

The pyramids have actually been described as sanctuaries for astronomical observations particularly due to the precise alignment of the structures with the four cardinal points and alignment with various stars, significantly those of Orion. Of course, no one knows for sure what many functions the pyramids served for ancient Africans.

The Great Pyramid, a map as well as an initiation chamber, is in precise alignment with the proportions of the Earth and moon. Pyramids and burial tombs have contrasting characteristics such

as a lack of inscriptions and funerary features or offering rooms typical of tombs. The pyramids also have many empty rooms; no evidence of human remains has ever been found in most of them. Last, the narrowness of the passageways for the manipulation of stone chests makes it absolutely plausible.

For the sake of a chronological timeline, the 1st and 2nd dynasties of ancient Kemetians did not build pyramids; they built mastabas, mud-brick benchlike tombs that were/are edifices with chambers underneath used for burial purposes. Pyramid building was actually introduced following the previous two periods during the 3rd dynasty. The first ever pyramid built was that of King Djoser (also pronounced Zoser), built by his vizier, Imhotep. The Saqqara burial ground is the home of the first pyramid.

There are a total of 10 pyramids that are built of limestone located within a 50-mile radius of one another. Early pyramids were built of limestone, and later during the 5th dynasty, the pyramids were built of lesser materials and considered less than genuine because of their quality and construction. During the third dynasty, of the 10 pyramids built, the first pyramid built by Djoser (2630–2611 BC) was indeed built as a tomb. Djoser's pyramid is also at the center of the nine pyramids, the number 9 alluding to the Ennead, the nine *neteru* or gods or cosmic forces that Kemetians held in such high regard. The second pyramid was built by Sekhemket (2611–2603) in Saqqara, one of the necropoli, followed by Kha-ba (2603–2599 BC) at Zel Aryan. Sekhemket's pyramid bears no sign of its owner, no inscriptions or other details that reveal its identity. As with most pyramids, underground chambers and/or shafts further reveal the intellectual aptitude of the ancient Egyptians, especially as it relates to math and architecture. The underground passageways serve as bridges and gateways between pyramids. The last of the pyramids built during the 3rd dynasty was attributed to Huni (2599–2575), yet little is known and documented about its location and details.

The first of the 4th-dynasty pyramids was that of Seneferu (2575–2551), known as the best pyramid builder of this dynasty, the first being located in Meduim and the later in Dahshur, also

known as the “Bent Pyramid.” Seneferu made a third attempt at pyramid building, known as the Red Pyramid, also located in Dahshur. Thereafter, his son, Khufu (2551–2528), built the largest of all pyramids at Giza, followed by his son, Djedefre/Gedefra (2528–2520 BC), at Abu Roash/Rawash, which remained unfinished. The ninth pyramid was built by Khafra (2520–2494), and the final pyramid of this era was built by Menkaura (2494–2472), both of which were located at Giza. The pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure are the most popular and glamorized of all pyramids mainly because of their location and the driving force of tourism. Khufu's pyramid is known as the largest of all, the Great Pyramid, and marked a transformation in pyramid building, initiated by his father Seneferu, from stairway to straight-sided, and announced the golden age of the pyramids. The Great Pyramid is internally made up of five components, the ascending passage, grand gallery, king's room, queen's room, and subterranean room, all of which serve a purpose during the process of initiation.

Elizabeth Andrade

See also Burial of the Dead; Kings; Queens

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PYTHONS

Pythons are sacred and deified snakes that are worshiped according to specific rituals in many parts of Africa. Called *Dangbé* in Fongbe, the language of the Fon people of the Benin Republic,



A plaque showing the gateway to the palace of the Oba of Benin. Two soldiers with shields flanked by two pages stand guard. The columns of heads may themselves be plaques, while the python on the roof tiles is a messenger of Olokun, the sea god, protecting the palace of his earthly counterpart, the Oba. Benin, Nigeria, early 17th century.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

pythons are primary divinities. Indeed, in the Republic of Benin, the *Vodun* pantheon is generally classified into three main groups: the Primary Divinities, the Secondary Divinities, and the Tertiary Divinities, the latter group including clan spirits, local divinities, and personal gods. In the Fon cosmology, the Dangbé has opened up the eyes of the universe for the creation of human beings and is, hence, a god of creation and protector of humanity. Although pythons are harmless to humans, their occasional biting is considered a good omen or harbinger of bliss, as well as vaccination against any harmful snakebite.

In Fongbe, adept or devout practitioners of the Dangbé Cult are called *Dansi* or *Dangbési* (those who are consecrated to the Dangbé divinity), and the High priest of the python-god religion is called *Dangbénon* (“owner” of Dangbé or High priest of Dangbé). The belief in and worship of pythons is particularly predominant in Ouidah, better called by its original name *Gléxwé* in the Republic of Benin. Indeed, the Dangbé is the Vodun of the Xwéda or Houéda people of Gléxwé in the Republic of Benin. The Xwéda or Houéda (also called Pedah) people are identified by their symbolic ethnic facial signs, 2×5 (two times five), on their foreheads, temples, cheeks, or chin.

Known as the religious capital of the Benin Republic, Gléxwé or Ouidah is actually the cradle of the Dangbé belief and is often credited as the only place to house the Temple des Pythons Sacrés (the Sacred Python Temple). In the West, pythons make good pets when handled correctly. They are also a lucrative activity in Western countries, in that a python can cost as much as \$10,000 if obtained from a reptile breeding center (see further reading below for more information on this topic). Unlike such breeding centers, however, the Sacred Python Temple in Ouidah is primarily a religious place. Every 7 years, the Big Festival for the adepts of Dangbé takes place. Today, the Temple also serves as a center of attraction for

tourists visiting Ouidah. Tourists must do a small ritual before entering the temple.

As divinities believed to be human protectors, pythons deserve unconditional respect from all human beings irrespective of their religious affiliations. As such, in the Benin Republic, pythons are not profaned and killed the way other reptiles are. Moreover, if a Dangbési sees a person abusing or killing a python, that person bears severe consequences, ranging from grave illness to insanity. The offender must take prompt measures; if not, he or she may die. Recommended measures include a visit of the transgressor to any Dangbénon to apologize for committing such a sacrilege, a payment of large fines, and accession to rituals of *Flá* (conjuring) and *Wouslasla* (cleansing).

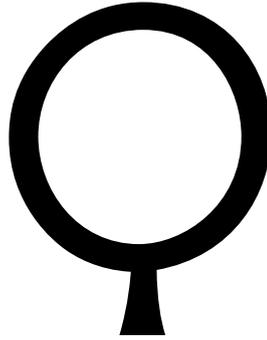
It is also believed that if a person abuses or kills a python even in the absence of adepts, the consequences are the same. Outsiders may consider this superstitious. However, to know is to understand because the nonbelief in the existence of a thing does not make that thing nonexistent. In Gléxwé, when a python makes its transition, one does not say the python has died; one says *Ablúdo* or *Zankou* (the night has fallen) instead, the same reverential euphemism used for humans who pass away.

Thomas Houessou-Adin

See also Animals; Vodou in Benin

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QUEENS

Queens are rulers or leaders who have been chosen, selected, appointed, or born into their roles. Queens appear in African history longer than anywhere else in the world. From the earliest of historical times, the idea of queenship has existed in the cultures of Africa; this idea appears to derive from the ancient concept of first ancestor, founding family, founding mother, or divine clan lineage. Among the prevailing ideas about queenship are that these royals are related to mediation between the ordinary and the divine; they are descended from divine rulers or they are infused with special supernatural power of divinity.

Therefore, the queen functions to protect the society from enemies and to bring order and balance to the cosmos. Among the Akan, when a queen mother dies, the people believe that the universe is chaotic until all of the rituals of burial have been completed. Such a spirit on its way to the distant “village” leaves not just social, but cosmic turbulence in the world, and this turbulence must subside before the community can continue as usual.

It should be clear that in many African societies the queen is not necessarily the wife of the king as in Western societies; she is a ruler or leader in her own right who has her own responsibilities. The main aim of the role, therefore, is to ensure that the conditions of harmony and balance are satisfied. Alongside all other responsibilities, the queen must ensure the proper running of the society. To

this end, one of the principal roles of the queen in the Akan tradition is to select the new king. When Europeans first met African queens, they used the term *Queen Mother* to describe this leader who did not get her authority from being married to a king. Thus, the queen in African societies actually exercises power and responsibility.

Queens have exercised tremendous power in the history of Africa. Nubia has the most documented line of queens in the world. More women have ruled in Nubia than in any other country modern or ancient. Certainly, in the history of the world, few names of women leaders are any greater than those of Amanerensis and Amanishakheto. In Kemet, we have the names of queens such as Hatshepsut, Sobeknefru, Tiye, Nefertari, Nefertiti, and Cleopatra, the last during the rule of the Greeks.

In African societies, the queen carries significant ethical and spiritual power as the leader of ceremony and ritual. Often she is seen to have incredible, superhuman strength, ability, and wisdom. Because leadership comes with power, a queen may also create chaos by wielding power in a negative or malevolent manner. However, in Africa, the royals tend to be individuals who take their roles seriously because of the risk of violating the taboos of community. Teaching the royal family about the traditions of the society is one of the great challenges of the religious and spiritual leaders. A queen is responsible for order, but the order is not merely societal, but cosmic. One must be careful to maintain stability and welfare in the community by acting in the interest of the

common good. Calamities, riots, wars, pestilence, disease, and bad fortune may descend on a community where the queen or king is irrational, violent, disobedient to the fundamental values of the society, or disrespectful of the ancestors. This is particularly true in those areas that are agrarian, where the weather and the resultant harvest depend on the queens. In communal life, the royal figure is the one gluon that holds everything and everyone together. It is a large and important responsibility for the royals to influence the harvest and the fertility of families, and therefore they must engage in the protection of their powers by ritual ceremonies to the ancestors.

The ruler in Africa is usually identified with a divinity or may be a divinity herself. Sacred queenship is related to the idea of the royal person being the daughter of god. This was the case in the earliest of African religions in the Nile Valley.

Indeed, each person who assumed the queenship as per-aa was considered the “Sat Ra,” that is, the “daughter of God.”

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Divinities; Women

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R

RA

In Maatian or ancient Egyptian theology, Ra (Re) is the Creator and has many names, manifestations, and forms according to the sacred texts, beginning with the earliest discourse on Ra in the Pyramid Texts (PT). In the Pyramid and Coffin Texts (Book of Vindication [BOV]), Ra also has the names Ra-Atum, Atum, Ra Kheper, or Kheperra and Kheper. In the BOV, Ra says, “I am Ra—I am Atum” and “I am Atum in his name Ra.” In the Pyramid Texts, it says of Atum, “You develop in this your identity (name) of Kheper.” The names Atum and Kheper represent different aspects of Ra. Atum means totality and completeness, one who is complete and one who completes. Thus, he is called “Lord to the Limit (*nb-r-dr*)” and “Lord of totality” or “Lord of All (*nb-tm*).” Kheper, which means becoming, coming into being, or bringing into being, represents the infinite developmental and creative aspects of Ra.

Also, in the Pyramid Texts, Ra as Atum is praised in this way: “Homage to you, Atum. Homage to you, Kheper, the self-creating one. You are high in your identity as the mound. You come into being in this your identity as Bringer-into-Being (Kheper).” Here the mound refers to the sacred mound of creation that is depicted as both the mound on which Ra stood to create the world and as Ra rising from the primordial waters of Nun as the sacred benben stone, or obelisk—like the pillar in the Benu-Phoenix Temple of On (Heliopolis), the sacred city of Ra.

Also, because the word for sun is *ra* and the sun is conceived as both the physical expression of Ra in his glory and the right eye of Ra, Ra is customarily called the “sun god” in Egyptological literature. However, a critical reading of the texts allows for the approach found here, which is to understand Ra in his spiritual form, rather than as his most definitive symbol, the sun disk or *itn*, which was the focus of Akhenaton’s worship during the Amarna Period. As Ra states in the Coffin Texts, “I am Ra in his first appearances, I am the Great God, the Self-Created One who created his identities (names), i.e., as Ra, Atum, and Kheper.” Moreover, the invisibility of Ra is emphasized in his identity and name Amen, the Hidden or Invisible One, and thus the joint name Amen-Ra. In a praise poem of Amen Ra, it defines him as “power with many names, who cannot be known. He is remote from sight and near in hearing.” Also, the combining of Ra’s name with other divine spirits and names extended throughout Kemetic history, and thus one encounters names such as Ra-Harakhty, Khnum-Ra, and Sobek-Ra.

The evolution of the theology of Ra begins with the Pyramid Texts, as noted previously, and was clearly aided in its establishment and development by its conceptualization of the pharaoh as the “son of Ra,” a title that became a central part of the pharaoh’s titulary as early as the 4th dynasty. This designation as the offspring of God and his images would spread to humans in the First Intermediate Period literature. Ra, as the Creator in his name Atum, comes into being and begins creation. His first act of creation of the world is to bring forth

Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture), the first divine powers. Afterward, they brought into being Nut (Heaven) and Geb (Earth), and they, in turn, produced Osiris and Isis and Seth and Nephtys. In the BOV, Tefnut is identified as Maat, the divine power of truth, justice, rightness, and order.

This creation narrative is more developed in the New Kingdom text, “The Book of Knowing the Creations (Kheperu) of Ra.” In it, Ra, described as the Lord to the Limit (i.e., the Infinite Lord), says, “I came into being as the Bringer-into-Being (Kheper). When I came into being, being itself came into being.” Here, Ra defines himself as the source of the ontological process of being. He then notes that afterward he brought other beings into being. He states that at first there was no Heaven or Earth and no place on which to stand, reaffirming his anteriority, aloneness, and self-sufficiency. But he rose up, made a place (the sacred mound) becoming effective in his heart and mind, conceiving the world, and then “made every form alone.” In the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, His role as creator is praised thus: “Homage to you Atum who made heaven, who created what exists, who emerged as land (the sacred mound), who created seed; Lord of that which is, who gave birth to the divine powers. Great god, who came into being of himself.” Here, the description of Ra, as having given birth to the divinities, reflects his containing both female and male aspects while transcending both. Thus, he is not androgynous, but inclusive in his totality, in his name and nature, Atum—completeness. Elsewhere he is described as mother and father of humans and the world, giving birth, begetting, and creating through exceptional insight (Sia) and authoritative utterance (Hu). Again, this expresses his infinite and complete inclusiveness.

In the First Intermediate Period, in the Book of Merikara, Ra is portrayed as a creator who cares for his creation, especially humans who are created in his image and provided with the sustenance of life. This is reaffirmed in the BOV in the Four Good Deeds of Ra, which He enumerates as benefactions for all humans, great and small. He says he created (a) the four winds, the breath of life for everyone, (b) “the great flood (the sustenance of life) for the humble and the great,” (c) “each person like his fellow (human equality) with free will,” and (d) cultivated remembrance of the day of death (moral and spiritual consciousness).

These divine endowments are translated in modern Maatian ethics as the granting and grounding of correlative human rights (i.e., the right to life, the right to the sustenance of life, the right to equal treatment and self-determination, and the right to freedom of conscience and thought).

Furthermore, during the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom, a theology of immortality (see afterlife) for all, through righteousness, is further developed. Ra gives Osiris power and kingship in the afterlife, and all are made eligible for eternal life through righteousness and thus to become an Osiris, a risen and powerful one who is “a glorious spirit in heaven and a continuing power on earth.” Thus, the risen and vindicated one who has become an Osiris says, “I am one with Osiris, Lord of Eternity,” and again “I am one with Ra.” Or again the texts say, “May you go . . . among the powers of heaven who are in the company of Osiris” (and go) in peace, in peace with Ra who is in the heavens.”

However, the fullest development of the theology of Ra is in the New Kingdom. In numerous prayers and sacred praises (hymns), Ra is depicted as a compassionate, justice-providing, protecting, hearing, and loving God. This is especially true in his name and identity as Amen Ra or Amen. Ra is both father and mother of humanity and the world who cares for his creation and all his creatures—humans, birds, animals, fish, and insects. He is “the helmsman who knows the water well” and “a rudder for the weak”; “protector of the humble and needy”; “prime minister of the poor” who takes no bribes; and “Great Shepherd (Herdsman) who leads his flock (herd) to green meadows.” He is “Creator who loves those in His image”; one “who hears the prisoner’s prayer, rescues the oppressed from the oppressor, and who judges between the weak and the strong.” And he is “Lord of Maat,” “physician who heals . . . without medicine,” a hearing God who “hears the prayers of those who call on him,” and “a gentle God with effective counsel.” It is this theological portrait of Ra that lasted to the end of ancient Egyptian history and culture and grounds its ancient and renewed spirituality and ethics.

Maulana Karenga

See also Amen; Chokwe; Nkulunkulu; Nyame

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RADA

There are more than 1,000 divinities, or Lwa, in Vodou, as practiced in Haiti. The Lwa are grouped in several pantheons or nanchon. Rada is one of those nanchon, along with 16 others. The most important nanchon include, in addition to the Rada pantheon, the Petwo, Nago, Kongo, Juba, and Ibo pantheons.

The Rada pantheon is arguably the most important, in terms of both size and the role played by Rada Lwa in Vodou, along with the Petwo pantheon. In fact, many of the other groups have been integrated into the Rada and the Petwo pantheons. For example, the Nago and the Juba Lwa are often thought of nowadays as Rada, whereas the Kongo and Ibo are commonly subsumed under the Petwo Lwa. This fusion underscores the difficulty one may face when adhering to too strict a classification. There are constant overlaps between the different pantheons of Lwa. The same Lwa may appear as Rada and then as Petwo. What seems to distinguish the Rada pantheon from the Petwo pantheon is, above all, the general character, attitude, or persona of the Lwa. Rada Lwa are often associated with a peaceful demeanor and benevolent attitude. However, this is not always the case. When displeased or offended, they may also turn out to be quite vindictive. In contrast, Petwo Lwa are commonly thought of as forceful, aggressive, and dangerous. Yet they may also be protective of the living and quite generous. Thus, one must resist the easy temptation of a simplistic classification.

The word *rada* comes from *Allada*, the name of the capital city of a powerful kingdom in Ajaland, later annexed by the Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa (in the country known today as Benin). Although there may be hundreds of Rada Lwa, there exists nonetheless a hierarchy within the Rada pantheon, according to which some Lwa are more critical than others. Certainly, one must mention the powerful *Legba*, the master and keeper of crossroads, without whom no communication with the spirits is possible and can ever take place. Legba must be asked for permission and must grant permission for such communication to be initiated. As keeper of the gate of the spiritual world, Legba is also, by extension, the protector of people's homes. *Agwe* (also called *Agwe Taroyo*) is the Lwa of the sea and all that is associated with it: flora, fauna, ships, ship crews, fishermen, and so on. The symbolic color of Agwe, as an aquatic spirit, is white. Danballa Wedo, and his wife, Aida Wedo, are other quite important aquatic Rada spirits. Represented as two snakes, which always appear together in the spiritual drawings known as *veve*, they stand for the power and eternity of life and, by extension, are closely associated with fertility.

Ama Mazama

See also Vodou in Haiti

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RAIN

Rain, as a form of water, is intimately and ultimately associated with notions of fertility in African religion. Fertility, the process that enables the transmission and regeneration of life, is of the utmost importance to African people. Fertility is not

to be understood as a phenomenon restricted to human beings only because, in reality, it encompasses land and animal fertility as well. All over Africa, one finds a pervasive association of the sky with male reproductive powers and of the Earth with female reproductive powers. Rain, in the African religious context, may then be thought of as cosmic sperm, with the sky fertilizing the Earth thanks to rain.

In Africa, rain is sacred and greatly desired because it is an indispensable blessing to the many communities who rely on agriculture and cattle rearing for their subsistence. Rain clouds are greeted with joy. Rain is thought of as God's gift to human beings to ensure their welfare. The Chewa (a people in southern and central Africa) creation story illustrates this quite clearly because it links the beginning of human life on Earth (as a result of God's act of creation) with the advent of the first rain. According to the Chewa story, indeed, as the first woman and man fell from the sky to the barren ground, torrential rains, accompanied with thunder and lightning, covered the land, thus forming in certain places rivers and lakes, and turning the arid soil into humid clay, which, in turn, allowed plant and animal life to be and prosper.

Africans have long celebrated the start of rain together, and they have collectively engaged in many rituals to propitiate the falling of rain. Indeed, most Africans believe that, through appropriate rites, one can make rain come. The San people, for example, would bury round stones and would have children born during a rainstorm walk alone in the forest. This was believed to enable the coming of rain. Furthermore, there are, throughout Africa, rain specialists, known as rainmakers, who are among the most important members of their communities. Rainmakers, it is commonly said, derive their ability to control rain from God. Again, given the importance of rain, it is easy to understand the prestige enjoyed by rainmakers. Rainmakers will preside over the sacrifices, offerings, and prayers that may be made by the community, thus acting as intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. When there is no appointed rainmaker, an elder or the king may play the same role.

The Manyika people of Zimbabwe provide an interesting example of this, with rain ceremonies that are held in November every year under the authority of the Manyika king. The latter is seen

as an incarnation of the ancestors and the symbol of sexual potency and fatherhood. He initiates the rain ceremonies, which are centered on the brewing of beer made with finger millet by post-menopausal women. The process takes 7 days. On the seventh day, the beer is carried to the mountains and offered to the ancestors by a small group of men and women of royal blood.

The best-known example of a monarch involved in rainmaking, however, comes from the Lovedu people of South Africa. On the 22nd day of October, the Lovedu people conduct a ceremony to ensure that rain falls in abundance and that the community is spared the dreadful experience of droughts. The people approach their queen with gifts, dances, and songs, and they organize this elaborate ceremony, known as the Rainmaking Ceremony, to appeal to her benevolence. The ceremony takes place in the royal compound. The Rain Queen, indeed, is believed to have the mystical power to control rain. Through her spiritual control of rain, the queen is therefore assumed to have control over the welfare of her society. The Rain Queen of the Lovedu people is therefore much respected and feared. As a Rain Goddess, she is seen as the embodiment of the divine and cosmic order on which harmony and balance rest because, without rain, there can be no life.

Ama Mazama

See also Water

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RAIN DANCE

The rain dance is a functional action form used to appeal to the ancestral spirits or deities during

periods of drought. As an ancient ritual, the rain dance harks back to the time when humans believed that the lack of rain was caused by some wayward action or lack of action on the part of the human society. There had to be propitiation of the gods for the proper order to be reestablished. Thus, one can often find, even today, in the arid parts of the African continent many people who use rain dances, and the accompanying offerings and rituals, to end drought.

For example, among the Dogon in Mali, the use of dances for rain is attached to the majestic Dogon-Tellem figures that are known as “they who request of the spirits that the rain be released.” The powerful ancestral figures are a collective prayer for rain. Singing and dancing around the figure, the priests are able to invoke the most archaic images in the land.

When the Dogon fled an awful war unleashed against them by the martial Mossi soldiers in 1490, they settled in the cliffs of Bandiagara in the territory that had been occupied by the Tellem people. This was a hot, dry, semi-desert area. When more Dogon came into the region, they began to accept the Tellem culture and customs, even following their artistic and aesthetic patterns. One of the best examples of cultural assimilation is in the Dogon–Tellem style of art related to the rain dance. The definite and exact raised arms of the Dogon–Tellem prayer for rain are the finest examples of ancestral figures used for rainmaking in West Africa.

The Dogon have many rituals and great philosophical traditions. However, there are special priests whose job it is to organize and orchestrate the rain rituals. They cannot be left to chance or to anyone because the lack of rain means that the people will not be able to plant their crops and, should they plant them, the plants would die for lack of water. If there are no plants, there can be no harvest, and without a harvest, the people and the livestock will perish. There is no ceremony or ritual more important to the Dogon than the rain ceremony. Should the priest be successful and the rains come in abundance, then the people will enjoy a bountiful life. There is then a collective spirit of hope and optimism at the root of all Dogon ritual services for rain.

Among the Ihanzu of Tanzania, there are several rain rites. Some of these rites are

performed annually at the beginning of the growing season. However, should these annual rites fail to bring on the rains, the people will then have complementary rituals until the rains fall. There is an ancestral offering for rain (*mapolyo a mbula*) that is usually made after it has been divined that the royal Anyampanda clan spirits demand the offering before the rains will come. Normally, the offerings take place over a period of 2 days, during which time the people focus their attention on the blessings that have been sent by the Anyampanda spirits. However, the entire ritual can last for 1 month or more.

The Ihanzu have decided that only the two royal leaders of the Anyampanda, one male and one female, can initiate the ancestral rituals. Thus, to start the process and initiate the offering (*kukumbika*), a few grandchildren are asked to assemble at the male ritual leader’s house. These children play a major role in the dance and ritual of rainmaking. Nothing occurs without their participation. In fact, both genders must be present because rainmaking is a productive act relating to fertility and sexuality. The children are instructed to place white sorghum flour and water, together with some herbs and tree branches, into a long-necked calabash (*mumbu*). They then address the royal clan spirits, calling their names and praising their deeds, before they place the calabash in the doorway of the male ritual leader’s house.

The grandchildren address the spirits with brief comments usually stating the obvious, for example, “We are now placing your beer in the doorway,” and so forth. The grandchildren are called on to perform the same lead function day after day. They are asked to brew beer. Usually among the Ihanzu, it is the women who brew beer, but for this ritual of rain the males must also participate in the brewing of beer. At every stage of the ritual, including in the rain dance, the granddaughter and the grandson must be involved. If they call the names of the spirits, dig trenches for brewing beer, collect firewood, or participate in any activity during this time, it must be done together.

On the final day of the ritual among the Ihanzu, the male ritual leader addresses Munyankali, the ritual name of the sun, a sort of visible symbol of a supernatural world about

which nothing can be known for certain. He speaks in words such as these:

Munyankali, you who come from your large house in the east and are on the way to your smaller one in the west, you have passed through Ihanzu and have seen that we are carrying out an ancestral offering, an offering in the case. We have an offering for rain. We are offering you water. We are offering you beer and a lamb that was born at night. Take good news to the place you are going; and the bad, toss it into the waters of the great lake.

The grandchildren then address the spirits while giving an offering of meat to them (*kutagangila*). They take several pieces of roasted meat and turn to the four cardinal points, throwing a piece of meat in the direction of each point while addressing the spirits. The grandson speaks first as always and then the granddaughter. When the sequence of addresses is completed, the priest or diviner reads the entrails that have been gathered in a bowl (*ntua*). The bowl is always oriented toward the east–west direction. When the priest completes the reading and tells the spirits of the gratitude of the Ihanzu, he then tells of the spirits' gratitude for the offering made by the Ihanzu.

Now the great rain dance takes place in earnest. All has been leading to the moment when the women gather to dance and sing their way to the main ritual cave. The grandchildren, both of them, join the dancers. The grandson and then the granddaughter address the spirits and toss the chyme of the sacrificial lamb around the entrance of the cave. The grandson goes back toward a large clearing; all the while the music is playing and the people are dancing. At this point, the granddaughter, female ritual leader, takes the lead in dancing toward the cave and is followed by elderly royal women who remove their clothes and carry a half-gourd of castor seed oil inside the cave. There the women take the oil and anoint old drums in the cave. They move to a second cave and anoint with oil a python that lives in the cave. When they have done this, they put their clothes on again and enter the opening of the cave and follow the grandson's path back toward the mass of people.

There is a great feast of the sacrificial food. The people eat, sing, dance, and make their way back

to the village to the house of the male ritual leader, who sprinkles water to the east, west, south, and north. There is more dancing, and, in the end, the priest or diviner says in a great voice that the spirits have heard and seen the offering that was made by the people.

In other parts of Africa, rain dances are practiced to appease the spirits and create fertility, productivity, and harvest in the land. Drought is seen as something out of balance, a function of chaos in the universe, and every person's responsibility is to make things right again with the spirits. Although the practices vary among groups, the idea is essentially the same all over the continent: make offerings so that the spirits will remember to bring rain to those who have shown their gratitude.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ceremonies

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RAIN QUEEN

Every month of October, more precisely, on the 22nd day of that month, a ceremony is conducted among the Lovedu people of South Africa to ensure that rain falls in abundance and that the community is spared the dreadful experience of droughts. The people approach their queen with gifts, dances, and songs, and they organize this elaborate ceremony, known as the Rainmaking Ceremony, to appeal to her benevolence. The

ceremony takes place in the royal compound in the village of Khetlahkone.

The Rain Queen, indeed, is believed to have the mystical power to control rain. In a community where agriculture and cattle rearing play a critical role in the sustenance of its members, as it is with the Lovedu people, the importance attached to the falling of rain comes as no surprise. Furthermore, rain, generally speaking, is linked in African life and religion to the fundamental notions of fertility and life transmission. Through her spiritual control of rain, the queen is therefore assumed to have control over the welfare of her society. The Rain Queen of the Lovedu people is therefore much respected and feared. She is seen as the embodiment of the divine and cosmic order on which harmony and balance rest. Although there have been and continue to be many queens in Africa, the Rain Queen of the Lovedu people has the distinction of being both a monarch and a rainmaker.

The Rain Queen is called Modjadji. There are several stories about how Modjadji came into being. According to one account, an old king who lived during the 16th century in the kingdom of Karanga, in what is now southeastern Zimbabwe, following his ancestors' orders, got his daughter, Dzugundini, pregnant to pass on to her the powers to control rain. As a princess, his daughter was called Modjadji, literally "ruler of the day." Modjadji gave birth to a girl, who eventually succeeded her as queen. In another account, it is Modjadji's brother who would have made her pregnant. Fleeing her father's kingdom out of shame, she settled in Venda with some of her followers.

Although the queen is to have children, she is to live in seclusion and never to marry. When the time of her death nears, the queen must select her successor, usually but not necessarily the oldest of her daughters. She then commits ritual suicide by absorbing poison.

Rain Queen Modjadji II succeeded her mother, Modjadji I, and reigned between the years 1855 and 1894. A mysterious figure, she rarely appeared in public. She had several children, but, following the tradition established by her mother, she never married her children's father. In 1894, she committed ritual suicide after having named Leakkali as her successor. Rain Queen Khetoane Modjadji III reigned until 1959, the year of her death. She was then succeeded by Rain Queen Makoma Modjadji IV, from

1959 to 1980. In 1981, Queen Modjadji IV was followed by Rain Queen Mokohe Modjadji V. Her reign was characterized by a strict adherence to tradition. For example, she lived in almost total seclusion. Among the three children she bore, she chose Princess Makheala as her successor. Unfortunately, the latter passed away 2 days before her mother. This is how her granddaughter, Makobo, rather than her daughter, became the next Rain Queen in 2003. She became known as Rain Queen Mokohe Modjadji V, but her reign was of short duration because it ended in 2005. The circumstances surrounding her death remain unclear. However, what is certain is that Rain Queen Modjadji failed to display the behavior expected from someone of her rank and importance. Fond of "modern" life, her lifestyle did not conform to the traditions established by previous Rain Queens. This might have been the reason for her short reign because many within the Royal Council were quite displeased with her failure to live up to her noble lineage. Her successor is yet to be nominated.

Ama Mazama

See also Mediums

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RED

Among African people, red is commonly associated with courage, desire, love, passion, physical energy, power, royalty, sexual energy, strength, and war. It is

therefore no surprise that the color red has had a special, sacred, and spiritual significance for people of African ancestry since ancient times. Thus, the use of the color red on a crown of a Pharaoh, in body adornment for social status, or on the clothing of an Orisha or Lwa devotee attests to the political and spiritual importance that people of African ancestry have placed on red as a communication code, as well as a color with a potentially powerful visual impact.

The first evidence of the special status of red in African culture was around 3000 BC, when, in Kemet (ancient Egypt), red was connected with political events, societal position, spiritual ceremonies, and warrior courage. Indeed, when Pharaoh Menes (a.k.a. Namer) united Upper and Lower Kemet (ancient Egypt) into one powerful kingdom, approximately 3000 BC, the Red and White Crown was placed on his head to represent the new land. The red was associated with Lower Kemet, whereas the white was associated with Upper Kemet. Menes was said to be the Pharaoh of two Nations and wearer of two Crowns. It was the start of the 1st dynasty, and the foundation of a central government was institutionalized. Under the Red (and White) Crown, Kemet developed written communication systems, trade routes, effective industries, agricultural techniques, and the science of erecting permanent pyramids. It was during this period as well that a strong army was created to actively protect and defend its eastern borders by spilling the red blood of their enemies as commanded by the Pharaoh wearing a Red Crown.

During the 4th dynasty of the Old Kingdom, red granite blocks of stone were used as the building material to construct the first known true shaped pyramid. The Great Red Pyramid of Sneferu (approximately 345 feet, 2600 BC) in Dahshur Necropolis of the 4th dynasty is surpassed in height and grandeur only by the Great Pyramid of Khufu (approximately 480 feet, 2560 BC) and the Great Pyramid of Khafre (approximately 471 feet, 2530 BC) in Giza Necropolis built during that same period. The strength and durability of red granite stone blocks were known by the pyramid engineers, stone craftsmen, and interior artisans of Kemet. However, its color was also visually and aesthetically attractive to the eyes and a symbolic statement of royalty that added to its choice as the building material used on and in sacred structures and places. Red granite

blocks were first used as a building material in the tomb of Pharaoh Den of the 1st dynasty (2985 BC) in Umm el-Qa'ab at Abydos. Kemet's geographical southern neighbors, the Nubians, used local red sandstone as well for good construction masonry for Tantamani's pyramid.

Elsewhere and later in Africa, we find the same continued reverence for red. For example, in Lower Congolese society, the color red had a multifunctional use as a symbolic language, informed with mythical belief concerning social status, developmental state, health condition, healing power, leadership ability, and warrior skills. Indeed, a red-colored painted body represents physical beauty, sexual desire, and maturity among the teenagers who are moving to adulthood and getting ready for marriage. A person reddened by painting, smearing, or daubing a pigment from pomade, red tree bark, red powder, coral wood, or palm oil on their body or clothing can denote weakened physical condition—old age, pregnant, sickened, and wounded. Aged people's bodies were rubbed with *nkula*-red and palm oil to promote good health and healing. Similarly, pregnant women, especially those who experienced miscarriages, daub their bodies with red pomade to enhance the belief that, next time, there will be a healthy birth. When the child is born, they are smeared with red pomade on their bodies for several months, and amulets are placed on them to give *ngolo* (physical strength and force). The meanings associated with the color red extend to protection from evil spirits or the ability to have magical powers. However, in the case of a severe negative health condition, this information is symbolically communicated in the society by reddening the skin of the person to warn of contamination risk, to report that the person has recovered from contagious illness or is released from convalescence seclusion. Wounds and sores are also smeared with red pomade or palm oil after the infected and gashed area has been cleansed with water to accelerate the natural healing process.

In addition, the color red took on another functional meaning in a spiritual and social context in Lower Congolese society when a king died or when a warrior wanted to be empowered with courage. The special red cloth that was wrapped around the corpse of the king was called *makamba ma nkosi*. A huge doll is made from cloths, mats, and blankets contributed by the

family and friends into a shroud. The complete body of the doll is covered in red cloth, while the eyes and mouth were painted in white and black—thus combining the dynamic and spiritual colors red, black, and white. During the sacred time of a king's burial, another symbolic ceremony to honor him was conducted by burying the red dressed huge doll. As far as a warrior or hunter is concerned, red is believed to inspire the fighting spirit on the battleground and bravery on the hunting grounds. Warriors especially painted their bodies red to prepare their spirits and minds for an intense war or after their return from a victorious battle. War is red with blood and fire.

Currently, the traditional spiritual systems in the African diaspora, such as Vodou in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, and Candomble in Brazil, honor and praise, with daily offering and worship in sacred and highly spiritual ceremonies, the Lwa Oggun and the Orisha Shango whose colors include fire red. Oggun and Shango have similarly defined mythological personalities. For example, both are known for displaying aggressive behaviors, for being combatant spirits and fierce warriors, and they are commonly represented as physically dark strong men holding iron fighting weapons. On August 14, 1791, the Vodou Priest Dutty Boukman called and evoked the belief of the spiritual energy of Ogoun with his iron sharp machete into the hearts and souls of Haitians, who, although physically enslaved, had never stopped being free. Red fire and human blood moved and rolled like fresh lava on the Island of Haiti. With the courageous fighting spiritual energy of Ogoun, who is associated with the colors of red and blue in Haiti, and coupled with the will of the Haitian people, it ensured that they were set free from captivity. However, in Brazil and Cuba, the freedom-fighting West African field workers and maroons called and evoked the combating spiritual energy of Shango to cut the chains of enslavement, cut the bodies fatally, and cut off the heads of their oppressors. Shango wears red and white, and he holds with both his black hands a double-headed sharp iron axe. When Shango goes into battle, he attacks with those double-headed axes, causing his enemies' wounded bodies to turn the river bloodred.

Ibo Changa

See also Color Symbolism

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REINCARNATION

Reincarnation is generally accepted as a term that means a dead person returns to life in another being. It is thought that, among some cultures, this means a return to life as an animal, whereas it has been said that Africans, who believe in the concept of reincarnation, see it as the return of a living human being.

This is a misunderstanding of the dynamic nature of African existence and a distortion, due to a borrowed term, of the reality of African life. Reincarnation as a term conveys the idea of a bodily rebirth of an individual. However, from the most ancient of times in African culture, this has not been the precise meaning of African existence. Documents from the walls of the temples, tombs, and pyramids attest to the fact that Africans did not have, in ancient times, the idea that after death the soul of a person occupied another.

Thus, it is necessary to discuss this term in the context of what is known of African societies. In the first place, one must dispense with the

Western idea of being when speaking of African existence. It is more exact to refer to force inasmuch as Africans believe that everything has force. There is a force to humans, living or dead, plants, rocks, and minerals.

Yet the precise African concept of existence cannot be understood by using the expression *being* that expresses force, although force is involved. Actually the concept of force is inseparable from the African's idea of being. One cannot be divorced from force because without the element of force there is no conception of being and vice versa. Force is not some separate entity that has to be expressed; it is the nature of objects, things, people, trees, and animals to express force.

The Platonic notion of the separation of body and soul, and substance and accidents must be considered foreign to African ideals. In the Platonic conception, substance is that which is considered essential by Western philosophers, and the accident is the physical body in which the substance is housed. When a person dies, it is said that the accident disintegrates, but the substance remains. The substance as the soul, according to many Westerners, can go to either Heaven or Hell depending on the quality of one's life on Earth. For the believers in reincarnation, it is this substance that is said to be reincarnated.

Africans understand the distinction between different forces or inner realities, just as it is possible to see differences existing between material things in nature. Just as someone may say that different beings have different energies in the Western sense, the African says that forces differ also in their essences. The divine force is not the terrestrial or celestial force, and the human forces are different from the mineral and plant forces, yet force is the commonality among all of them.

In African religion, there is a clear hierarchy of forces with God preceding the spirits, then the founding ancestors and the living dead, according to their primogeniture, and then humans according to their age.

Thus, Africa has a different idea of deathlessness. In African ontology, one understands that all visible beings are perceived by the senses as well as having an inner nature or force. One does not say of a person who dies that the soul has gone to the spirit world, because it is not the "soul" or just a part of

a person that has gone, but the complete person that has become invisible. Thus, what lives after death is the person him- or herself. The one who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible expression has become invisible, but is force endowed with intelligence and will. For this reason, the African does not speak of the dichotomy of soul and body, such that at death there is a separation and the soul inhabits another body. In fact, the person still exists as the person in an invisible form. Although the bodily energy disappears, the vital force increases and gains in strength from day to day depending on the rituals held to maintain the force.

Clearly, the dead assume an important role in the society because of vital power and energy that allows the dead ancestor to express will and intelligence in dealing with the living. It is believed that the departed gain in knowledge of nature, the cosmos, and human relationships through the experience of departing.

The dead ancestor becomes pure force. However, a person can be "truly dead" when the vital force is entirely diminished. This can happen if the living do not ritualize the ancestor. A preoccupation with immortality and deathlessness can be traced to the ancient Egyptians, who believed that one increased the chances of immortality by leaving a vital force that is strong enough to outlast death. Sacrifice and prayers are considered essential for increasing the vital forces. The idea behind reproductive fertility may be ritual sacrifices for the Dead by the living descendants. By sacrificing, the living receive the vital force of the ancestor and the ancestor receives immortality. What one seeks is infinite deathlessness by perpetuating the society through vital force.

Now one can see how the ancestors' "perpetuation of themselves through reproduction" is called reincarnation. One might more correctly claim it as the passing of vital force to the living from the ancestors to affect births by giving of themselves. The dynamic force of the ancestors can influence everything, and that is why "reincarnation" cannot be partial, as Idowu has claimed. It either is or it is not. One esteems the dead ancestors to the degree that they increase and protect their progeny by giving them their vital force. Onyewuenyi has argued that the vital force of an ancestor is comparable to the sun, which is not diminished by

the number and extent of its rays. The sun is present in its rays; it heats and brightens through its rays, yet the rays of the sun singly or together are not the sun. Thus, the vital force, which is the being of the ancestor, can be present in one or several of the living members of a clan, without the life-giving will or vital influence being diminished. To use the same analogy of the sun, one can say that the rays of the sun are subordinate to the sun, just as the living are subordinate to the ancestor.

The human is a causal force and therefore can sustain and enrich life whether the human is living or dead. Thus, when Africans say that an ancestor has been reborn, it must be understood that the rebirth may happen in several individuals, and yet the ancestor cannot be diminished by this act. African philosophers understand that the use of the terms *return* or *reborn* cannot be translated by the word *reincarnation* because the newborn children are not the same as the deceased, and their births are not the end of the deceased ancestors' lives in the world of the departed.

More important, one must realize that Africans believe in the biological conception of children; the influence of the ancestor, which has been called reincarnation, is subsequent to conception. The human being in the mother's womb finds that the ontological influence of an ancestor occurs during this time. When one says that a deceased "reincarnates" in grandchildren, it is not to say that the ancestors cease to exist. They still continue to live in the afterlife.

A proper understanding of African ontology would create a respect for the African's approach to eternal ritualizing of ancestors through living perpetuation of the ancestors and see it as an act of community, kinship reaffirmation, inspirational influence, and participation in the continuity of society. Unfortunately, we are left with the Platonic terminology and conception that hampers and hinders clarity. This discussion of the concept as it relates to Africa should be seen as a measure to bring light to the issue.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Afterlife; Death

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RESISTANCE TO ENSLAVEMENT

What is the attitude of African traditional religion vis-à-vis oppressive rulers and oppressive institutions such as the slave trade, colonialism, or local dictatorship? To raise such a question is to address the problematic issue of whether religion per se is a force of progress and liberation or an obscurantist weapon of mass destruction. The answer to such a question is made extremely complicated by the complex history of Africa. On the one hand, forms of slavery existed in Africa, apparently introduced by Islam, as they did in ancient Greece, Rome, Christian Europe, Asia, and the Islamic world. On the other hand, the principle of *Bumuntu*, which stands at the core of African traditional religion, bears witness to high moral standards that condemn all forms of enslavement as contrary to the will of the ancestors and as a form of evil that hinders one's ability to join the village of the ancestors and to enjoy a blissful existence in the afterlife. It is clear that slavery in Africa was viewed as a form of punishment. To enslave another human being or to wage war recklessly was to partake in radical forms of social and moral evil. This is why slave traders and African dictators are referred to as witches by common folks.

In a world where historically Christianity and Islam have been heralded as paths of liberation from traditional oppressive customs, the liberating nature of traditional religion has been largely overlooked or obscured. Yet it is traditional religion that provided a moral compass to millions of people throughout centuries and that still guides the existence of many today. The fact that colonial regimes heavily targeted traditional religion as the breeding ground of rebellion is an eloquent

acknowledgment of the African spirit of resistance to oppression. It is therefore imperative to make a careful distinction between the moral ideals of African spirituality and the deplorable behavior of individuals throughout history. Careful studies of religion will not recklessly identify the spiritual ideals of Hinduism with Sati and the caste system. Hindus readily point to Brahman and the virtues of Ahimsa and Yoga. Likewise, when asked to define Christianity, Christians point to Jesus' teaching on "loving the enemy" and turning the other cheek, rather than crusades, inquisition, colonialism, and persecution of women and members of other religions. The same hermeneutical principle should be applied to Africa. African spirituality is to be found in the ideals of genuine personhood (Bumuntu) and in the numerous examples of resistance, rather than the lapses of some *ubuesque* tyrants and caligulan dictators.

From time immemorial, religion as the soul and hope of hopeless people has always functioned as the ultimate source of liberation. This is particularly the case with a continent that for centuries has been trampled underfoot by all forms of oppression. Africans on the continent and in the diaspora have always turned to the ancestors and Shakapanga, the creator, to find refuge and the power to resist enslavement.

In 1791, enslaved Africans led a successful revolutionary war that propelled Haiti to become the first "black republic," that is, the first black country to gain independence by throwing off successfully the yoke of chattel slavery. Eighty-five years before this Haitian revolution, a young African lady named Kimpa Vita was burned at the stake in 1706 by Christian Portuguese authorities in the Kongo Kingdom for waging a resistance movement against the slave trade and for challenging the racist theological underpinnings of the Catholic Church and its complicit involvement in the slave trade. These acts of defiance and rebellion were not an imitation of foreign ideals of democracy, but a genuine expression of traditional ideals of the good life. Indeed, Kimpa Vita's revolution occurred 70 years before the American Revolution and 83 years before the French revolution, at a time when Western powers and their Christian missionaries were engaged in oppressive colonial ventures legitimized by the civilizing mission ideology. Both the Haitian and

Kongolese rebellions were steeped in a liberation theology profoundly shaped by African traditional religion. African traditional spirit of Bumuntu (liberty and human dignity) has crossed the Atlantic carrying the torch of liberation struggle into the Americas. It is now widely held in academic circles that the Haitian revolution was stimulated and sustained mainly by Vodou, a religion of African origin. It is also largely understood that the most prestigious leaders of the Haitian revolutionary war, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, Christophe, Boukman, and Makandal, were all steeped in Vodou rituals and philosophy. In fact, the plans for a war of liberation from slavery and colonialism were laid by the Vodou priestesses Mambo Mariesaint Dede Bazile and Cecile Fatiman and the Vodun priest Houngan Boukman during a religious service held on the night of August 14, 1791, at Bois Caiman in the northern part of Haiti.

Vodun, an African religion, had crossed the Atlantic carrying with it that revolutionary spirit that in Africa led the prophetess Kimpa Vita, Simon Kimbangu, and many others to articulate a liberation struggle that challenged slave traders and French, British, Belgian, German, Portuguese, and Italian colonial regimes as well as the colonial bourgeois Christianity that lent moral and spiritual legitimacy to foreign tyranny. The extraordinary role played by Vodou in the Haitian revolution is to be understood as the culmination of a liberation movement firmly rooted in the ethical vision of African traditional religions.

In fact, all over Africa, many charismatic leaders steeped in traditional spirituality rose to lead resistance movements against the slave trade and colonial enslavement. The Maji Maji uprising resorted to the power of African religion. In so doing, it became the most serious challenge to colonial British rule in East Africa. In the colony of Tanganyika, Germans had to contend with the powerful prophet Kinjikitile Ngwale, who resorted to African religious practices and worldview to fight the colonial regime. He preached that the war of liberation was ordained by God and that the ancestors would return to life to assist the African people in this war. God and the ancestors, he added, want the unity and freedom of all the African people and want them to fight the German oppressors. This war waged for more

than 2 years, from July 1905 to August 1907. Although Kinjikitile was captured and hanged by the Germans, his brother picked up his mantle, assumed the title of Nyamguni, one of the three divinities in the region, and continued to administer the Maji, a religiously blessed water aimed at rendering the warrior invulnerable. This practice of blessed water is widespread in Africa. Among the Baluba, it is referred to as *koya kisaba* (taking a bath in a magical water blessed by the ancestors to gain extraordinary strength and invulnerability on the battlefield).

It is worth noting that the traditional role played by women in African religion brought them to the forefront in resistance movements. In the Zambezi valley, the Shona mediums instigated the famous rebellions of 1897, 1901, and 1904. In the Congo, the notorious case remains that of the Christian independent church of Dona Beatrice, Kitawala, and Simon Kimbangu. Kimpa Vita's struggle for freedom in the Kongo kingdom was so passionate that historians have Eurocentrically called her "Jeanne d'Arc du Congo" in reference to the spirit of French revolution. But Beatrice is not an isolated case. In Congo-Brazzaville, the priestess Maria Nkoie instigated the Ikaya rebellion, which lasted for 5 years, until 1921. Many other women have played a crucial role in the struggle for freedom.

Almost all wars waged against forces of domination and oppression were backed by religious belief in justice and just cause. It is worth noting the role played by African "abolitionists," especially those famous "enlightened kings."

In 1526, Affonso, King of Kongo, sent a letter of protest to the King of Portugal (Dom Joao). The letter first describes in detail the evils of the slave trade and then concludes with a decision to abolish it. "It is our will," he wrote explicitly, "that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them" (Hoschild, 1998, p. 4). It is remarkable that King Affonso did not wish to abolish only the enslavement of noble people, but rather wanted to see the whole slave trade come to an end. He made it clear that he did not want his kingdom to be crossed by slaveholders and their caravans of victims. Affonso's analysis of the impact of the slave trade on Kongo contradicts also the argument often used by some scholars who claim that Kingdoms of Africa flourished because of the wealth gained by African

kings through the slave trade. But this phenomenon of enlightened Kings is not unique to Central Africa. Another notorious case is reported in West Africa in the 18th century by the Swedish traveler Wadström. In a report to the British Privy Council Committee of 1789 on the political chaos caused by the slave trade in Africa, Wadström evokes the case of the enlightened King of Almammy, who, in 1787, enacted a law that no enslaved person whatever should be marched through his territories. Angry French merchants remonstrated and attempted to corrupt the King with gifts. But the King returned the presents that had been sent to him by the Senegal (French) Company and declared that "all the riches of that company should not divert him from his design (to end the slave trade)" (Isichei, 1978, pp. 474–475). This case sheds a splendid light on the notion of moral character in traditional Africa. This same passion for moral rectitude led the Asantehene of Ashanti (Ghana) to reject a European demand for enslaving people. In 1819, he replied to a European visitor that it was not his practice "to make war to catch slaves in the bush like a thief."

Such are the traditional roots of the resistance spirit that animated Simon Kimbangu, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, and the African Nobel laureates such as John Luthuli, Wangari Matai, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu. This is an eloquent illustration of the pervasive spirit of resistance to oppression and enslavement that has characterized Africa since time immemorial. As Tutu's focus on the traditional virtues of Ubuntu shows, even those Africans who converted to Christianity and Islam have turned to the ancestral spirituality of human dignity in their struggle against local and foreign forces of enslavement. In a world where Christianity and Islam were often complicit in European and Arabic systems of domination and exploitation, the importance of ancestral spirituality in African resistance movements can scarcely be overstated. The fact that millions of Africans find meaning not in Christianity and Islam per se, but rather in "Africanized" Christianity and Islam, points to the centrality of ancestral spirituality as the fundamental moral guidance of the African people.

Like many other world religions, African religion is based on the notions of Bumuntu, justice, purity, and

respect of human dignity. Shakapanga the creator is largely celebrated as the king of justice and is viewed as good and pure (*Vidyē kadi katonye*: “God is spotless,” say the Baluba). Life, which is his supreme gift, is to be honored, protected, and promoted in every creature. Hence, the *Kishila-kya-Bankambo* (the will of the ancestors) commends a virtuous life, an ethical conduct that prohibits all forms of dehumanization. Enslavement therefore stands as radically antithetical to fundamental religious values. Although the practice of slavery is overwhelmingly attested in African history, there is no evidence that such a practice was indigenous to Africa and was sanctioned by African religion as a virtue. Its endurance therefore is to be viewed in terms of what people refer to as *mucima mubi*. It is “evil heart” that leads people to enslave others. Initially, slavery was conceived of as a punishment and was largely applied to prisoners of war. African religion, with its emphasis on *Bumuntu* (genuine personhood), generated two fundamental attitudes vis-à-vis the slavery phenomenon. First, it commanded that the humanity of enslaved people be acknowledged and honored by a humane treatment. Hence, although slavery has always been an unjust and cruel reality, African history is replete with instances of enslaved individuals who were integrated in the family of their masters and regarded as sons or daughters, some even becoming figures of authority by virtue of their excellent character and competence. Second, traditional religion triggered a massive resistance movement to the European slave trade and colonial oppression. This same ancestral spirit of dignity and liberty exploded again in the 1980s and 1990s to stimulate struggles against dictators and promote collective liberty. In this era of ambiguous globalization, African traditional spirituality is likely to stimulate a new path of “liberation theology” against modern forms of enslavement.

Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha

See also Destiny; Justice

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RITES OF PASSAGE

According to African religion, as one journeys through life, carrying out a particular destiny and asserting one’s humanity, one should become more complete and perfect. This perfection, in turn, allows a person to become an ancestor, which is the ultimate purpose of life. Through rites of passage, set up by the community, people undergo a series of transformative processes that will assist them in their development as human beings. Rites of passage have played a major role in African communities for hundreds of years. They are well-thought-out and effective programs designed to allow people to move with little stress to the next phase of their existence. It is also important to remember that Africans only exist in community and that any personal development necessarily takes place within a collective space, rather than being an individual affair. Indeed, the expected and desired outcome is that the community will be enhanced as its individual members gain in knowledge, consciousness, and wisdom. Their new insights will allow them to contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of the traditions and social order on which their community was established.

Life in the African religious context is a cycle marked by four critical moments: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Those four moments are moments of transition, and each one is characterized by specific religious observances, its own set of rituals and rites.

Birth: Naming Ceremony

The birth of a child is always a time of great rejoicing. It means that a couple was blessed with

fertility and a safe delivery, and that the family lineage and the community are being perpetuated and strengthened. In many African communities, however, festivities to celebrate the arrival of a baby do not start until a few days after birth because one must make sure that the baby is healthy and will live on. Only then will the rejoicing start. In fact, and more important, the new child does not officially start existing until he or she has been named as part of his or her first rite of passage, that is, the naming ceremony. Among the Akamba people, a child is named after 3 days. A goat is then slaughtered as a token of appreciation for the ancestors who are responsible for human fertility. Among the Akan, a girl or a boy is named on the eighth day after being physically born. Among the Yoruba, the child is named on the eighth day as well. For the Hutu, it is on the seventh day that naming ceremonies take place. Until then, both mother and baby are expected to remain alone in the home. However, regardless of when the naming ceremony takes place, what is underscored is that existence is first and foremost a social experience. Although one may be born in the physical sense, one's existence starts only when one has been acknowledged as a member of a community. Through the naming ceremony, a new human being comes into being as it becomes integrated into a community. Only at that point is someone considered to exist. Thus, the fundamental assertion undergirding the naming ceremony is that existence is a corporate experience, not an individual one. The names given to the child further assign him or her a place in the family, the community, and the universe. This is why all community members take part in the naming of the child, because the child belongs to the whole community and because all have a stake in its proper insertion in the society. Among the Edo people, the naming ceremony occurs on the seventh day after a child is born. In the morning, close relatives and elders assemble to pray for the newborn child and its parents: they pray that they will be blessed with prosperity, good health, and a long life. The elders, usually after having engaged in divination, offer a name to the baby's father. Divination helps determine which ancestor may be coming back through the child. Later on, in the evening, others

in the community join to officially welcome the newborn. Specific ritual food and drinks will be used, such as kola nuts, honey, sugar, and alligator pepper for prayers; and gin and palm wine for prayers and libation. A coconut full of water will be broken and shown to the women as a symbolic representation of the mystery of life. Yams will be cooked and shared by the women. All those in attendance will give a name to the child and partake in a meal. In Africa, names are always meaningful and are believed to be an essential part of one's spiritual and social identity. Names are therefore sacred.

In Akan society, names are determined by the day on which the birth occurs. The Akan naming ceremony is known as *Den to*. Until the time for *Den to* has come, a baby is to remain in seclusion. Each day of the week is governed by a particular *Obosom* (or divinity created by God). Therefore, the day on which a child is born is of great importance because the spiritual attributes of the *Obosom* of that day are transferred to the *kra* (or soul) of the child. Everyone receives a soul name that is known as *kraden* (plural: *akraden*) and that is again determined by the day on which he or she was born. Thus, a male born on a Sunday will be named Kwesi, Kwasi, or Akwasi, whereas a female will be named Akosua, Akousia, or Esi, all after the *Obosom* Awusi or Asi, who is related to the sun, and associated with leadership. In addition to their *kraden*, the child receives other names, in particular, their formal name, known as *den pa*, which identifies the child's function and potential as it relates to his or her clan. The naming ceremony starts early in the morning of the eighth day. Family members and the elders gather at the father's house. Prayers are said, libations are poured, and spirits are invoked. Two ritual cups are used, one containing a strong alcoholic drink (*nsa*) and the other containing water. An elder on the father's side will announce the child's names. Gifts are then presented to the newborn, whose names are shared with every member of the community. Everyone, in honor of the child, will drink from one of the cups where water and *nsa* have been mixed and start sharing a meal.

In some communities, boys may be circumcised as part of the rituals associated with the naming ceremony. Such is the case among the Ewe people, who circumcise males on the seventh

day after their birth. Ewe females have their ears pierced on that day.

Puberty: Initiation

As children mature physically and therefore sexually, a special puberty rite of passage, initiation, is meant to help them move smoothly from childhood into adulthood. The purpose of initiation is, above all, educational. Through initiation, young adults further learn about the traditions and expectations of their community and will therefore be able to contribute to the maintenance of social order. They must die to their child self in order to be reborn into an adult self, one characterized by greater knowledge of the world, deeper consciousness, insight, and wisdom. The notions of symbolic death and resurrection are central to the initiation process. Also, those undergoing initiation must take a vow of secrecy. Initiation rites vary from community to community. However, they follow a general pattern. The first step is the separation of a group of adolescent novices from their usual surroundings to be secluded in an isolated place away from the community. There, they will be tested and taught by elders. The testing usually involves demonstrating physical endurance, mental strength, and intelligence. It is often the time when males are circumcised and females excised. They must undergo the whole operation without showing any sign of fear and without expressing any discomfort. Failure to demonstrate fortitude would bring shame and dishonor to them and their family.

After the period of seclusion is over, the initiates are reincorporated into their community, and this marks the time of their rebirth. Their hair may be shaved off, their old clothes may be thrown away, and they may receive new names, all symbolic gestures indicating that they have become new, mature individuals. The reunion of new initiates with their family and community is a collective festive time. All rejoice now that the new initiates are ready to assume their new place in the community.

One of the responsibilities and prerogatives associated with the completion of initiation is marriage. Initiation, in fact, prepares the young adults for marriage. Indeed, in most African societies,

one can get married only after having been initiated. This is often the time that young people receive information and instruction regarding marriage, sex, family life, and procreation.

Among the Maasai, for instance, the Eunoto ceremony, which lasts for a whole week, is the rite of passage that marks the transition from childhood into adulthood for the males. It is an elaborate ceremony that marks the end of a relatively carefree life and the beginning of greater responsibilities. The initiates are then expected to watch over the community's cattle (which are highly regarded as God's unique gift to the Maasai), participate in cattle raids, and kill a lion with their bare hands. At the end of the Eunoto ceremony, the young men's hair is shaved, thus formally indicating the passage to manhood. In addition to having their hair shaved, they also have their skin painted with ochre in preparation for marriage. They may then marry and start families.

Marriage

Marriage is widely acknowledged throughout the African continent as one of the most critical moments in a person's life. This is the case because marriage is intimately linked with procreation. In fact, the main, if not only, purpose of marriage is procreation. In most African societies, marriage is not deemed complete until a child has been born. Likewise, a man is not a full man or a woman a full woman until they have given birth to a child.

Marriage creates the context within which children are conceived and born, hence its critical significance. Getting married and having children is a social, moral, and, ultimately, spiritual obligation and privilege. Likewise, one's refusal or failure to get married and have children is largely incomprehensible and certainly quite reprehensible as far as African religion is concerned.

Marriage, from the standpoint of African religion, is never simply an affair between a man and a woman, but an event that involves at least two families. African families are normally quite large because they include several subunits. The whole community has a stake in the marriage and will be involved.

Because marriage is a most serious affair, young men and women are thoroughly prepared for

married life. Young men and women are taught about the responsibilities of married life and educated about sex and procreation. Many rites and rituals are performed as part of the wedding ceremony. Of particular significance are rituals meant to purify or bless the couple. Among the Yoruba people, for instance, the oldest woman in attendance will spray gin (which is closely associated with the ancestors) on the couple and other relatives to bless the new union. Among the Bemba people of Central Africa, for example, a woman about to get married is given a clay pot by her father's sister. Because the main purpose of marriage is procreation, the clay pot stands for the womb that is expected to be filled and blessed with many pregnancies. A similar ritual can be observed among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, when the paternal aunt hands a clay pot full of water to the bride to bless her with a fertile marriage. Water is intimately associated with fertility in Africa. Among the Hutu, on the day of her wedding, a woman's body is smeared with milk and herbs to cleanse her from her previous life and make her pure. Among the Ndembu, the bride walks backward into her husband's house. An old woman who is instructed in matters related to sex and marriage accompanies her and presents her with beads, which symbolize children, to bless her with a fertile marriage.

Death

The last critical moment in one's life is death. Death, as far as African religion is concerned, marks the beginning of a new mode of existence characterized by a higher level of spirituality. It is also the time of the ultimate test: whether one will become an ancestor. This, of course, largely depends on how one conducted oneself while alive, but it also depends on the performance of the necessary funerary rituals. It is usually the children's responsibility to perform such rituals, hence the imperative necessity to get married and bear children.

Death is thought of as a journey to the ancestral world. Those undertaking that crucial journey must be prepared for it. This explains why oftentimes a dead person will be buried with different objects to assist them, such as weapons, tools, food, drink, and even money to be presented as a gift to the ancestral spirits.

Before being buried, however, the corpse must be prepared: It must be washed and entirely shaved, and the fingernails must be cut. The body may be dressed as well. In some communities, the body is buried within the compound; in others, far enough away. Although rules differ from community to community, there are always strict prescriptions on how a dead person should be handled.

Failure to comply with those prescriptions and perform the required funerary rituals will have terrible consequences: The spirit of the deceased will be condemned to spiritual vagrancy, unable to access the ancestral realm. In return for being condemned to such a cruel and unenviable fate, the wandering spirit will most likely create havoc for its family and the community. It is therefore imperative for the living, for their own sake, to make sure that all eligible dead receive proper treatment when they die.

However, those who lived undignified lives, such as homosexuals or witches, or died in an undignified manner (e.g., by killing themselves), will have disqualified themselves for proper burial rituals. This may extend as well, in some communities, to people who died childless. Those may be taken into the forest for vultures and other beasts to devour them.

Among the Mende people, upon dying, and to access the ancestral world, a person must embark on a most critical journey that involves the successful crossing of a river. To assist the recently deceased individual, the living must perform certain rituals, known as *tindyamei*. Of particular relevance here is the sacrificing and offering of a chicken at the gravesite 4 days after burial for a man, 3 days for a woman.

Among the Ewe people, funerals are also taken most seriously. They are dramatic, socially binding, and extravagant affairs, spanning over 1 month. There are six phases to a Ewe funeral:

1. Amedigbe: the burial of the body (treated with herbs for the sake of preservation) 2 or 3 days after dying.
2. Ndinamegbe: the main mourners are received 1 day after the burial has taken place.
3. Nudogbe: a wake-keeping day, usually 4 to 6 days after the burial.

4. Yofogbe: a day after Nudogbe, lineage rituals are performed and gifts are offered to the family of the deceased, especially to help with the costs associated with the funeral.
5. Akontawogbe: 3 days after Yofogbe, donations are estimated.
6. Xomefewogbe: the final cost of the funeral is established; attending a funeral and contributing to its expenses is a socially important obligation in Ewe society.

In addition to performing the appropriate burial rituals, certain taboos also must be observed so as not to displease the dead person. Among the Hutu, close relatives of a newly deceased person may not engage in work or sexual intercourse during the period of mourning. When mourning is over, the family organizes a ritual feast, and all activities resume normally. Likewise, a Luo man who just lost his wife must wait until he can sleep in their conjugal room or be around other women. It is not until he has dreamed of making love with his wife, which may take quite a long time (sometimes several years), that he is allowed to use the conjugal bedroom again and live a normal life. Until then, he must sleep in another room and sometimes even outside on the veranda.

In African religion, the relationship between the living and their ancestors is a dynamic and reciprocal one. It is not uncommon, for example, for ancestral spirits to visit their living relatives, to whom they appear in dreams. Ancestral spirits might pay a visit out of care and protection, but also out of displeasure if they feel neglected or offended. When a person or a family experiences misfortunes, for example, death, illness, or barrenness, the ancestors are immediately suspected of being responsible. It is therefore quite important for the living to please the ancestors by honoring and remembering them. This can only be done through living an ethical life. This is also the only way to become an ancestor, the supreme goal and reward of life.

Ama Mazama

See also Age Groups; Akan; Ceremonies; Death; Ewe; Initiation; Luo; Maasai; Marriage; Mende; Naming; Puberty

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RITES OF RECLAMATION

Rites of Reclamation have the explicit purpose of reclaiming African culture. These rites can include taking an African name; giving children African names; adopting African dress and cultural practices; celebrating Kwanzaa, Odunde, Juneteenth, Fi Wi Sinting, or Nakumbuka Day; traveling to the slave fortresses of West Africa; making pilgrimages to Kemet; and practicing traditional African religions. These are just a few of many activities that could be considered rites of reclamation. Whatever form they take, Rites of Reclamation have been an essential aspect of the African experience since Africa's encounter with Europe in the 15th century.

In more recent times, Rites of Reclamation have focused on efforts to reclaim African cultural values. Kwanzaa is a prominent example of this because it is inspired by African social values and uses the language of Kiswahili. Odunde, which means Happy New Year in Yoruba, is a festival started in 1975 and held the second Sunday in June. It resulted from Lois Fernandez reinterpreting the processions to the river orisa Osun in West Africa for an African American neighborhood in

Philadelphia that dwells along the Schuylkill River. Other festivals held in June are the various “Juneteenth” celebrations that commemorate the news of emancipation reaching the last of enslaved African communities. *Nakumbuka*, a Kiswahili term meaning “I remember,” is a solemn public remembrance held each November to commemorate those unknown Africans who suffered and died resisting enslavement.

Jomo Nkombe, a Tanzanian who lived in Canada, conceived the idea of *Nakumbuka* in 1990, and it was embraced by the World Pan African Movement held in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1991. *Nakumbuka* Day celebrations are now held throughout the African world. The *Fi Wi Sinting*, again a Kiswahili phrase meaning “It is ours,” was started by Pauline (Sister P) Petinaud in 1991 as a way to raise funds for a rural school in Jamaica. It has grown into a yearly celebration of Afro-Jamaican culture held during Black History Month. Although these celebrations began relatively recently, have structure and regularity, and in a sense have become neo-African rituals, Rites of Reclamation can be traced back to the early stages of the encounter between Africa and Europe, when they were far less formal. These rites included physical and spiritual resistance to enslavement, such as shipboard mutinies, uprisings, and escapes; and secret meetings held in the woods, where Africans refused to let European saints, Gods, beliefs, and styles of worship replace African ones. A more sobering Rite of Reclamation was enacted by those Africans who chose suicide as a method to reclaim themselves. Not all rites of reclamation involve the living.

In Vodun, there is an actual ritual called Rites of Reclamation (*Retire Mo Nan Dlo*). This is performed 1 year and 1 day after a person dies. The purpose is to call the animating force of the body, the person’s *Gros Bon Ange* (Big Good Angel), from the community of the Ancestral Dead. Once it is in its new “body,” a special container called a *Govi*, it can participate in the living community once again by giving guidance and advice. This practice is essential to Vodun cosmology, which acknowledges that life constitutes a cycle and people must be reclaimed from the land of the ancestors so that they may continue to be active members of the community. Whether it is reclaiming a person’s spirit, preparing a home altar, or

journeying on a trip to Kemet, rites of reclamation have been and continue to be an essential aspect of the African experience.

Denise Martin

See also Ceremonies; Rituals

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RITUALS

Rituals are set forms or prescribed procedures for carrying out religious actions or ceremonies. African rituals constitute collective statements of continuity and unity that function to express communal definition through group participation. People assimilate the religious ideas and practices that are held or observed by their families. Through communities and families, rituals are passed down from one generation to the next across centuries. Rituals are vital. When the life and safety of a community are threatened, rituals can psychologically and emotionally strengthen the community’s members by creating a sense of order. The African propensity to seek and maintain order, balance, and reciprocity is grounded in *Maat*, the guiding principle of African ethical existence articulated best in ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) culture and society.

African people have carried their culture and its rituals wherever they have journeyed through time and space. Rituals have survived and sustained spiritual order even under the extreme chaos imposed during the period of *Maafa* (disaster in Kiswahili), the most prominent aspect of which is the European- and Arabian-dominated trade in enslaved Africans. In the example of the Yoruba religious tradition carried to the Americas and the Caribbean from Africa in the 16th century, We find adherents performing the same rituals in Brazil, Cuba, the United States, and other countries in the 21st century.

Rituals Connect Communities to God and Ancestors

The African worldview is holistic, and its spiritual philosophy does not distinguish sharply between sacred and mundane experience. Everything is connected. A Supreme Being exists who resides in everything that exists and is therefore part of everything that exists. African rituals are the ultimate expression of this worldview. This can be demonstrated using the Akan concept of God as an example.

Among the Akan, Odomankoma (also known as Nyankopon, Nyame, Onyame, and other names) is, first and foremost, the Great Ancestor. Every head of a family or community is understood to be descended from and must live according to the dignity of the first ancestor. It follows as well that there is connectedness in all life, including human life, that is realized through the continuous flow of blood from the Great Source who is Odomankoma. Throughout the African world, it is understood that to be human means to belong to a community. The purpose of community for the Akan is to ensure the continuity of the connection with Odomankoma, who is the source of all life.

Belonging to a community obligates one to participate in the rituals and rites attendant to the community's beliefs, ceremonies, and festivals. Furthermore, it is believed that the Dead form a community of their own, which exists alongside the community of the living, and the two are assumed to be united in a partnership beneficial to both communities. Through communities, the collective responsibility of humanity is reflected in efforts to affirm the value of life and endeavors to create and maintain a quality of living that lives up to the dignity of the original ancestor. For the descendants of the first ancestor to fall short of the ideal is a contradiction of the responsibility that befalls humanity and that should serve as its inspiration. Through rituals, new life is given to the African spirit.

Rituals Take Many Forms

There are many types of rituals practiced among Africans, and not all Africans practice the same rituals in the same way. The premise that underlies rituals is the perception of the individual existing as part of a great stream of life that transcends

the self and links the individual to a "chain of generations." This is a vital aspect of the cultural unity that exists across Africa's diversity. Rituals do not conform to calendars. They can be performed at approximately the same time over a period of time, but they can also be postponed or held at an earlier time. Some rituals are annual, whereas others are performed after the passing of many years. Among the Dogon, for instance, the Dama Festival, a large collective funeral, takes place every 12 years to honor all those who have died during the preceding period and initiate them into the world of the ancestors.

The timing of some rituals can depend on the phases of the moon or the changing of the seasons. Agricultural and nomadic herders who rely on pasturelands perform seasonal rituals associated with ample rain, floods, drought, harvests, and abundant grasses. There are personal rituals that correspond to major events in the human life cycle. These are performed to mark exiting the spirit world and entering the physical world at birth, naming, entry into adult status, marriage, attaining elder status, and departure from the physical world and return to the spirit world upon death.

Examples of three types of rituals are discussed below: seasonal, life cycle, and those associated with royalty. The extent to which these rituals are practiced differs among ethnic groups. Clearly, some may be more widely practiced than others. Others, due to the cultural impositions of colonialism and neocolonialism, may no longer be practiced or may be practiced in adapted forms. The intent here is merely to provide a sense of the variety of the ways in which African religion manifests its major tenets through rituals.

Seasonal Rituals

Seasonal rituals are performed to acknowledge and maintain nature's balance. From ancient times, the belief among Africans in the oneness of the universe has supported the idea of reciprocity between human beings and the environment. The balance in nature represents order. This order represents Maat in the ethical practice that existed in the progenitor African civilizations of the Nile Valley. Maat upholds the principle of reciprocity between God and humans. Whatever is taken from the Earth must be returned to the Earth.

Among the Ewe people of Togo and Ghana, as well as many other ethnic groups, it is considered disrespectful to eat yam from the first harvest the season before performing a ritual offering at the appropriate shrine. This is a form of ethical practice based on reciprocity. It reflects the belief in the principle that holds that that which the Earth provides is respected as a gift from Mother Earth and a gift to the Earth is given in return.

Throughout Africa, agricultural and nomadic pastoralist societies engage in seasonal rituals to seek the blessings and interventions of the spiritual world for successful plantings, harvests, pastures, and hunts. Rituals are also performed for protection against droughts, floods, and other catastrophic occurrences. The Fulani place a talisman around the necks of cattle to help them find djenne grass during the dry season. The djenne grass contains vitamin A. The scarcity of the grass causes a deficiency that results in night blindness among the cattle, as well as among the Fulani herdsmen who obtain vitamins from their cattle's milk.

Life Cycle Rituals

Throughout Africa, attention is paid to the journey of life. The major points of transition and transformation along the life cycle are marked by significant rituals and ceremonies.

Birth and Naming

The human being is both a physical and a spiritual being. Birth is the entry of the embodied spirit into the physical world and the community. Both the birth and naming of a child are celebrated with appropriate rituals to demonstrate their significance.

When a child is born among the Yoruba people, a special ceremony called The First Step Into the World is performed 3 days after birth. The purpose of this ceremony is to determine with the assistance of a *babalawo* (a priest of Ifa) what sort of person the child will be and to appoint an *orisha* (divinity) or guardian spirit. Once the father of the child has acknowledged it, the *babalawo* is consulted to determine which of the *orishas* will be the child's protector, as well as what is forbidden or taboo to the child.

The naming ceremony, called *I-komo-jade*, a child's first outing or "outdooring," is performed on the seventh day after birth for girls and on the ninth day for boys. A *babalawo* performs a purification ceremony called the *Iwenumo*, which is preceded by sacrifices offered to the deity who protects the child. During the *Iwenumo*, the *babalawo* throws consecrated water on the roof of the dwelling. The mother with the child in her arms runs out of the dwelling three times to catch the water falling from the roof. As she does this, the *babalawo* pronounces the name of the child. A fire that has been lit inside the house is ceremonially extinguished, and the ashes from it are carried outside. Following this, the members of the family give various names to the child while offering it gifts and best wishes.

Initiation

After the observances that mark the child's birth, the ceremonies or rituals of the initiation period that mark the transition from child to adolescent to adult status in the community are the second major point in the life of the individual. Nearly all African peoples give this period of transition special recognition. These rituals and ceremonies establish the place of the individual among the adults in the community. By the time children in African societies reach adolescence, they know their place within the social fabric of their communities and have learned important aspects of their social and cultural heritage. This is accomplished through everyday life in the context of family and lineage. This preparation, however, is regarded as insufficient. Initiation is required for admission to adult status. Three practices, which feature prominently among initiation rites, are education in the ways of adults, the seclusion of initiates, and circumcision.

Marriage

Initiation rituals and ceremonies are, in effect, preparation for marriage. Once they have gone through initiation ceremonies, there is nothing to prevent young adults from getting married. In fact, they are expected to do so. Marriage is a social and religious obligation because the purpose of marriage is procreation. Most, if not all, African societies

thus prepare the young people to fulfill that obligation. In many African societies, prior to marriage, the bride undergoes rituals that will prepare her for a new role as a wife and mother. Feasting, dancing, animal sacrifice, and blessings are consistent elements of marriage rituals. These rituals help create a bond between families. Such rituals either accompany the wedding or are held following it. They are conducted to offer prayers for the welfare of the new couple and for the blessing of fertility and children. During these rituals, God and the ancestors are called on to witness the occasion and to extend their blessings to the couple.

Eldership

Elders, like young people, are considered to be a full part of African communities. Although they may be physically weak, they are considered in Bantu and Akan societies, for example, to be a powerful social force. They are spiritually strong and wise enough to maintain the cohesion of the community, but they are also able to build the moral foundation of the community's youth and the generations to come.

In the case of the Akan, an individual becomes an elder by first being selected by his or her matrikin. The process involves the pouring of a libation by the older members of the lineage for the candidate who will become the *Ebusua pinyin* (head of the lineage). The elder, once chosen, joins other lineage heads and officials to sit on a council advisory to the *ohene* (king). Elders are referred to as *nana*. It is important to note, however, that not everyone who bears the title of *nana* is an elder, but every elder is a *nana*.

When Akan elders meet, prayers in the form of libations are almost invariably said before any proceedings take place. It is believed that whenever two or more elders convene (such an occurrence is referred to as *Nananom mpanyifo*), the ancestors (*abosom*) are present. The person conducting the libation asks for the ancestors' continued blessings and for protection, prosperity, and happiness for the entire community. The ancestors are offered the reasons for which the meeting has been called and request success for the endeavor.

Death/Return to the Spirit World

African religions present hundreds of myths about the origin of death. There are no myths in Africa about how death might be overcome and removed from the world. However death is thought to have originated, every time a person dies, his or her death is due to a cause. The cause of death is significant. Death can be caused by lightning, trees, poison, drowning, warfare, and various forms of accidents. When death is caused by sickness, there are two broad types: normal and unclean. The cause of death will determine the rites and rituals that are to be performed.

The rituals and ceremonies associated with death are many and complex. Because death marks the physical separation of the individual from other human beings, the funeral rites draw attention to the permanence of the separation. Meticulous care is given to the performance of funeral rituals in order not to cause any offense to the deceased or his or her family. Such care is not taken for the funerals of strangers, thieves, murderers, witches, and troublemakers or for those who have died an abnormal or unclean death.

There are rituals for preparing the corpse for disposal as well as for burial and the belongings to be buried with the corpse. Rites performed at the burial are intended to sever the links with the living and ensure that normal life continues among the living. Women, especially, wail and weep to lament the departure of the dead person, recall the good things that she or he said and did, and offer reminders that the deceased lives in the spirit world.

Becoming an Ancestor

Ancestors are venerated; they are not worshiped. Libation and the offering of food to the ancestral spirits are rituals and rites performed to express the esteem and feelings of hospitality that people hold for their ancestors. These acts reflect the firm belief that Africans generally have in the existence of an unbroken relationship that exists between the living and the Dead.

In West Africa, the Akan and Yoruba are among those who believe that not everyone who dies becomes an ancestor. There are conditions that must be met. A person's conduct in the world of the

living and the manner of his or her death determine entry into the ranks of the ancestors. In the case of the Akan, special ritual preparations are made by the maternal lineage of the deceased to facilitate the journey of the spiritual personality. First and foremost, however, to become an ancestor, one must first have been an elder. Ancestors are, therefore, separate and distinct from other spirits who are endowed with immortality. Becoming an ancestor requires that one live one's life from the beginning in anticipation of the end. Eternal existence becomes possible after one has first achieved perfection as an elder. As ancestors, elders have reached the highest state of existence. They exist with God, but, unlike God, they cannot create or alter the created order. Ancestors are dynamic. They can reincarnate via their spirits to help people.

Rituals Associated With Royalty

Since antiquity, African kings and queens have been closely associated with gods and regarded as sacred. In fact, the concept of kingship is regarded as a significant indicator of the cultural similarity between ancient civilizations of Kemet (Egypt) and Moroë and the rest of Africa.

The king was supposed to be the man with the greatest life force or energy. When the level of the king's life force "fell below a certain minimum he could only be a risk to his people if he continued to rule." Diop believed that "this vitalistic conception is the foundation of all traditional African kingdoms," with the exception of those that were usurped. Thus, the ritual killing of the king in ancient Kemet originated to preserve an image of the king as a person to be revered. Originally, the king was actually killed. Over time, royalty, to preserve its prerogatives, transformed the fatal judgment into a symbolic one, in which the king was put to death ritualistically. This occurred during a ritual called the Sed Festival, in which the king's ritualistic death and revivification supposedly rejuvenated him and he was again deemed fit to rule. Diop's original discussion of this practice was published in 1955. At that time, he reported that the ritualistic death of the king was in practice among the Yoruba, Dagomba, Shamba, Igara, and Songhay; the Hausa of Gobir, Katsena, and Daura; and the Shilluk peoples.

Another important royal figure is the queen mother or *Əhemaa*. This is particularly true among the Akan, whose traditions require that the queen mother be consulted before any man can be elected to serve as *Əhene* (chief). The *Əhemaa* is usually the *Əbaa-panin*, female head of family, of the lineage of the founder of community. She is generally the *Əhene's* mother, maternal aunt, sister, or maternal cousin.

The ritual responsibilities of the *Əhemaa* include serving as custodian of the blackened stools of her female ancestors. The stool is a symbol of office, authority, and leadership. When a stool holder dies, a ceremony of blackening the stool takes place during the final funeral celebrations. Blackening is accomplished by smearing the stool with a mixture of egg yolk and soot. Later it is smeared with sheep's blood. The *Ada* festival of the Akan is centered on the blackened stools, which are regarded as shrines or abodes of the ancestors. *Ada* festivals are held twice every 42 days. Within each 42-day period, one *Ada* falls on a Sunday (*Akwasi*) and one falls on a Wednesday (*Wukuda*). On these days, the queen mother pours libations and gives offerings of food and drink for the ancestors whose blackened stools are in her care.

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See also Ceremonies

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RIVERS AND STREAMS

Rivers and streams are linked to the theme of water, which, as the primordial matter of the universe, plays a central role in African understanding of the source of life.

All over Africa, rivers, streams, creeks, lakes, and lagoons are regarded as the habitat of deities and ancestors. Thus, they are viewed as the sacred space of spirits and are subsequently treated with great reverence.

The sacred nature of rivers and streams is explicated in various creation myths. In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, in the beginning was Olodumare the supreme God who sent the orishas (divinities), under the supervision of Obatala, to create the world from the primordial watery matter. After the creation of the world, the spirits did not return to the sky. It is believed that the 400 orishas that created the world entered the Earth's crust instead and transformed themselves into rivers, trees, and mountains. Hence, in the Yoruba pantheon, Olokun is venerated as the divinity of the Ocean, Oloso as the divinity of the lagoon. Yemoja (Yemọnja), the most prominent of the river divinities among the Yoruba, for example, is not only the mother of numerous river deities, but also the ruler of the Ogun River in Abeokuta. She is also the mother of fish and the giver of children. Women therefore pray to her for children, with offerings of yams and fowls. Other prominent river goddesses include Oya, the goddess of the Niger River, who is believed to be the companion or one of the wives of Shango, the god of thunder. She is so fierce and terrible that no one can look on her. Oya is often identified with the wind that blows when no rain follows. Among

the Baluba of the Congo, Lake Boya (near Kabongo) is said to have suddenly and mysteriously sprung from the Earth and is regarded by the Luba kings as a special abode of the ancestral spirits. No king of the Luba empire could be installed without being confirmed by the Boya spirits through royal diviners. Moreover, for the Baluba, the spirits reside in some special sections of rivers, especially the source, where two rivers meet or fall into a sea or lake, and in the region of waterfalls.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, Uhammiri (or Ogbuide), the goddess of Ugwuta Lake, plays a crucial role in people's lives because her priests and priestesses help people afflicted with infertility, gynecological problems, mental illness, repeated deaths of children, and many other misfortunes.

The African religious vision of rivers, streams, lakes, rain, mountains, and the Earth points to the centrality of "Ecospirituality" in African theology. This "spirituality of environment" goes beyond a mere sentimental environmentalism.

In the Baluba version of African cosmology, humans and deities are rivers, streams, lakes, and rain. Indeed, an ontological vital force emanates from Shakapanga the creator and flows through humans and nature through water and human blood.

This spirituality of rivers and streams carries with it a fundamental ethical principle against pollution of the environment because ultimately any act of pollution affects humans and the gods. In the African religious worldview, the pollution of the environment is not merely physical, but a spiritual impurity that jeopardizes one's ability to join the village of the ancestors.

Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

See also Lakes; Moon; Rain; Trees

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RIVER TANO

See TANO RIVER

ROCKS AND STONES

These humble, unassuming objects are a manifestation of God, the source of creation, human life, rain, and the dwelling place of spirits in African religion. When they are combined to form massive structures, such as the Great Pyramid of Giza and the hill complex at Great Zimbabwe, they offer a powerful testament to their sacred significance. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the first man, Musikavanhu, falls to Earth from the sky. Falling with him is a stone. He points to the stone and it stops. When his feet landed on part of the stone, that section of the stone softened and changed into water. This is known as the “stone of the pool,” Matopos, and it is held sacred among the Shona. Musikavanhu later falls asleep on the stone and dreams creation into being. In Madagascar, tradition holds that people descended from stones. One day, a woman asked Rasoalavavolo, who dwells underwater, for a child. The woman provided two silver rings and two round smooth stones as offerings. Rasoalavavolo transformed the stones into two male children who would become the ancestors of the original inhabitants of Madagascar. The Bor and Dinka of the Sudan also trace their ancestry to a boy who emerged from a stone. This same stone caused torrential rains in the middle of the dry season and was said to fall from the sky, like many other stones in days of old. Another link between rain and stones is found in the Sudan, where rain stones are said to come from Heaven. Interestingly, the moon is likened to a shining stone among the Ekoi of Nigeria.

This tradition of creating with stones is echoed in Great Zimbabwe, which means “stone house.” These structures date back to AD 1085 and include more than 500 villages, with citadels and conical towers. Millions of cut stones were laid without mortar or cement. The architectural

styling appears to be local with no outside influences and is unique in the world. Examples of such styling are the elliptical walls and curved lines that follow the natural landscape, created during the height of the classical period of construction. Select buildings were oriented to positions of the sun and stars, causing speculation that some of the structures may be temples, although little is known about the symbolic significance of the structures.

In ancient Egypt, stone was used only to build tombs, temples, and sacred buildings, not houses for mortals—regardless of royal status. The most visible of the stone structures is the Great Pyramid, which is composed of roughly 2.3 to 2.8 million stones. The interior stones averaged 2½ tons, and the casing stones at the base weigh as much as 16 tons. The entire structure was coated with fine white limestone that gave the pyramid a flawless appearance.

The rock shelters of the San of the Kalahari Desert serve as a canvas as well as a “veil.” The rock offers paintings and it serves as a mediator between the material and spiritual worlds. The rock is permeable, and shamans, in the proper state of consciousness, are able to penetrate it and communicate the experience via the images they draw on the rocks.

Thus, it is undeniable that African people have long established a clear connection between stones and the spiritual world. This is most clearly seen in the Santeria tradition, for example, which holds stones in the highest esteem. Indeed, the Orishas are embodied in sacred stones, *otanes*. Those spiritual stones are kept in beautiful urns. They represent the essence of the Orishas and, therefore, must be fed, as prescribed by the African religious tradition.

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See also Lakes; Moon; Rivers and Streams; Water

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RUHANGA

One of the overwhelming features of African traditional religion is the belief in the Supreme Being (God). In most cases, the belief in God is closely connected with the story of the creation of the world. In this connection, various peoples of Africa have legends that tell the story of the creation of their communities and the entire universe. It is a truism that the African conception of the creation of the world often contravenes Western scientific and Christian doctrine's interpretations and findings. A point that remains indisputable is that no creation story outweighs any other—because different people have diverse belief systems and often cling to their own views about the world in which they live. A critical look at the basic concepts of the legends and creation stories indicates that, in African traditional religion, the primacy of the Supreme Being is prominent. Also, most African narratives provide insight into the significance of geography in the creation of the world. Although different versions are capable of being recorded and appreciated, the most paramount factor is reference to the Supreme Being. Individual African groups personalize the name of God, but most Africans believe that the world came into existence through God.

The name of God among the Banyankore and Haya of modern western Uganda and northwestern Tanzania, respectively, is Ruhanga. Ruhanga is the creator of both the world and human beings. He is also the God of fertility as well as disease and death. The creation story relates that Ruhanga was hitherto living on Earth and decided to relocate to Heaven. To fill the vacuum of his absence, he decided to create human beings by putting three seeds in the Earth. These three seeds germinated into a calabash within a day. Out of the first two calabashes he picked two men and a woman, and in the last calabash he took just a man. Ruhanga named these men Kairu, Kahima, and Kakama. A test was needed to determine the rulers and the subjects of the world that he was about to create. The three men were to carry a pot full of milk for a night without sleeping or allowing the milk to spill out of the pot. During the test, Kairu slept and allowed his milk to spill out of the pot, thereby causing the floor to be littered with milk. Ruhanga got angry and decreed that Kairu

would have to spend the rest of his life looking for food from the ground/Earth. Later and before daybreak, Kakama, like Kairu, began to sleep and lost half of his milk. It was only Kahima who remained awake throughout the night of the test. Because Kahima was the most faithful, Ruhanga decreed that he would be the ruler, whereas the Kairu would work as an agriculturist and Kakama as a cattle keeper.

Another version of the creation story is instructive. This version, which is not too different from the one given previously, indicates that Ruhanga created the first human being from clay and was assisted by his son, who provided the breath, thereby giving life to the new lifeless creature. This genre of the creation story indicates a sort of African pneumatological model of the Christian's doctrine of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The father in this instance is Ruhanga, the son, Kazoba, and the Holy Spirit is Ntangire, which is the spirit of Ruhanga.

The Haya of Tanzania and Banyankore of western Uganda also believe that human beings hitherto had the power to live on Earth forever. Ruhanga revoked this power when a custodian of a dead dog refused to perform the required rites that normally accompany the transition from the world of the living to the world of the Dead.

As previously mentioned, different ethnicities have diverse interpretations of how the world came into existence and the relationship between human beings and the Supreme Being. Although linguistic variations provide room for people to call the Supreme Being different names, his or her function remains the same in all cultures—creator of human beings and the universe.

Saheed Aderinto

See also Olodumare

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SACRIFICE

Sacrifice is a universal phenomenon. In a general and secular sense, *sacrifice* may be defined as the “giving up” of a thing for the sake of another that is higher or more urgent. It may also refer to that which is given up for a cause or for something else. Sacrifice plays an important part in the religious ceremonies of Africans.

Purpose and Significance of Sacrifice

Most of the time, sacrifice is for the purpose of maintaining or restoring a right relationship of human beings to the sacred order. Generally, the purpose of a particular type of sacrifice in Africa is revealed by its name, as will be seen next. In several African societies, sacrifice constitutes one of the commonest acts of worship. In fact, virtually all traditional worship and divination involve one form of sacrifice or another.

Types of Sacrifice

Propitiatory Sacrifice

This sacrifice is often prescribed by a diviner. The Yoruba call it *Ebö ètùtù*. In this sacrifice, the offering belongs entirely to the deity; the sacrifice is never shared, but burnt or buried. It is performed during a crisis like an epidemic, famine, drought, or serious illness. This sacrifice is also made when a worshipper violates a prohibition. For example, among the Akans, if a man indulges

in sexual intercourse in the bush, *Asase Yaa*, the Earth goddess, has to be propitiated. Among the Mendes of Sierra Leone, sexual intercourse in the bush is also regarded as a violation of *Maa-nsoo*, the Earth goddess. On such occasions, sacrifice should be offered at the sacred groves to propitiate the Earth mother and the ancestors.

Preventive Sacrifice

This sacrifice is prescribed as a precautionary measure to prevent danger or disaster. For example, when a particular community learns that an epidemic is raging in a nearby village, it may offer this sacrifice to prevent the scourge from entering the village. Among the Yoruba, the preventive sacrifice is known as *Ogunkoja*, “that which wards off attacks.” Among the Akans, palm nuts, raw meat, and raw food are often placed at the entrance of the town or village to ward off evil spirits. Among the Yoruba, the animal victim that is slain and offered to the deity may be buried or exposed at the entrance to the town, village, or house.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

The substitutionary sacrifice has an element of propitiation and prevention. It is offered in place of the person who might have suffered some kind of misfortune. It may also be offered to avert danger or misfortune that might befall someone. Among the Yoruba, usually a sheep is used as a substitute for the human being. The sheep is rubbed against

the body of the offerer to transfer the illness or misfortune to the sheep. It is believed that the destiny of the offerer is exchanged, hence the name *Ebo Irapada* (Redemption or Exchange Sacrifice). Among the Mendes, a fowl is sometimes offered as a substitute. The leg of the chicken is broken, accompanied by words such as “We have observed this man; we see a big trouble coming on him, but now as we break the leg of this chicken (he breaks one of its legs), may it, now disabled, carry his trouble; and may the trouble return and fall on anyone who was going to cause it.”

Thanksgiving Sacrifice

Generally, Africans love to express gratitude. The Yoruba articulate thanks to divinities and espouse communion with fellow human beings by engaging in *ebö öpü ati idàpò*. This type of sacrifice is usually accompanied by feasting, in which the worshippers and the divinities concerned share a communal meal.

Votive Sacrifice

The votive sacrifice is also a thanksgiving sacrifice to express appreciation to a deity and also to fulfill vows. It is a common practice among some Africans, particularly the Yoruba, the Mendes, the Akans, and the Anlo, for devotees of some divinities to go before their divinities to pour out their minds and to promise that if their needs are met, they will give specified offerings in turn. This sacrifice is known as *Ebo Eje* among the Yoruba; the Akans call it *aboade ε* (Twi), and it is known as *dzadodo* among the Anlos.

Foundation Sacrifice

Foundation sacrifice is offered at the beginning of projects such as the foundation of a house, the starting of a business, or the site of a new land for cultivation. In several societies in Africa, before houses are built or villages are founded, sacrifices are made to the gods. Among the Akans, before a building is put up, a sacrifice of appeasement is made to the *Asase Yaa* (Earth goddess). This sacrifice is meant to prevent evil spirits from entering the place.

Sacrificial Objects

In several African societies, sacrificial offerings include a fowl, a four-legged animal, and other things like kola nuts and palm oil. An offender in Anlo land has to offer a sheep, whereas the Mendes offer rice and palm oil and sometimes a fowl. An offender in Akanland offers a sheep or sometimes a fowl depending on the taste of the gods, but what is commonly offered must be without blemish. Some of the sacrificial objects used especially by the Yoruba include *obi* (kola nut), *epo pupa* (palm oil), *efun* (native chalk), *ataare* (alligator pepper), *mariwo* (palm fronds), *eyin* (eggs), and so on.

Sacrificial Victims

- *Fowl*: This domestic pet is commonly used because it is easily available and certain parts of a fowl have distinct meanings for the offerers.
- *Pigeon*: Among the Yoruba, *eyele*, a bird that is noted for its serenity in flight, its neatness of appearance, and its smartness in movement, is offered to invite prosperity, good luck, and longevity.
- *Sheep*: This animal is noted for its meek nature; thus, when a substitute sacrifice is prescribed by the oracle, the usual victim is the sheep. Ogun, unlike other gods, prefers a dog.
- *Cow*: Among the Yoruba, it is regarded as *eranla* (the highest domestic animal). When there is a great national disaster or when a community is badly oppressed, the usual victim is the cow.
- *Human Victim*: In some societies in Africa, the immolation of a human being (*Oluwo*, among the Yoruba) was the highest and costliest victim of sacrifice. The community resorted to human sacrifice mostly in times of national disaster to propitiate certain divinities and purify the community. Human beings were offered not out of lack of respect for human life, but rather because the African's philosophy of life maintains that it is better to sacrifice individual life for the good of the community than for all to perish.

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See also Divinities; Rituals

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SANGOMA

A sangoma is a highly respected healer among the Zulu who diagnoses, prescribes, and often performs the rituals to heal a person physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. Often the sangoma addresses all of these realms in the healing process, which usually involves divination, herbal medicine, and specific, customized rituals to cure the illness and restore well-being.

God, being rarely involved in human affairs, is not a common cause of illness (*isifo*). However, God delegated much of its administrative functions to the ancestors (*Amadlozi*). The latter, therefore, are actively and constantly involved in the world of the living. As a result, they are frequently suspected of being responsible for sending *isifo* to the living. They do this not out of wickedness or caprice, but to punish the living for not abiding by the ethical standards of the community and to remind them of their imperative duty to live a moral life. Failure, for instance, to conduct certain important rituals or violation of a taboo may result in the ancestors' wrath, manifested in the form of sickness. One is then in a state of spiritual pollution and imbalance, which must be redressed. Once divination has established the exact cause of illness, certain rituals will be conducted to appease the ancestors, thus restoring health. The behavior that angered the ancestors will also, of course, not be engaged in again.

In addition to the ancestors, witches and sorcerers have the ability and desire to harm others. They may house evil spirits, use medicines, take on animal (or other) forms, and, generally speaking, resort to several possible agents to hurt other people. Witchcraft is taken quite seriously and is dreaded, given the devastation it may cause in a person's life. As a result, people often take precautionary measures to circumvent evil attempts at harming them. They may engage in rituals whose express purpose is to appeal to the ancestors for protection against witchcraft. They may also

choose to wear protective devices—amulets. The latter are known as *Ama-khubalo* and are often fragments of barks or roots tied around the neck and sucked on. When witchcraft has already struck, specific ngoma rituals, relying heavily on the use of medicinal plants known for their spiritual cleansing powers, will be conducted to neutralize the malevolent forces unleashed by the witch or sorcerer. The expected result is the return of harmony, peace, and health in the life of the person affected.

The sangoma is the most senior of the various traditional healers in South Africa. These healers can inherit or choose their professions. However, the sangoma must be called by Spirit. Because sangomas are called, there are no restrictions on gender imposed by society; however, approximately 90% of sangomas are female. Sangomas, unlike other healers, or malevolent sorcerers, must learn ethnic and communal history and mythology. In this way, they are healers as well as keepers of sacred knowledge. The calling denotes an ancestral and cultural responsibility and is initiated usually by an illness, *ukutwasa*, which is accompanied by strange dreams and visions. This disruption in the daily life of the person causes him or her to seek the services of various healers. Because of the availability of Western medicine in South Africa, many *twasa*, or “apprentices touched by illness,” often try in vain to be cured by modern medicine before ending up with a sangoma who can correctly diagnose *ukutwasa*. This begins their initiation period which can last from months to years depending on the circumstances.

Initiation

In the case of Credo Mutwa, an internationally recognized sangoma, the initiation period lasted 2 years as he made a gradual and at times reluctant transition from his Christian upbringing into the way of life of a sangoma. During this time, he would perform a series of rituals and tasks that would not only cure his body but teach him about the healing power of herbs and traditional medicine as well as tune his body to perceive the subtle spiritual energies vital to the work of a sangoma. His days would start before sunrise with alternating plunges into cold streams followed immediately by hot steam baths. Dance sessions in the

morning and evening would further help tune his body to the spiritual world. He would also have to confess any negative thoughts to his instructor, abstain from eating certain foods and from all sexual activity, and spend his days sitting with his instructor as he received clients. Upon completing a stage of initiation, a feast is held where a calf or goat is slaughtered. The *twasa* then searches the ashes for an unbroken bone. Eventually, this collection will become part of the sangoma's *dingaka* or oracle bones to be used in divination, which is a common, although not exclusive, activity of the sangoma.

Skills

The *dingaka* is composed of animal bones with sacred markings, bits of seashell, and ivory. The sangoma reads the bones to detect the presence of spirits around a sick person, resentful ancestral spirits, offended nature spirits, or malevolent spirits. In serious cases, divination is repeated in three areas in nature to establish the validity of the reading. Diagnosis, an important element of the sangoma's skills, is usually performed through divination. Sangomas are also "soul doctors" because they are able to determine the specific part of a person's soul that is out of balance or afflicted by offending spirits. Among the Zulu, physical or mental illness is understood to originate in the spiritual realm. The spiritual causes of such afflictions are numerous; therefore sangomas must be proficient in a variety of areas. Highly skilled sangomas can make herbal medicines, interpret dreams, incorporate spirits, control weather, and predict the future, as well as be excellent listeners and communicators. Communication is an important characteristic of sangomas because sangomas must effectively listen to the patient to gain both information and trust. Sangomas must then be able to talk to the patient so the patient understands the information the sangoma has, but is still treated with respect. Last, the sangoma has to communicate with entities from the spirit world, some of which are or potentially can be violent or hostile. Again, the emphasis is on effective communication and respect, although the goal is to coax the spirit away from the afflicted person.

The sangoma is also a psychologist who understands the power and workings of the human mind.

Being able to distinguish and treat the various forms of madness prevalent in South Africa is an important skill of a sangoma, as is the ability to neutralize curses, read minds, and communicate via mental telepathy. Other skills of the sangoma include the ability to distinguish between different types of ghosts and the ability to distinguish a real ghost versus a manifestation of the patient's mind and various extraterrestrial life forms. Treatments for various afflictions include dietary modifications, herbal preparations, identification of personal taboos such as the avoidance of a particular substance or place, and spirit expulsion.

Sangomas are respected in the community because of their mystical power and leadership. Sangoma women are indentified by the long woolen wig with beads that symbolizes humility before God. A headband indicates purity of thoughts. A leopard skin skirt denotes honesty and courage, and the occasional red blouse says the sangoma is ready to sacrifice herself for her people. Today, a cloth *heia* has replaced the animal skins but still retains the symbolic meaning. Sangomas work in groups when necessary, such as when a situation requires a lot of focused power. The source of sangomas' power is *umbilini*, whose presence is said to feel like a hot coiled snake ascending the spine. The sangoma learns to summon this power at will through the beating of the drum or deep meditation. The source of sangomas' power according to Credo Mutwa's grandfather is a hidden lake, a huge unseen lake in the spirit world with all knowledge of the universe: past, present, and future.

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See also Divination Systems; Healing; Initiation

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SANKOFA, CONCEPT

Sankofa is an Akan (West African) word made up of three parts: *san* (“return”), *ko* (“go back”), and *fa* (“fetch/retrieve”). It is a symbol and principle that serves to remind us that the past is a “resource” and not merely a “reference.” It is ripe with meaning for Africans. One interpretation, among several, is “Go back to the past and recover it.” Yet another one is “Return to the source.” Similarly, sankofa may be interpreted as an injunction to “learn from the past” and finally as an order to “never forget the past and path you made when moving ahead.”

The typical visual form is a bird standing or walking forward while reaching back with its head into its feathers. The bird is said to be taking something off its tail, searching through its tail feathers, or grooming itself. There are at least five meanings associated with this representation of Sankofa. First, it suggests the value of reflecting on the past. Second, it also suggests a person who self-consciously reflects before moving forward with a decision. Third, it represents self-definition, identity, and vision. Fourth, it represents an understanding of personal destiny and collective vocation. Finally, fifth, Sankofa is said to represent the repossession of something forgotten, misplaced, or lost. In addition, the head of the bird appears to be picking up an egg, thus further suggesting that the path we have made holds the potential to understanding the present and the promise of the future. It describes an ongoing process, principle, and value of historical and cultural recovery.

Although valuing the past is part of the general African tradition and heritage, going back to the Nile Valley, as part of a process of historical recovery, has particular relevance for Africans today, especially having undergone the holocaust

and its subsequent mutations into other forms of oppression. Many writers, leaders, and intellectuals see cultural and historical recovery as essential to the forward development based on the cultural integrity of Africans as a people. The term denotes historical recovery and is ripe with metaphors ready for one to decipher. In an age when African descendants are told that their pasts are at best irrelevant to the present and at worst nonexistent, unworthy of discussion, or having no bearing on the present, this profound concept serves the useful purpose of reminding African descendants of their moral obligation to remember and recognize the sacrifices of the past, the countless number of souls and ancestors who worked and suffered tremendously on plantations, so that we could live the lives we want and deserve to live. Sankofa as a process and principle of recovering history functions as a reminder that the past is not merely a referential source of origins and artifacts, but a source of paradigms, that is, exemplary models of thought, reason, morality, and practice. The past, then, offers us a model of excellence, whereas history provides us with many lessons that inform our current self-conception and social identity.

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See also Ancestors

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SANKOFA, FILM

Released in 1993, *Sankofa* is a film written, directed, and produced by Howard University professor Haile Gerima. Considered one of the most important contributions to cinema, the film derives its name from the important Africana

cultural concept *Sankofa*. *Sankofa*, an Akan term that means to return to the past and move forward, became emblematic of Black empowerment and the embrace of Africanity in the late 1980s and early 1990s among people of African descent. *Sankofa* the film is a realist drama depicting the horrors of the system of enslavement and the transformative and redemptive characteristic of rebellion. The plot of the film revolves around the experiences of one main character, “Mona/Shola” (Oyafunmike Ogunlano). As Mona, the character is a miseducated fashion model who finds herself transported from a modern-day photographic assignment choreographed at an ancient slaveholding castle in Ghana to the persona of Shola, a house slave on a large plantation. *Sankofa* is a journey of self-discovery, which employs a number of African spirituality concepts, including spiritual possession and the collective rituals of resistance. A local priest and guardian of the sacred site where enslaved Africans passed through, Sankofa (Kofi Ghanaba) induces the character Mona to “Get back to your past!” The film also made bold statements about the inherent cruelty of the system of enslavement, the hypocrisy of Christianity and slavery, the sexual exploitation of enslaved African women, and the management of African and slave identities to internally advance the system of enslavement. In contrast to prior major motion pictures depicting Africans within the system of enslavement, *Sankofa* consistently unfolded the story Afrocentrically, from the African’s perspective, emphasizing the overwhelming determination to be free embodied in the character of Shango (Mutabaruka).

Gerima, born in Ethiopia and based in the United States since the late 1960s, faced a number of challenges in getting the film completed and aired throughout the country. His film company partnered with the government of Ghana and used equipment from Burkina Faso. An exemplar of independent African filmmaking, *Sankofa* was produced for less than \$1 million. Gerima, undaunted by American production and distribution challenges to his film, initially galvanized Black communities nationwide (New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Newark, Chicago, and Atlanta) in the airing of the film in theaters often classified as “art houses.” Gerima has won

national and international awards for his films, including *Sankofa* (Oscar Micheaux Award and First Prize, African Film Festival—Milan; and Best Cinematography Award at the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou [FESPACO] in Burkina Faso). As a result of its success and impact on global cinema, many journalists and scholars have critically reviewed *Sankofa*. *Sankofa* has been described as a “turning point” in contemporary Black film and a departure from the stock Hollywood Black gangster genre. Gerima has consistently produced films that challenge mainstream views of the African experience (e.g., *Mirt Sost Shi Amit* [*Harvest: 3000 Years*] and *Adwa: An African Victory*). His 1976 *Bush Mama* has often been described as an important departure from the era’s blaxploitation films. As in *Sankofa*, Gerima is noted for his ability to exceed cinematic convention by humanizing African people and the Black experience. *Sankofa* has been linked to a number of important African independent films that comprise an Afrocentric or African-centered liberatory genre, including, but not limited to, *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash), *The Second Coming* (Blair Underwood), and documentaries such as *Black Studies USA* (Niyi Coker) and *500 Years Later* (M. K. Asante, Jr., and Owen ‘Alik Shahadah).

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See also Akan; Ancestors; Maroon Communities; Resistance to Enslavement; Yoruba

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SANTERIA

Santeria (also known in Cuba as *regla de ocha*, *Oricha*, or *Lucumi*) is a trans-Atlantic extension of Yoruba religion into the African diaspora. Santeria is one of a number of related Yoruba-based religions existing in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Throughout this region, relatively new religious forms arose out of the encounters of indigenous Amerindian peoples, European settlers, and imported Africans and Asians as Europe colonized the Americas. The religion of the Yoruba people, mainly found in the countries of Nigeria, Togo, and the Republic of Benin, is an ancient religious system with millions of adherents on the African continent as well as in the Americas. Just as there are regional and doctrinal variants within the Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic religions, this is the case with Yoruba religion as well, and Santeria is simply the Cuban variant of this older, more extensive Yoruba religious tradition.

Origins

The history of Santeria effectively begins in West Africa, where the Yoruba had evolved their own religious and social traditions. The Yoruba kingdom was set in a network of political and cultural interaction with the old kingdom of Benin in Nigeria and the kingdom of Dahomey in what is now the Republic of Benin. In the 18th and 19th centuries, all three of these kingdoms battled against each other and were unwillingly involved in the European slave trade. Yorubas were only a small segment of the enslaved Africans brought into Cuba in its beginnings, but at the height of

the warfare and the slave trade (1840–1870), more than one third of all the Africans brought into Cuba were Yorubas. Because Cuba’s Catholic church was closely allied with the national government and because Catholicism was the only religion that was legal, as Cuba remained a Spanish colony, once they were in Cuba, all the African ethnic groups—including the Yorubas—came under pressure to convert to Catholicism and abandon their traditional religions. The Catholic church’s strategy was this: Guide the Africans gradually toward a complete conversion to Christianity, but tolerate some mixing of African and Catholic religions along the way. To this end, the Catholic church founded Afro-Catholic fraternities in cities with sizable African populations. The fraternities, called *cabildos*, formed mutual aid societies for people from the same African ethnic background. The Yoruba-based *cabildos* formed an institutional basis for what would later become known as *Santeria*, *regla de ocha*, *Oricha*, or *Lucumi*.

At the same time as they preserved African traditions, the *cabildos* also promoted Catholic religious education and participation in the church’s public festivals. In the late 19th century, however, when it became clear that the *cabildos*’ African religious traditions—even in their mixed and modified forms—were not about to disappear, the Catholic church and the colonial government joined hands to try to stamp them out. The Catholic church cut its ties to the *cabildos*, the government passed increasingly oppressive legislation against them, and the police clamped down on them, too, treating involvement in the Afro-Cuban religions as a criminal activity. In response, the *cabildos* went underground, and Santeria worship became clandestine.

During this era of suppression, Santeria was also influenced by the spiritist doctrines of Hippolyte Rivail. Rivail’s books had begun appearing in Cuba as early as the 1850s, but between 1870 and 1880, his writings spread like a tidal wave throughout the French and Spanish Caribbean and into Central and South America. Writing under the pen name Allan Kardec, this French engineer proclaimed the revelation of an updated, scientific spiritualism. His books described the results of a positive investigation of the spiritual world, which others could also carry



A Santeria priest blows brandy over an Elegua (Yoruba deity) as part of a prediction ritual asking for the health of Cuban president Fidel Castro. August, 7, 2006, in Havana.

Source: AFP/Getty Images.

out through mediumistic séances, and he preached a kind of Christian morality based on suffering, charity, and spiritual development. All this had been dictated to him by spirits.

Although Kardecian spiritism—or Espiritismo as it came to be called—first took hold among literate highly placed Cuban Creoles who wanted independence from Spain and were alienated from the Spanish-dominated Catholic church, it eventually worked its way down to the urban masses and out into the countryside. Although Santeria had been transmitted primarily by oral tradition since at least the 18th century, and although Rivail's books had to be smuggled into Cuba because they were illegal, his writings still had an impact on the development of Santeria. Some Santeria priests came to view apprenticeship as a spiritist medium as a valid, even necessary prerequisite for the practice of their religion. They became adepts in both systems and also adopted some of Espiritismo's healing techniques.

Although Catholicism and Espiritismo have affected the development of Santeria, its ritual system and cosmology remain essentially African in character, with a strong fidelity to Yoruba practices. Among the faithfully preserved aspects of Yoruba religion in Santeria are the names and personalities of the Yoruba deities, divination procedures, ceremonial spirit possession and trance, Yoruba liturgical music and musical instruments, dance as a medium of worship, Yoruba language prayers and incantations, beliefs in ancestor veneration and reincarnation, and sacrificial practices. Santeria contains a vast compendium of herbal medicine and healing ritual, much of which also has African analogues.

Beliefs

Despite the impact of Espiritismo and Christianity, Yoruba religious conceptions clearly dominate Santeria's pantheon, ritual, and worldview. Santeria theology recognizes a somewhat distant Supreme Being, called by various Yoruba names, such as *Olodumare*, *Olorun*, and *Olofi*, or simply *Dios* (God) in Spanish. The Supreme Being created the universe and all things in it, including the *orisha*, who are the main focus of worship. The *orisha* (also called *santos*) are powerful spiritual beings—at once forces of nature, guardians of

particular facets of human life, and magnified human personality types—sent by Olodumare to populate and civilize the Earth and endow it with the essential powers necessary for the harmonious existence of all living things. Although there are innumerable orishas throughout the world, and the number of them known among Yorubas in Nigeria is large, only a few have special prominence in Santeria, and each of these corresponds to a saint also known and venerated in Cuba's Catholic churches.

The spirits of people who have died are also important. The ancestral Dead are closer to human beings than they are to Olodumare or the orisha, and deceased family members continue to have an intimate connection with their descendants. The ancestral Dead are capable of intervening in the affairs of their living relatives and can be called on to intercede with the orisha. Although they are less powerful than the orisha and less attention is given to them, they still receive respect and veneration, and all devotees have a small altar devoted to them.

An encompassing energy, *aché*, flows through and envelopes the entire hierarchy of beings from Olodumare, through the orisha, the ancestral Dead and other spirits, plants, animals, and the entire natural world. This energy can be manipulated through rituals and can be made to manifest itself in different forms. Each orisha has its own divine power, or *aché*, through which it is sustained and through which it acts on the aspects of the world over which Olodumare gave it dominion. When the orisha first formed human beings, they also taught them how to access each orisha's power. This knowledge is the basis of the rituals and doctrines of the different priesthoods. Through these rituals, devotees expect to achieve an active harmony with the Supreme Being, a closer relationship with the orisha and the natural world, and increased control over the forces affecting their lives and personal fortunes.

Santeria is neither a salvation religion that rejects the world nor a revealed religion with an authoritative founder or holy book. For Santeria devotees, spiritual beings and religious truths do not exist in a world apart from the natural and social world known to our senses; instead, they reside within it. Santeria has an intensely hierarchical, human-centered, and this-worldly cosmology that does not

draw a hard-and-fast line between either the human and the divine or the living and the Dead. Because Santeria is primarily concerned with the self and with achieving ritual mastery of the natural, social, and spiritual forces affecting daily life, the religious attitude of priests and devotees might best be described as instrumental—that is, “If it works for you, believe it.” Despite Santeria’s history of religious persecution, Santeria priests and devotees are generally tolerant of other religions. Many regard themselves as Catholics, whereas others fluidly slip among the worlds of the Catholic mass, the spiritists’ white table, and Santeria drum dance with little deliberation or anxiety.

Worship

Santeria is not congregational and so does not depend on the existence of a temple or church building. Worship is both individual and communal. Lay devotees carry out a round of private offerings to the santos in their homes; priests and priestesses perform rituals and provide herbal medicine, counseling, and symbolic healing to devotees and the general public. There is also a cycle of annual festivals coordinated with the saints’ feast days of Cuba’s Catholic church.

Most individual worship takes place in front of the altars that devotees keep in their homes or outside in natural settings such as a riverside, near the sea, or in a forest or park. Much individual worship consists of offerings to the orisha and the Dead. These offerings generally have two purposes: The first is to allow the devotee to influence the orisha and gain access to its *aché* to help solve personal problems. The second purpose is to help the devotee develop a bond of reciprocity and mutual respect with the orisha, a bond thought to be beneficial not only for the human devotee, but for the orisha as well. Offerings can take many forms, including cooked or raw food, liquor, money, cloth, prayers, or entire ceremonies, as well as the blood of sacrificed animals.

Communal worship is highly participatory and features ritual dance; call-and-response chants performed in Yoruba and accompanied by drums; ceremonial spirit possession; ancestor veneration; and, on occasion, animal sacrifices. The most characteristic form of communal worship in Santeria is the *bembe* or *toque de santo*. *Bembes* are great

feasts and celebrations often correlated with the feast days of those Catholic saints who have orisha associated with them or coincident with the initiation of a priest or priestess, the anniversary of a priest’s initiation, or the fulfillment of some other religious obligation to the orisha a priestess may have.

Spirit mediumship is at the core of the *bembe*, so these ceremonies usually fall into two parts: the invocation of the ancestral Dead and the orisha, and the presence of the orisha among their devotees. The invocations are libations and prayers made before an orisha altar in Lucumi, the Cuban variant of the Yoruba language that is the liturgical tongue for all religious observances in Santeria, followed by music directed at the altar by an ensemble of drummers who lead call-and-response chants sung with a motionless group of standing devotees. In the second part of the ceremony, devotees perform dances imitating the personalities, attributes, and attitudes of the each of the orisha as their chants are sung in an attempt to attract the orisha, to compel them to come and take over the bodies of their priests and priestesses, and manifest themselves in a visible human form. When this event occurs, the possessed priests and priestesses are garbed in the colors and clothing appropriate to the orisha who has mounted them and they interact with the community of believers: talking to them, confronting them, consoling them, healing them, making prophecies, or recommending that they carry out certain rituals. Eventually the orisha return to their invisible realm, leaving behind a group of exhausted priests who have no memory of what their bodies did while orisha possessed them. A purification rite ends this part of the ceremony, a communal meal follows, and then a general distribution of the fruits and desserts that have surrounded the altar throughout the events.

Diffusion of Santeria

The spread of Santeria outside of Cuba mainly owes its origins to Cuban exiles who left in 1959 and also those who were part of the exodus from the port of Mariel in 1980. They brought Santeria to the United States, where it spread to other Latino communities and to African American, white, and Asian communities as well. From these

contacts in the United States, Santeria has made its way back into the Caribbean to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Cubans transplanted the religion to Mexico and also to Venezuela, where the santos/orishas have already begun to win new devotees and exert an influence on the Venezuelan popular religions. A small number of exiled santeras have made their way to Europe, and, through them, Santeria became established in Spain, spreading from there to other European countries.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Santeria in Cuba is undergoing a renaissance fueled by tourism, greater tolerance from the government, and higher levels of contact among Santeria communities dispersed throughout the Americas and Europe, and with Yoruba practitioners in Africa. Aided by high-speed travel and the Internet, there is much greater intercommunication between the growing number of people on four continents who see themselves as devotees of the orisha.

George Brandon

See also Orisha; Yoruba

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SARA

The Sara ethnic group lives in the Central African Republic around the area of Lake Chad. They are associated with several other linguistic and cultural groups that include the Kara, Gula, Kreish, Ngama, and Nduka. In fact, if one takes these groups alongside the Sara proper, they constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in the country. What is clear is that the Sara material culture shows evidence of migration from the eastern region of the continent.

In examining the material contributions of the Sara people, one has to pay attention to the productive qualities of the culture. They are mainly agrarian. Among the foodstuff that they grow and eat are taro, yams, and sweet potatoes that provide their basic sustenance. They also raise cattle, sheep, goats, and chickens, as well as small horses. Sara people have relied on their agricultural skills to maintain a healthy community and to ward off outsiders. Nevertheless, they have had a history of invasions from Arab slave traders who devastated the culture of the people over a long period of time.

Arab slave traders from the 15th through the 19th centuries invaded the Sara lands, taking many of the artisans and farmers into slavery. The enslavement and persecution of the people created enormous pressure on the traditional religion of the people, forcing them to change many of their practices and observances and to change the location of their shrines. Punishment and brutality eventually created a distorted traditional religious practice. Many Sara were forced out of their region into places controlled by Arabs, and others became Muslims to escape the appellation *infidel*. Indeed, the interaction with the Arab slave traders caused the people to seek the perforation of the lower lips of their women so as to make them less attractive to the Arab slave traders. Various decorative plugs were placed in the perforations as ornaments.

Sara culture remains deeply traditional, although Islam has significantly influenced the society. As is true of many African societies, bodies of elders normally oversee autonomous village communities, each of which is composed of separate marriages outside the clan. This tradition as a part of the historical response of the people to

ancestral custom recognizes the roots of the Sara. The moral authority of the Sara people is tied up in the rituals of passage of the young men and women that occur every 7 years for a period of 2 months. For boys and girls, this is a phase of physical hardship, discipline, and ethnic scarification as measures to indicate maturity.

Indeed, the Sara people represent one of the ethnic groups that have been forced to relinquish a major part of their ancient traditions and customs because of external religious influences. Belief in the impact of the ancestors on the living is still a part of the Sara tradition despite the inroads made into their culture by other religions.

M. Tillotson

See also Ancestors; Rituals

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SARAMACCA

The Saramacca people are one of six Maroon communities found in Surinam in the South American hemisphere. The Maroons of Surinam have the distinction of being the only Maroons to have maintained themselves as politically and culturally autonomous communities in the Americas up to this day. Indeed, unlike Maroon communities in other parts of the Americas, such as Brazil, for example, the Maroons of Surinam have managed to perdure and carry on their traditions. There are about 60,000 Maroons in Surinam, with the Saramacca numbering approximately 25,000. In addition to the Saramacca, the other Maroon communities include the Djuka, the Matawai, the Aluku (also known as Boni), the Paramacca, and the Kwinti.

Surinam, formerly known as Dutch Guiana, was invaded in 1651 by the British, who set up a plantation economy based on chattel slavery and

the production of sugar, a typical development in South and Central America at that time. In 1667, however, the Dutch successfully seized Surinam from the British and proceeded to expand the production of sugar, with the massive and constant introduction of Africans. In fact, the high mortality rate among enslaved Africans, which could not be compensated for due to a low birth rate and which was due primarily to the atrociousness of slavery and the extremely harsh life conditions that enslaved Africans experienced, rendered necessary the uninterrupted arrival of men, women, and children from the African continent. With them, those men, women, and children brought their culture, including, of course, African religion. The culture of the Maroons of Surinam is often cited by scholars as the most obviously and unmistakably African culture of the Americas. Interestingly, and as a preliminary example, one of the Saramacca villages is called *Dahomey*, the name of a powerful kingdom in West Africa. Also, the Creole language spoken by the Saramacca is tonal, a characteristic phonological feature of African languages. About 30% of the Africans taken into bondage in Surinam came from Central Africa, with the remaining 70% originating in West Africa.

Africans started escaping from plantations as soon as they were brought into Surinam, that is, in 1651. The Saramacca probably started coalescing, as a community, in 1690, when a large number of Africans escaped together. In 1728, the Saramacca, as well as other Maroon communities that had come then into existence as well, began to raid plantations in an attempt to obtain weapons, tools, and women. The Dutch attempted to fight back and crush the Maroons, whose frequent attacks had made their life quite difficult, if not impossible. However, they were unsuccessful and opted for peace treaties with the Maroons starting in 1760. Those peace treaties, among other things, acknowledged Maroon communities as sovereign nations, totally independent from the plantations. When slavery was finally abolished in Surinam, in 1863, the Maroons maintained their autonomy and continued to live in a fair amount of isolation in the interior of the country.

The Saramacca are organized in *lo*, that is, matrilinear clans. Members of a *lo* trace their ancestry back to a common woman ancestor. Each Saramacca village coincides with a given *lo*. It has

its own leader and council. However, above the villages and the lo presides the *Granman*. The Granman is regarded as the king of the Saramacca people. He also functions as a high priest. He is assisted in his functions by a council of elders, who act as the formal government of the Saramacca people.

The Saramacca believe in one supreme god, Grangado. Grangado is responsible for the creation of the world, including protective divinities, which may mount the living. Important spirits include sky spirits, forest spirits, and snake spirits. Obia, or the power of magic, is revered and cherished for its ability to protect one on a daily basis. Ancestral spirits are also highly regarded. There are special songs for them, known as *Papa songs*. Drumming and dancing are intricate and fundamental parts of Saramacca religion. A typical battery of sacred drums includes three specific drums: the *Apinti*, used to communicate with sky and ancestral spirits; the *Tumao*, used for spirits from the forest; and the *Agida*, used to facilitate communication with snake spirits. Those drums are sacred because they allow the divinities, the ancestors, and the living to exchange messages. The drums act as both conveyors and translators of those messages. In addition to the drums, other instruments are used. Of particular importance in Saramacca religious music is the rattle. Known as *pemba dote*, white clay is commonly spread over ritualistic and religious items. Again, it is believed to further facilitate communication between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. Dancing takes place while drums are being beaten, and one may be mounted by a spirit while dancing to the drums. Bandama and Awasa are two significant Saramacca dances. Twins, as in many parts of the African world, are regarded as sacred. Healing is achieved through spiritual means and reliance on leaves, plants, and oils. Finally, each village has a religious shrine for the divinities and ancestors. At the entrance of the villages, overhead wooden barriers, called *azang*, have been erected for the purpose of protecting the villages from the assault of evil spirits.

Ama Mazama

See also Clay; Maroon Communities; Twins

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SARCOPHAGUS

In general, a sarcophagus is a stone container that houses either another smaller coffin or a corpse. The word derives from the Greek words *sarks*, meaning “flesh,” and *phagein*, meaning “to eat,” and literally translates as “flesh eating.” It is said that Herodotus (or Pliny) observed that the stone used to construct sacrophagi in Troy, in Asia, consumed the flesh of the corpse inside. Hence, all such structures were referred to as sarcophagi. However, in ancient Egypt, the word used to designate the outer stone container for the body is transliterated as *nb ‘nkh* and translates to “lord of life,” a reference to Osiris (Ausar) who is the Lord of Life because of his resurrection after being murdered by Set. Because Osiris represents eternal life, the *nb ‘nkh* is designed to protect the body for eternity, ensure the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife, and provide a house for the *ka*. The glyphs that make up the word “lord of life” are the basket, the ankh, water, placenta, and a determinative made up of the rectangular outline of the *nb ‘nkh*. Another determinative used for *nb ‘nkh* is the image of the reclining Osiris.

Osiris recurs as an essential theme in the symbolism, imagery, iconography, and text that appear on most *nb ‘nkh*. However, early in Egyptian history, bodies were flexed and placed on plank constructions within baskets. Perhaps the glyph of the basket reflects this early usage. Bodies were

buried in extended positions during the time of Khufu and Sneferu in the 4th dynasty, which was approximately 2494 BC. Later in the Old Kingdom, physical offerings and provisions of food were placed inside, and images of food offerings were drawn inside of the nb 'nkh. These were to sustain the ka of the deceased. A pair of eyes was drawn on the side of the nb 'nkh that faced east, the direction of the rising sun. This was to ensure that the ka could "see," but, more specifically, to see the rising sun, which is another prominent Egyptian symbol of rebirth. During the Middle Kingdom, extracts from the Pyramid Texts appear on the nb 'nkh and more explicit identifications with Osiris such as anthropoid-shaped containers with arms crossed at the chest and his signature beard.

In the New Kingdom, scenes once drawn on tomb walls were rendered on these containers, still with Osiris as a key theme. Images would be drawn depicting the deceased standing in judgment before Osiris, the journey of the deceased into the underworld, and the voyage on the solar bark. New imagery was also introduced during this period with the depiction of Geb on the floor of the nb 'nkh and Nut on the lid. As a variation, Hathor and the djed pillar would be rendered on the floor while Nut would still be drawn on the lid. In addition to images, text was often rendered such as the Litany of Ra and excerpts from the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*. The 25th dynasty revitalized styles from earlier periods and introduced nb 'nkh with two or three nesting containers.

Denise Martin

See also Burial of the Dead

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SEBA

Seba (Sba), or *saba*, is the ancient African word for teacher and may be the etymological source of the word philosopher (*philos* + lover of + *sophe* +

wisdom). It is believed that the Greek term *Sophia* is derived from the ancient Egyptian *Sba*. In Kemet, there exists complete description of what a seba does and values. Seba, like most Kemetic words, is polysemic, meaning that it carries other meanings and associations as well. Nonetheless, seba is the moral teacher or philosopher, the one who contemplates the deeper meaning and morality of things, and one who teaches through instruction and exemplary practice. The seba is the scribe, intellectual activist, and priest, the record keeper and adviser. Some early seba include Imhotep (circa 2700 BC), the first deified seba to write on the big questions of illness, disease, and immortality. Ptah Hotep (circa 2414 BC) reflected and wrote on significant questions of youth, aging, and gerontology. Merikare (circa 1990 BC) contemplated and wrote on relevant questions of rhetoric, knowledge, and the axiology of speaking well. His contemporary Sehotepibre (circa 1991 BC) wrote concerning the citizen's loyalty and relationship to the leader of the nation. Another contemporary, Amenemhat (circa 1991 BC), was the earliest known cynic seba, cautioning readers to choose friends wisely. Amenhotep, son of Hapu (circa 1400 BC), became the second deified seba who mastered all the available knowledge of the ancients. Duauf (circa 1340) was the educational seba and bibliophile who cherished learning and wrote on his love of books. Finally, Akhenaton (1300 BC) was a theologian of seba who single-handedly changed the Kemetic theology to reflect his personal beliefs about God. These seba among the ancients contributed to world knowledge.

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See also Akhenaten; Amenhotep

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SECLUSION

Seclusion is the separation of a person from a larger community to ritually celebrate the transition or passage from one stage to another. In some ways, seclusion is synonymous with the first phase of the three major phases (separation, transition, and incorporation) in the concept of "rites of passage," that is, the rites associated with the human life cycle (naming, puberty, marriage, and death). In some other ways, seclusion marks the beginning of the initiation into cult, priesthood, or traditional political status. The practice also comes up with the renewal of the community's beginning or during critical moments of personal or communal crisis. Seclusion is highly significant in terms of its cultural, social, spiritual, and political structure and contents.

Significance

Seclusion symbolizes a number of activities: cosmic journey, death and rebirth, cleansing and renewal, chaos and order, renunciation and transformation, power and authority, secrecy and knowledge, and identity and relationship.

Seclusion provides a medium for the acquisition of critical knowledge and movement into the realm of power and responsibility so defined by the community. It redefines and seals the definition of a person or group of persons involved. The practice, sometimes requiring partial or total fasting and self-denials, involves a detachment and aggregation of the initiate(s) from the general to isolation, and back to general, thus becoming a new person of another status.

The process of seclusion not only defines the initiate(s) as sacred, but also identifies certain spaces or places, times or periods, and actions as divine through ritual performances. Seclusion provides the initiate an avenue to engage in the culture of the society and the new status that he or she is to assume. It is here that cultural values are reenacted and cultural lore injected and instilled in the initiate(s). The state of seclusion evokes in the initiate(s) self-doubt and reflection. This transitory state, which has been described by some scholars as a state of between and betwixt, defines the ascribed and socioculturally hierarchically constructed positions of the community. In

situations when seclusion involves a group of participants, seclusion produces a feeling of a spirit of "communitas," a feeling of group warmth, solidarity, and unity, although it is fraught with a deeper feeling of awe and momentary rejection. In any case, it is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty for the participants. The practice of seclusion varies among the different peoples of Africa in terms of human responsibility, social and political structures, and gender and power relations.

Body, Ritual, and Transformation

The moment of seclusion provides a symbolic system of understanding the potential relations among the biological, cultural, and spiritual through the body, the locus where transformation occurs. The body is the vehicle that conveys the individual on a cosmic journey where full and true realization of his or her beingness in the community is reached. The movement in ritual process proclaims the reality of human growth, cultural expectation, and adaptation, and it conveys social responsibility within the universe that is conceived as spiritually populated and charged. The journey of the body requires certain discipline that may be physical and psychological, training in the mind, and most times a reflection of the movement from one state of being to another state of being, making the earlier a state of indignity. Thus, in the seclusion rites dealing with the cycle of life (birth, marriage, puberty, and death) and rituals of initiation into cults and traditional political statuses (as in kingship and chieftaincy), the movement engages the body in a new form of existence. In the process of the journey to the new life, there is a flow of power of generational significance, which is believed only to be made available to the privileged ones. Seclusion features most prominently in the following groups of events, which are also common to African peoples: rites of passage, renewal of hegemony, and initiation into priesthood.

Life Cycle Rituals

Birth and Death

Seclusion imposes on a woman a complex situation of responsibility of pollution and purity,

chaos and order in the rites that mark birth and death. For example, a Zulu woman, in the company of married women, is required to be in seclusion in the first 10 days after giving birth. This is necessary because her association with the new life places her in a potentially dangerous condition of ritual pollution. Among the Yoruba, the woman remains in seclusion for 9 days (for boys) and 7 days (for girls) when the incorporation of the child (through naming) is done. During the period of seclusion, the woman is given a special but unusual meal, soup without salt and oil. To the Kikuyu of eastern Africa, seclusion symbolizes death and resurrection, where the mother and child symbolically die and rise again during and after a naming ceremony.

Puberty

Seclusion is crucial to the performance of puberty rites—the rites that are performed to celebrate the coming of age by girls and boys. The performance is fairly common and elaborate among most peoples of Africa, although with different intensity, because it introduces boys and girls into sex life, ushering them into parental and family responsibility. Among some ethnic groups of Sierra Leone, seclusion takes the form of formal separation into societies: Poro for the male, and Sande for the female. In their seclusion moment, they receive instructions that are tailored around mythic heroines or heroes, sexual activities, and customs and taboos of the community. For the Tiv, Ibibio, and Igbo peoples of Nigeria, girls observe a period of seclusion that takes 4 months in “fattening houses” that are built for the purpose. During their seclusion, they are fed with fatty foods, and their bodies are anointed with oil to make them plump and beautiful in preparation for marriage. Girls are also exposed to sexual functions and motherhood and the dignity of virginity and chastity at marriage in the houses. They learn songs, dances, the customs of the community, and its myth of origin.

Among the Ndembu people of northwestern Zambia, a girl goes into seclusion for several months, where she acquires the virtues embedded in the normative aspects of womanhood, motherhood, and the mother–child bond. The use of a particular milk tree that symbolizes aspects of

female body imagery, such as milk, suckling, breasts, and girlish slenderness, and conception climaxes the initiation into puberty. For boys, they are collected from a cluster of villages for seclusion, first in a camp where they are prepared for circumcision. A fire is lit in the camp and continues to burn for the length of the rites. It is on this fire that the mothers of the boys prepare food that the boys eat during this seclusion. Immediately after the circumcision, the boys are then secluded in a lodge until their circumcision wounds are healed. Here they are taught lessons relating to adulthood, after which masked dancers beat them with sticks, they are taken to a stream and washed, and then they are sent into the forest to trap animals. They return to their parents’ camp in painted bodies, disguised in such a manner that their identities are not easily known. The seclusion period closes when the boys return to their villages to participate in community adult life.

For the Tswana of southern Africa, seclusion features in the initiation of both boys and girls into adulthood; male initiation is, however, more extensive and elaborate, and so is male seclusion. The males who are old enough to serve as regimental leaders are assembled and sent outside of the village to spend about 1 month under the supervision of some senior men. There they sing, dance, and make ceremonial kilts out of bark. They undergo circumcision and remain in seclusion in special lodges. Here, they learn dances, songs, and ethical norms that emphasize obedience to the chief, filial piety, and the domination of women. This event qualifies them to reenter into the society with a new status of political relevance and significance. Their girls are also secluded outside the village, where ritual operations involving cutting of the inner thigh and perforating the hymen offer them a transition to adulthood and an opportunity to be given instruction in domestic wisdom in preparation for marriage.

A young Pokot woman in Northern Kenya, in East Africa, is put in seclusion after being circumcised. She wears garments made of leather and a cloth over her head. Her face is covered with a white paste made from milk and ashes. She holds a staff or stick in her hand. One of her breasts can be seen under her leather cloak, and she has cicatrix markings for body decoration. Frazer recorded some other taboos that were expected

to be observed by the girls at puberty among old communities of Akamba, Baganda, Zulu, Tanganyika, Nyanja-speaking people of Central Africa, Wagogo, Lake Nyassa, Zambezi, Lower Congo, and so forth.

Pregnancy

Seclusion of the pregnant woman takes place at different stages of pregnancy among African communities. Although it takes place at crisis moments in the life of the pregnant woman in some communities, particularly when there is a threatened miscarriage, some communities seclude their women at a particular period of pregnancy. Among the Igbo community of southeastern Nigeria, seclusion takes place after about the fifth month of pregnancy. It covers about 28 days (7 Igbo weeks) when the woman assistant smears the body of the pregnant woman with chalk every fourth day. The pregnant woman is clothed in her best wrapper on the final day. She goes to the marketplace with a calabash that contains a coconut, a piece of meat, and 16 cowries. The young boys of her family meet her at the marketplace, where they collect the coconut and break it. She is given some of it to eat while she offers them the 16 cowries. The pregnant woman parades the marketplace and distributes the pieces of coconut. She is offered gifts in return. She comes back home to distribute the remaining coconut to the children in the family.

Death

Among the Yoruba and Igbo people of Nigeria, a woman whose husband dies remains in seclusion for a period of between 21 and 40 days, during which time she does not bathe. In Igboland, the widow goes into seclusion after her hands have been washed with water by the husband's senior sister. The sister rubs the hands with an unbroken egg and throws it away into the "bad bush." Also, on the first day of the market day after the man's death, the head of the widow is shaved by the deceased's sisters. At the end of 1 month, there is a ritual cleansing, including the sweeping of the room where the widow stayed. The mat on which the widow sat and the dishes used are carried away at night into the bad bush. The widow goes

to a stream early in the morning to wash herself, saying, "I have washed away all the evil of the death which killed my husband." For the Igbo and Yoruba widows, a partial seclusion follows, which involves the wearing of garments of dark color for a period of 1 year. The clothes are then discarded and sometimes burned.

Power and Renewal of Hegemony

Installation of the Monarchs

Installation of the monarchs among the indigenous peoples requires that the candidate go into a period of seclusion, during which he or she undergoes traditional ritual ceremonies of empowerment, which marks him as the head of the community. He or she learns the traditions of the people, the myth of origin of the community, and the taboos associated with the authority of his or her royal throne that are only known by the chief priest of the community. The number of days varies according to the customs of each community.

Annual Hegemonic Festivals

It is also a commonplace phenomenon for most traditional rulers to go into seclusion, particularly at the beginning of the annual hegemonic festivals that mark the origin of the town, which are usually connected to certain hierophantic experiences that the original settlers are claimed to have had with a deity, usually described sociologically as "the idol of the tribe." Such a festival defines the people's group identity. A good example is the Ooni of Ifè, the monarch of the city that is regarded as the cradle of Yorùbáland. The commencement of the Olojo festival is marked by the Ooni's 5-day spiritual retreat when he goes into total seclusion in the next room to the legendary Are crown, the crown that he puts on only once a year as the keeper of the seal. During the 5-day period, he will neither eat nor drink, nor talk to any mortal including wives, children, friends, subjects, or the palace staff. He would be expected to be communing only with the Yoruba deities, performing annual traditional rites for peace, security, and stability for his immediate community, the Yoruba people, and Nigeria as a whole.

Related to annual hegemonic festivals is the seclusion of the priest, priestess, or votary maid who bears the seal of the pact between the deity of the land and the first settler, usually dramatized in hegemonic festivals. The bearer of the seal is prepared for the journey usually in seclusion that lasts a period of 7 days or more. The votary maid of Osun Osogbo in Nigeria presents a good example. She goes into seclusion on ritual preparation to be able to succeed in the festival, where she is expected to carry the symbolic calabash representing the presence of the Osun deity, the failure of which spells calamity for the entire town, including the monarch.

Training of and Special Operations by Priests, Priestesses, and Healers

The training and initiation of priests, priestesses, and healers are usually conducted in seclusion. Among the Akan of Ghana, for example, to become a priest healer requires the candidates to undergo several years of training in seclusion. The candidate is "separated from the world" to observe strict taboos and other disciplines, and to receive instructions in natural and religious laws. In the process, he or she goes into possession by the deity. Priests and priestesses may also be required to go into seclusion in moments of crisis affecting the community, during which time consultations are made with deities who are claimed to be responsible for the problems and those who are claimed to be capable of resolving the crisis. During the period of such seclusion, rites are performed to remove and ward off the effects of evils in the land and to restore ontological equilibrium. In some cases, patients with chronic diseases are made to undergo a period of seclusion with the priests and priestesses to be able to properly diagnose and perform necessary treatment of their diseases as required by some supernatural deities.

Fecundity

Metida is a common form of seclusion practiced by the Southern Nilotic agropastoral, Datoga-speaking peoples of the Mbulu/Hanang districts of Northern Tanzania. It involves daily and ritual practice that implies the seclusion of people, animals, and parts of land. The seclusion

or restriction will thus control and prevent those elements from their inherently dirty and contagious influence, which causes infertility. Women are mostly affected by severe restrictions because they are regarded as highly susceptible to the threats and consequences caused by death and misfortune.

Contemporary Contexts

The practice of seclusion still persists in most parts of Africa, but there has been a decline in its intensity in some communities, particularly in relation to indigenous tradition. The decline is due to the obvious reason of industrialization. Communal life may become eroded when individuals live far away, and some engage in economic establishments that do not offer unlimited opportunities to stay away from daily work. Second, the doctrines and practices of other religions in Africa are affecting such a practice as seclusion in indigenous practices, particularly the puberty rites. However, seclusion regarding death ritual, kingship, and hegemonic festivals are still strong in most parts of Africa. Besides, African-initiated churches employ seclusion on the numerous clients who patronize them for effective healing. Also, individuals within these traditions and some Islamic movements who are in desperate need for spiritual powers to become charismatic priest and priestess healers go into seclusion on mountains, riversides, and wildernesses.

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See also Rites of Passage; Rituals

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SEERS

In its narrowest and most literal sense, a seer is a person with the ability to foretell events or a person's destiny. However, in a broader and more interpretive sense, a seer is also one with profound moral and spiritual insight or knowledge, such as a sage. Using either definition, seers abound in Africa. A seer is, first and foremost, one who sees. What precisely is being seen and how it is being seen is another matter. Because African ways of knowing include a combination of cognitive faculties, such as divination, thinking heart, intuition, possession, dreams, and keen observation from sources that are both natural and supernatural, a seer has a potentially infinite well from which to draw information. This information can be accessed in a systematic way, such as by divination, where the diviner or client poses a specific question on which to receive information. Or the information may come in the form of a dream, where the person would act on the information in the dream or seek the counsel of someone with a reputation for interpreting dreams. Sometimes by learning the language of nature, such as the songs of birds or the movements of clouds and wind, a person is able to "predict" a future event. Because of all of these sources of information, the tasks of a seer are spread across many roles in the community, such as priests and priestesses, diviners, medicine men or women, rainmakers, and family elders. Often these people work in the context of a specific family or

community, so their information is targeted or meaningful to a relatively small group. This, along with the perception that traditional Africans have a limited concept of the future and are influenced by the future-oriented religions of Christianity and Islam, feeds the perception that Africa does not have prophets. However, there have been instances where seers have predicted events with broader implications, such as the coming of Europeans to Africa, the arrival of guns and airplanes in Africa, World War I, and the invention of the telephone. One sangoma sharing such information is Credo Mutwa of South Africa, who says that "prediction is a vital human power" and an "early warning device that the gods placed within the human soul so that one can recognize future dangers." With the power to recognize the dangers comes the power to avoid them. Information about the future, whether received intuitively or requested, is really about what is happening now. African people want to know what needs to be done now so that situations can be made right, harmony can be restored, or that whatever the undertaking it will be a successful one.

Denise Martin

See also Divination Systems; Sangoma

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SEKHMET

In ancient Egypt, there was a lioness goddess named Sekhmet. The meaning of her name was "the Powerful One." She was represented as a



Lion-headed Sekhmet, goddess of war. Statue from the temple of Mut, wife of god Amun (Amen) of Thebes. The temple was built under Amenophis III (1403–1365 BC, 18th dynasty, New Kingdom).

Source: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

woman with the head of a lioness “whose back was the color of blood with fire emanating from her mane and eyes.” Her fiery body would glow when she used her weapons of arrows piercing the hearts of her enemies. Her hot breath came from the desert winds of Egypt.

For it was written that the creator god Ra, in his declining years, had become grieved by a decline of respect for him in the world he had created, and especially by a few among the human race, the product of his own tears. He reached out to his closest followers to convene a divine assembly of his nearest relatives. Messengers were sent out quietly to the gods and especially to his daughter, Hathor. He addressed the gods as to what they felt should be the punishment for those tormentors. Nun, the eldest of the gods, suggested that Ra’s eye in the form of Hathor be sent out to kill those who attacked the great god. The other gods quickly agreed to this strategy, and Hathor, in the manifestation of the enraged Eye of the sun god, Ra, became Sekhmet, a fierce and ferocious lion, to seek revenge. Sekhmet quickly set out to attack the tormentors and found that she took delight in the slaughter. Her taste for blood was overwhelming, so much so that she raced over the extent of the land, consuming the people in her pleasure for more. Ra observed Sekhmet and was pleased with her work and called to her to stop before she performed the total destruction of humankind. “Come in peace, Hathor. Have you not done that which I gave you to do?” But her thirst for blood was greater than her father’s plea. Due to her divine power, no one could stop Sekhmet, not even Ra himself. The cries of the people were heard everywhere.

As Sekhmet rested, Ra and the gods, seeing the despair of the people and the Nile River flowing with the blood of humanity, thought to devise a plan that would cease the lioness’s whirl of destruction. They ordered the brewing of 7,000 jars of beer, to which red ochre from the ground was added to give it the color of blood. Ra told his messengers to spread the beer all over the Earth. Shortly, Sekhmet arose to continue her enjoyable task of looking for more prey. Instead, she saw the blood-like liquid over the land and rejoiced, drinking all that she wanted. Finally, the mixture caused her to sink into a peaceful slumber. While in her slumber, her father, Ra, quickly called to

her: “Come, come in peace, O fair and gracious goddess.” Sekhmet, the lioness, was then transformed again into the goddess Hathor, and the world began to heal. The Nile River ran blue, and thus humanity was saved.

LaRese Hubbard

See also Ra

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SENUFO

The Senufo are made up of a number of diverse groups who have lived in Northern Côte d’Ivoire and Mali since the 15th and 16th centuries. Their neighbors are the Guro, Yaure, Baule, Malinke, Bamana, Bobo, Lobi, Kulango, and Toussiana. Among the people of the Sahel region, the belt between the Sahara and the Forest, the Senufo have established a reputation for art, tradition, and customs that elevate their ancestral spirits.

Because religious practices express the cosmology of the African world, it is demonstrated nowhere any better than in the Senufo society. The cultural practices of the Senufo people are reflective of their cosmological beliefs.

The Senufo believe that the first two celestial beings were Maleeo, Ancient Mother, and Kolotyole (Kòlotyöö), Creator God. When Kòlotyöö created the first male and female, they became man and wife. The first two offspring of this first pair were male and female twins. The concept of male and female principles (duality), beginning at the dawn of creation, is consistent with the ideas of Africans in antiquity. Moreover, this concept establishes a basis for equality, and a balance of power between males and females is observable in the beliefs and practices of the Senufo.

Yirigefölö, the owner or chief of “creating, making, bringing forth,” and Nyëhënë, which means



The double-headed Wambele masks appear at Senufo funeral rituals. They incorporate features borrowed from many creatures, such as the tusks of warthogs and the teeth from crocodiles. These complex hybrid masks, often believed to represent antelopes, are decorated with feather and porcupine quill plumes.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher.

“sky” or “light,” have been consecrated as guardian spirits who intercede to Kòlotyöö on behalf of terrestrial beings. In addition to these guardian spirits, there are other spirits, such as ancestral spirits, twin spirits, and nature spirits, that affect the welfare of the people.

Monitor lizards, crocodiles, tortoises, soft shell turtles, and pythons are nature spirits. The python motif is the primary insignia of Sandogo members. The Nile crocodile is considered to be the strongest and most powerful of the water animal family. These animals are associated with the nature spirit—water. Men prefer the crocodile as their symbol of power. In many traditional African societies, humans have animal doubles or twins commonly called *totems*. Anita J. Glaze notes the testimony of a former Senufo diviner. This diviner explained that his special twin (totem) was the monitor lizard. “Once such a spirit ‘attaches’ itself to a person, it is for life.”

Although Islamic and Western influence have caused some groups to shift to a patrilineal system, the Senufo are a predominately matrilineal society. Women are highly respected in matrilineal societies. Elder women are given what might be called special recognition in community affairs. For example, a woman is the head of the men’s Poro society.

Education and governance take place within the framework of the Sandogo, Poro, Wambele, and Typeka societies. Sandogo is the women’s society, and Poro is the men’s society. Although Poro is the men’s society, young girls and post-menopausal women are permitted to join Poro, and men are permitted to join Sandogo. The Wambele is a society for sorcerers, and Typeka is found only among the Fodonon people. Males and females play vital roles in the activities of the societies and in public rituals and celebrations. Poro members perform at funeral rituals, considered one of the most important rituals for Senufo people as well as other African peoples.

The Senufo adhere to a long tradition of occupational specialists in traditional Africa. Woodcarvers, blacksmiths, brass casters, leather workers, and agriculturalists are among the various occupational specialists. Major agricultural crops include millet, sorghum, maize, rice, yams, bananas, and manioc. In addition, they raise farm animals

such as sheep, goats, chickens, guinea fowl, and dogs, in addition to hunting and fishing.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Initiation; Poro Society; Sangoma; Societies of Secrets

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SERAPIS

Serapis or, more accurately, Asar-apis, emerged as a state deity during Ptolemaic Greek occupation and oppression of Kemet (332–31 BC). Although Greek in image, Serapis engendered the highly admired healing attributes of two ancient African deities, Ausar, the lord of eternal life and resurrection, and the bull deity, Apis, the restorer of life, who was originally worshipped in Mennefer as an incarnation of Ptah. Around 306 BC, Ptolemy I Soter introduced Serapis as a state deity in hopes of placating and uniting the Kemetians (Egyptians) and Greeks. Soon after, Ptolemy III Eurgetes (246–221 BC) founded a temple at Alexandria that firmly established Asar-apis as the god of healing in the Hellenistic world. Ptolemy made Serapis the main state deity of healing and located his temple in Alexandria, where many in the Hellenic world

made pilgrimages to Africa to worship and seek healing at the Seraphim temple in Alexandria.

Kemetians were often treated as foreigners in their own land by the colonial Ptolemaic regime. This regime was responsible for adopting the ancient African deity as Greek. However, the Kemetians rejected the Ptolemaic version of the deity, which the Greeks had created in their own image as a curly haired, bearded Caucasian seated adjacent to a three-headed dog Cerberus who sat or stood at the feet of Serapis. This was different from the onxy-skinned Asar and Apis. Kemetians created the original association between Asar and Apis as far back as 1300 BC during the 18th dynasty. Memphis Kemetians worshiped Apis as one of the many forms of Ptah. Later they associated Apis with much-revered Asar and the name came to mean "Asar in full glory." In some instances, Kemetians represented Apis as a bull carrying a sun disk between his horns, and in other instances they represented Apis as a bull-headed man carrying a crescent and full moon between two large plumes. Nonetheless, the Ptolemies established Asar-apis as the state deity of a Ptolemaic-ruled Kemetite state. This reimagining, Asar-apis as the Hellenic Serapis, was part of a cultural trend followed by the Greeks and Romans in the pan-Hellenic world, namely the process reimagining foreign gods in their own image and interest and then coercing or acculturating ruled populations into accepting the gods as their own. Thus, the Greeks, and subsequently the Romans, would continue the oppression of Kemetians while embracing the Greek interpretation and image of Serapis and identifying him with their own deities Hades and Pluto.

Eventually, when the Romans defeated Cleopatra and captured Egypt, they replaced Asar-apis with Auset, who became the main state deity of healing throughout the Roman world. Greeks, Romans, and people of other nations made pilgrimages to Africa to give deference to Serapis up to AD 385; at this date, Emperor Theodosius gave orders to close and destroy all temples of Serapis and Auset. Moreso carried out the order with the beheading of the priests of any Kemetite temple. Theodosius celebrated this state-sanctioned bloodletting because it meant that his reimagined phallogocentric, Roman-based Christianity would no longer have to compete

with the African-engendered religions of Asar and Auset that had become popular in his state.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Asar; Auset

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SERER

Serer is the name of the second largest ethnic group located in Senegal and the Gambia in West Africa. The word *Serer*, in ancient Egyptian, means "he who traces the temples." Thus, although Serer are mainly found today in Senegal, they have a long history across Africa. Some Serer people are also found in the country of Mauretania. They are an ancient people whose history reaches deep into the past during various migrations from the North and East to their present home in West Africa. In fact, the Serer have several distinct languages, although they are viewed as one ethnic group. For example, the largest language among the Serer is called Serer-Sine, but there is also Serer-Noon, Serer-Ndut, Serer-Palor, Serer-Safen, and Serer-Lehar. These distinct languages are spoken in different parts of the countries of Senegal, Gambia, and Mauretania, and they represent the remnants of powerful ancient kingdoms, specifically the Kingdom of Sine and the Kingdom of Saloum. The latter kingdom counts more than 100 kings in its lineage, from the 11th century to the 21st century.

Religiously, the Serer follow the pattern of many West African people: They have a belief in one Supreme Deity, Roog. In their view, Roog created

everything in the universe, but all of the ordinary things that have to do with daily life, relationships, land disputes, war, and death are left to the ancestors. Among the Serer, there are elaborate ceremonies surrounding their relationship with their clan and totemic ancestors. Names such as Faye, Sar, Fall, Diagne, and Diouf are considered totemic for the Serer.

The oral tradition of the Serer states that they traveled from the Upper Nile to West Africa. One of the reasons that Cheikh Anta Diop claimed that the Serer were able to reject Islam, being one of the few African groups in the West African Sahel region to do so successfully, might be because of their strong connection to their ancient religious past. Scholars have long believed that the route of the Serer from their ancient homeland in East Africa can be traced by upright stones found along the latitude they traveled from East to West, from Ethiopia to the region of Sine-Saloum.

Linked to the religious beliefs of the Serer is the fact that their ancestors came through the Sudanese village of Tundi-Daro and erected upright stones in the shape of a phallus and a female organ. It is believed that this was an agrarian practice that symbolized the ritual union of the sky and Earth as a way to give birth to vegetation, their daughter. The vegetation from this divine union was a cosmic trinity that harks back to the African trinity of Ausar-Auset-Heru. Thus, the ancestors to the Serer carved stones of two sexual organs to invite the divinities to couple and give them good harvests. It was the desire to ensure material existence that drove humans to this process of ritualizing the divine union.

The Serer people still retain the deity service to the upright stones. At one time during the 14th century, they planted pestles that were used as altars for libations, called *dek-kur*, by the Wolof who have mixed with many of the Serer. Indeed, the idea of *dek-kur* means anvil or receptacle. The ancient town of Tundi-Daro means, in Wolof, the hill of sexual union in a ritual sense, affirming much of the Serer oral tradition.

What is more interesting in terms of the religion of the Serer is that their burial rites were the same as those of the ancient kings of Ghana and Egypt. The deceased, after an elaborate ceremony, was buried in luxury depending on what was available, laid on a bed, and around him were placed all the

usual domestic and ordinary materials, tools, and objects with which he was familiar during life and maybe a rooster to awaken him. He may have been mummified in the manner of Sunni Ali Ber, the great king of Songhai, because mummification seems to have remained only in the Angola region.

There are many linkages to other parts of Africa, specifically ancient Kemet, in the religion of Serer. It seems possible that the Serer found the sacred city of Kaôn upon their arrival in Sine-Saloum as a replica of the Egyptian city of the same name. In addition, the name of the deity Roog suggests Ra. Indeed, Roog was often complemented by the national epithet, Sen. Kemetologists have seen in the Serer name Sar, a widely used Serer name, the idea of nobility, because in ancient Kemet (Egypt), the term *Sa Ra* meant Son of God. A linguistic variant of this is *San*, from the nobility of Sudan, as in the expression San-Kore, the area where the nobility and intellectuals lived in Timbuktu.

Clearly, the Serer represent an African people with an extensive religious history and fascinating regard for human community as expressed in their language. From their famous burial mounds, tumuli, or pyramids to their intense philosophical reflections on the nature of space and time, human relationships, and the meaning of life, the Serer are in the tradition of Africans who have confronted their environment with numerous questions and answers.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ancestors

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SERPENT

African communities express a variety of views about the serpent as an animal of mysterious and complex characteristics and symbolisms. Among

some African people, the serpent is associated with lunar elements as it manifests cosmic powers. The Ngala of central Congo hold that the moon once lived on the Earth as a serpent while the Dogon of West Africa think of the rainbow as the serpent of Nommo, the water god. Africans classify the different species of serpent according to conception in mythic narratives, natural behaviors, and ritual uses.

An Akan (Ghana) cosmological myth holds the serpent as an object of mystery and danger, deprivation, and impoverishment. In this myth, the community suddenly discovers a pot full of gold, around which a mysterious serpent appears and coils. The mission of the serpent is to prevent the people from retrieving the gold. However, the woman Asona demonstrates great courage, bravery, and determination, and she dips her hands into the pot; Asona dies after she is bitten by the poisonous serpent. Asona is the Old Woman and the first of the seven children of Abrewa, the counterpart of Nyame, Akan Supreme Being.

A myth of the Basari of northern Togo presents the serpent in a narrative that is striking but parallel to the Genesis myth of the fall of Adam and Eve. The African narrative tells of the serpent as diabolic and deceptive as it misleads the first human beings into eating certain fruits, which until that time only Unumbotte, the Basari Supreme Being, had eaten. The Suk and Bari of East Africa, the Benin of Nigeria, and the people of the Ivory Coast in West Africa all conceive of the serpent positively. To the Suk and Bari nomadic shepherds, the serpent is called “child of God.” It is looked on as a bringer of good fortune. It is fed with milk. The people look on the serpent as a protector and bearer of treasures and riches. The Benin people see the serpent as a symbol of happiness and prosperity, whereas the snake is regarded as a bringer of wealth and fame in the customs and traditions of the Baule and other people in the Ivory Coast.

The Zulu people of South Africa and the Maasai of East Africa hold similar views of the nature of the serpent. The Zulu regard certain serpents as divinized ancestors who have mysterious power to return to Earth in this form, whereas the Maasai of East Africa claim that the souls of the kings and healers turn into serpents to continue their life in this form after death. The Maasai notion also associates the serpent with the soul.

The Chewa of eastern Zambia regard some serpents as sacred and thus they play a major part in ancestor veneration.

The serpent is regarded as a mysterious messenger of death that is often sent on dangerous errands by wicked persons or evil eyes to bite their victims. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, medicine men and healers use certain parts of the serpent, like its fur and teeth, in serious ritual preparations for healing. Magicians also use the serpent in their drama activities. They often turn to the serpent and scare their audiences who offer gifts to them. African-derived religious systems, which included a cult of snakes that migrated from West Africa, especially Dahomey, to America, have produced a new form in the spiritual and religious Voodoo of Haiti.

David O. Ogunbile

See also Animals; Magic; Medicine; Rituals

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SESHAT

In ancient Egypt, Seshat was the goddess of writing and measurement and the ruler of books. Djhuty and Seshat were divine *seš* (scribes). Djhuty is well known as the scribe of the gods, the god of wisdom, knowledge, science, cosmology, magic, medicine, and the afterlife. Seshat was Djhuty's consort and is portrayed as a female wearing a headband with horns and a star with her name written *Sš3t* on it. Her dress is a plain sheath covered by a long panther skin, with the tail reaching her feet. She is often depicted with the notched palm rib that represented the passing of time. Seshat's name is inscribed on the obverse side of the upper register of Narmer's palette.

Seshat was an expert in the art of sighting the stars and planets. She has also been recorded as assisting the king in the ritual of “stretching the

cord” associated with astronomical and astrological measurements for the location of temples. The commissioning pharaoh says, “I have established the surveying rod and I have grasped the point of the peg; I hold the plumb-line with Seshat. I turn my sight toward the course of the stars; I make my eyes enter the constellation Meshket [Thigh/Great Bear]. The Time Measurer stands next to his hour clock. I have established the four corners of your temple.” Seshat was the keeper of ground plans and charts.

Seshat is also portrayed recording the king’s jubilees, such as in the Sed Festival, cattle counts, and the king’s campaigns as early as the 2nd dynasty. Reliefs found in temples of the Old and Middle Kingdoms (2686–1650 BC) depict her as the recorder of quantities of foreign captives and booty in the aftermath of military campaigns, and she is also shown writing the names of the king on the leaves of the Persea tree.

The inspirations of Seshat are evident in activities concerning the service of the gods, the living, and the Dead. In pre- or protodynastic times, the people of Kemet used canons, a system of proportions resenting an anthropometric description of the body based on the standardization of its natural proportions expressed in the ratios of Egyptian measures of length for metrological purposes. They knew that the various parts of the human body are constant and immutable in all individuals irrespective of any differences in size and dimensions.

The idea of Seshat assisting the king in the ritual of “stretching the cord” for proportional measurement of the ground to plan for the layout of magnificent temples can be advanced to explain the inspiration for the creation of grids, a geometrical projection of the canon, in which the side length of the modular square represents the anatomical unit of one full handbreadth (four fingers plus thumb) with the proportional value of $\frac{1}{13}$ metrological handbreadths to achieve *maat* (i.e., balance, harmony, and straightness of objects in drawings and paintings). In this case, grids were either ruled with a straightedge or marked by means of strings dipped in red ochre. Seshat’s inspirations of counting and measurements are demonstrated in city planning, architecture, seagoing vessels, recitations in spells and rituals, writing, medicine, music, and placement of figures in *reliefs*, *bas reliefs*, and *reliefs en crux*.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Goddesses

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SET

In ancient Egypt, Set was considered the deity related to confusion, indecision, chaos, and evil. Often depicted with a human body and a head with a long nose and square ears, Set most closely resembled an African anteater. It is also possible that the image of Set was that of a purely mythical creature. When presented in full-body form, Set could have an erect forked tail and a canine body. At various other times, Set might be depicted as a donkey, a hippopotamus, or a pig.

Set is an old deity. There is no authoritative source that states exactly when Set appears in the ancient records. The earliest known depiction of him dates from 4000 BC on a carved ivory comb. Set is also depicted on the mace head of the proto-Dynastic ruler Scorpion around 3200 BC. Inasmuch as Scorpion may have been one of the first authenticated rulers of ancient Egypt, this puts Set at the beginning of the ancient dynasties.

Set is the son of Geb and Nut, the brother of Ausar, Auset, and Nebhet. According to the mythology, Set was born in Naqada and became the patron of the foreign lands. He is also associated with the foreign goddesses Astarte and Anat. Geb the Earth and Nut the sky represent the progenitors of the terrestrial creations.

The great drama of Set’s struggle against his brother Ausar and his nephew Heru occupies much of the moral narrative of ancient Egypt. According to the mythology, Set attempted to kill his brother Ausar. He was initially unsuccessful, but then was able to murder Ausar, cut his body into 14 pieces, and spread them around the world.

Set then engaged in a long violent contest against Heru, the son of Ausar, that ended when Heru finally defeated Set at Edfu.

When the gods were called on to judge whether it should be Set or Heru ruling the Earth, they decided that Set, who was favored by Ra, should rule the underworld, and that Heru would be the god of the living. Although Set did not gain the throne, he was able to remain a companion of Ra and therefore to exercise considerable power over activities on the Earth. Set's power could be used to create chaos in the weather, for example.

Set was revered by many in ancient Egypt and in the 2nd dynasty had a status that was similar to that of Heru. Actually, the 2nd-dynasty king Peribsen chose to write his name in a serekh surmounted by the image of Set instead of Heru. However, after this dynasty, the serekh was only associated with Heru.

When the Hyksos ruled the Delta region, they worshipped Set because he was similar to their god, Baal. Set and Baal were both thunder gods. By the time of the 25th-dynasty kings, Set was widely accepted as evil, and the Egyptians believed that Heru should be celebrated for his moral authority.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also God

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SEVEN

The significance as well as the symbolic, mythological, mathematical, and esoteric meaning of the number 7 varies throughout Africa. In ancient Egyptian, the word for 7 is *sefhet*, or Seshat. Seshat is the feminine counterpart of Thoth. She is the mistress of measure and the passage of time. Her emblem is the flower with seven petals or leopard skin. She was a personal deity of the pharaoh and therefore was not worshipped by the

populace. Seshat was invoked at the stretching of the cord ceremony, a ritual performed by the pharaoh during the laying of a temple's foundation. The association of the number 7 with wisdom comes with Seshat's title "Foremost of Libraries" and her role as guardian of her husband Thoth's books.

Among the Bambara and Dogon, 7 is the number of harmony. It signifies the harmony of the male or masculine, represented by the number 3, with the female or feminine, represented by the number 4. It has been suggested that the pyramid also embodies the harmony of 7 because it is a 4 (the square base) topped with a 3 (triangle). Among the Akan, the queen mother's number is 3 and the king's is 4, a different configuration, but still totaling 7. Also among the Akan, the number 7 is significant in divination because it is an odd number. The practice of attributing gender to numbers is found throughout Africa. Among Sudanic cultures, even numbers are feminine and masculine numbers are odd, such as the case among the Kolokuma Ijo people of the Niger Delta.

The number 7 is also central to Egyptian mathematics. The fundamental equation $1 + 2 + 4 = 7$ reflects the Egyptian method of calculating based on continued doubling. Further, when 7 is multiplied by doubling, the first three multipliers are always 1, 2, and 4, which equals 7. These equations factor into the Egyptian table of length used to calculate pyramid measurements. Egyptian fractions are calculated by multiplying them by the number 7.

Although 7 is a conspicuous number in many cultures, it is also taboo. The Kolokuma Ijo associate the number 7 with the great divinities, so it is to be avoided. Among the Mandak and Ga, the avoidance of the number 7 is found in speech where 7 is referred to as $6 + 1$. Among the Malinke people and the Mbundu-speaking people, the word for the number 8 is used in place of 7. In both languages, the word for 8 is six-two; so to say 7, one literally says six-two. Because 7 is taboo, the danger of speaking it can be divided between two speakers by one making the gesture of the number while the other speaks it. The Kikuyu use a non-number name for 7, *mugwanja*, and people do not divide things in portions of seven nor do children travel in groups of seven. Seven curses can be evoked, each represented by seven sticks aimed at the victim. If seven items

remain after the diviner's functions have been performed, it signals death. Among the Kamba, odd numbers are "without a companion" so children should avoid walking in odd-numbered groups, and cattle are not to be watched by the same cowherd more than 6 days at a time. Farmers will place seven porcupine quills in the stalks of their sugarcane to protect them from thieves. However, Kamba circumcision festivities span 7 days, and cracking a whip seven times brings good fortune to elephant hunters.

Perhaps the most conspicuous appearance of the number 7 is found in Egyptian cosmology and mythology. There are seven elemental powers: darkness, light, air, Earth, water, fire, and blood. In the mythology, there are seven Hathors, seven souls or Ra, seven nomes of Egypt, seven stages of the solar bark, seven Glorious Ones, seven servants of Horus, seven with Anup at the pole, seven molders with Ptah, seven souls of Atum-Ra, seven assistants to Maat, seven wise masters of arts and sciences who assist Taht in his measurements of the Earth, seven who assist Ausar in Amenta, and seven stages of Ptah's creation. Seven also factors into Egyptian funerary culture. In royal tombs as early as 3100 BC, seven sacred oils were used to anoint the body during funerary rituals. The specific oils are not known, although it is speculated that lotus and cedar are among them. The step pyramid at Saqqara, part of an ancient burial complex, has seven steps.

Among the Dogon, the spirit of the seventh ancestor is responsible for world order. This spirit also wove a cloth that is a manifestation of the Word and imparted it to humanity. The word for the cloth is *soy*, meaning "it is the spoken word." *Soy* is also the word for seven. In addition, during the creation process, the Dogon supreme deity, Amma, spun seven worlds above and seven worlds below. Inside the first seed of creation, the *po*, there were seven vibrations. Each vibration represents a stage in the development of life. The image of the *po* seed with seven lines of various lengths extending from its center symbolically represents Amma as twins, or masculine and feminine. Two lines are for the head, two for the arms, two for the legs, and one for the sex organ. Here again we see seven as the unity of male and female. This is also the case among the Bambara, a group related to the Dogon. The Bambara hold seven to be a unity of male and female, as well as

intelligence and Earth. Among the Zulu, there are seven judges for eternity, the *abakulu*.

In the diaspora, the spiritual significance of seven manifests in the Seven Powers of Africa, which are a selection of seven orisha from the Yoruba tradition. These are found in Spanish-speaking areas of the diaspora as well as in the African American conjure and folk traditions. Also in African American folk traditions, the seventh child of a seventh child was believed to be spiritually powerful. Among the Nation of Gods and Earths, seven is the number that denotes God, which according to their teachings is man.

Denise Martin

See also Number Symbolism

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SHAME

Shame in African religion refers to an awareness of the violation of a taboo that can cause harm to one's community if it is not dealt with through propitiation or sacrifice. The person who is responsible for the violation of the taboo is associated with disgrace and collective condemnation because he or she has placed the entire community at risk of retribution by the ancestors.

Throughout Africa, one finds the idea of a communal sense of responsibility; that is, people live with a degree of respect for others in the society. Therefore, dishonoring the ancestors by violating a taboo, breaking a rule, committing incest, cursing an elder, or attempting to harm the community produces shame.

Shame must not be considered the same as guilt in the Western conception. Actually, in the West, it is common to hear that there is no difference between guilt and shame, but this is to misunderstand the nature of shame. In Africa, because of

the collective sense of responsibility, the familial ties, and the intertwining/interconnectedness of the community's life, shame carries with it the idea that someone has broken or violated the collective social values that have come down from many generations. Guilt is much more an individual and personal feeling, whereas shame is a much more collective feeling. There is no concept of guilt in traditional African religion. However, the idea of shame carries with it the intense pressure on a person to do right as a way to protect the society.

Shame causes the person to feel responsibility rather than regret, and therefore he or she must do everything humanly possible to change the reality. Shame in Africa involves public humiliation if the act that created the violation was offensive to the public in a major way. All are endangered and in peril if the person is not discovered and made to admit the violation; therefore it behooves the community to determine who is the cause of the violation; Once this is determined, in most African societies, the religious leaders seek to control the damage to the community by identifying the culprit and making sacrifices to appease the violated ancestors.

In some instances, the person who is responsible for the shame may be banished from society so as to get rid of the offending character. However, the idea of shame as a part of socialization means that it is a mainstay of stability in African communities that depend on the traditional values handed down by ancestors. Those who have violated the taboos of the society may feel worthless and outside of redemption and therefore may have to be banned from the community for life.

When a society employs shame to regulate the social and ethical activities of people, it usually relies more on the shared opinions and judgments of the people. Certainly any form of relational control in a communally articulated society, as most traditional African societies are, is important in the social structure. Shame is therefore a major force in the stability of the traditional African society.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Punishment; Taboo

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SHANGO

A major deity of the indigenous religion of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, Shango (sometimes written Chango) also appears in the religion of the Bini of southeastern Nigeria, where he is referred to as Esango, as well as in the religion of the Fon of the Benin Republic, where he is called Sogbo and Ebioso. Like all of the Yoruba deities (called *orisha*), Shango is both a deified ancestor and a natural force, both aspects being associated with a cult, a priesthood, and an elaborate material culture that witnesses and supports his worship.

The ancestral Shango was the fourth king of the town of Oyo. Oral history describes him as a powerful king who had a voice like thunder and shot fire out of his mouth when he spoke. When a subordinate chief challenged his rule, many townspeople, impressed by the chief's feats of magic, deserted him, and Shango, defeated in the eyes of the majority of his subjects, left Oyo and committed suicide. His faithful followers, however, claimed that he did not really hang himself: Instead, he ascended to the heavens on a chain. They claimed that his disappearance was not death, but the occasion of his transformation into an *orisha*. After his death, he was deified and took on some of the attributes of a preexisting deity, Jakuta, whose name continues to be associated with him in Cuba. Jakuta represented the wrath of God, the scourging and cauterizing of evil by fierce justice. His followers began to sacrifice to him, continued the ceremonies he had performed while on Earth, and passed on his worship to succeeding generations. Shango's followers eventually succeeded in securing a place for their cult in the religious and political system of the town, and the Shango cult became integral to the installation of Oyo's kings. Shango's cult spread widely when Oyo became the central town of an expansive empire dominating most of the other Yoruba kingdoms, as well as the Bini and the Fon, both of whom incorporated Shango worship into their religions and continued his cult even after they ceased being under Oyo's control.



A shrine of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, furnished with figures of women devotees. These figures at the court of the Temi of Ede are displayed before the shrine during the annual Shango festival. Shango was the dominant religious deity of the Oyo empire. Ede, Southwest Nigeria, Yoruba people.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

The natural forces associated with Shango are fire, thunder, and lightning. Shango has a powerful *aché*, and, according to the Lucumi people, when he opens his mouth or laughs, thunder is heard. His voice is thunder, and some say he is the god of lightning. His most prominent ritual symbol is the *oshe*, a double-headed battle-axe. Statues representing Shango often show the *oshe* emerging directly from the top of his head, indicating that war and the slaying of enemies are the essence of his personality and fate. The *oshe* is also used by Shango's priesthood. While dancing, they hold a wooden *oshe* close to their chests as a protection or they swing one in a wide chest-high arc that battles human and spiritual enemies. During Shango's reign, he selected the *bata* drums as the specific kind of drum to be played for him. Shango is said to have played these drums to summon storms, and they continue to be used by his devotees. His possession priests perform all sorts of magical feats at important festivals, including piercing their tongues with knives without drawing blood, harmlessly running torches up and down their bodies, and eating fire.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, thousands of Yoruba, Bini, and Fon people were uprooted, enslaved, and imported to the Americas. In some locations in the Caribbean Islands and South America, they were able to reestablish Shango's worship during or after slavery. Today, Shango is worshipped in Haitian Voodoo and Cuban Santería, as well as in the Candomblé of Brazil. Two neo-African religions in the American context bear his name: Trinidad Shango (also known as the Shango Baptists) and the Afro-Brazilian cult Xango, most prominent in the city of Recife.

George Brandon

See also Gods; Orisha; Santería; Yoruba

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SHAWABTI

The shawabti was a small figurine used by the ancient Egyptians as a companion to the deceased. The term is probably derived from the word *shawab*, which refers to a hard wood used in the sculpturing of the earliest shawabti. Because it was believed that death and the afterlife were just an extension of this life, it was also believed that the deceased would have the same responsibilities. For example, many people had to devote time to shoring up the immigration system as a matter of fulfilling mandatory duties for the government. If this were to be the case in the afterlife, the deceased would not like to break his or her relaxation to go to the fields to do this work, thus, the need for the shawabti to do the work.

In fact, a tomb could have scores of shawabti, even hundreds of them, depending on the rank and power of the deceased. There were to be no activities covered in life that could not be taken care of in death by the shawabtis. A king who had been active in life as a hunter, military person, or visitor to the temples would find shawabtis prepared to carry out these responsibilities for him in death. Such figurines made out of faience became some of the classic objects discovered in the tombs of the nobles and great leaders of Egypt. In many respects, the idea of the shawabti accompanies most narratives of death and the afterlife in African societies. To the degree that the king or the noble would need workers in the afterlife, some African societies often requested living persons to "go with the king" to the afterlife to ensure that all of his needs were met. Some societies, such as the Yoruba, had a tradition that the king's horseman, for example, should accompany him on his journey. This tradition is directly linked to the tradition of the shawabti from ancient Egypt. Whereas the ancient Egyptians most often used shawabtis, one can find other African societies where humans were employed in the same capacity as the shawabtis.

One of the most dramatic examples of the shawabti belief and practice was the discovery in the tomb of the great king of the 25th dynasty, per-aa Taharka. When his burial chamber was opened near Nuri in Sudan, there were 1,070 shawabti standing in neat rows in the tomb. Some of the shawabti in Taharka's tomb were 2 feet tall and made of granite or alabaster. They were not all made of the same materials. However, the large numbers of shawabti found in this grave suggest that the king was looking forward to much work, which, gladly, he would not have to perform. Taharka ruled from 690 to 664 BC and reconstructed the temples and ancient monuments of Egypt. In fact, he was one of the most active of all the kings, ranking in the company of Ramses II, Thutmoses III, and Pepi I. No king's tomb has been found to have more shawabti than that of Taharka. It is believed that the highest number ever found before King Taharka was 410 found during the New Kingdom. According to the *Book of the Going Forth by Day*, section 6, it says that the shawabti were required to do whatever was requested of the deceased in the afterlife. Thus, the shawabti were quite busy in some cases.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Afterlife

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SHILLUK

Living on the banks of the Nile River, near the city of Malakal, the Chollo ("word of mouth") people, also known as Shilluk, are a major Nilotic ethnic group in southern Sudan. They were brought to their present location by the great

Shilluk leader and hero, Nyakang. The latter is believed to represent a bridge between the Shilluk and Juok, the supreme God. Furthermore, the spirit of Nyakang is reincarnated in every Shilluk king, also known as Reth. Juok is formless and invisible and is everywhere at once. He is recognized as the creator of all things, and Nyakang is invoked with Juok. In this regard, Nyakang serves as a mediator between the people and their god. Reth, the Shilluk king, is the supreme spiritual and temporal ruler and reigns by divine right as a direct descendant of Nyakang, the founder and first king of the Shilluk nation. In every king, there is immanent the spirit of Nyakang, and this spirit is transferred through the royal ceremonies of death and installation from king to king. The ceremony is initiated with the sealing up of the corpse of the deceased king in a special chamber near the royal capital Fashoda; then the new Reth is elected by the chiefs of the royal family and the Wowo (burial and funeral dance for the deceased) commences. Finally, Rony, the installation ceremonies of the new king, begins with the bringing of the Effigy of Nyakang and the sacred four-legged stool from Akurwa, which is marched from there to Fashoda, which represents Nyakang and his son Dak. Upon entering Fashoda, the new Reth is taken to the Shrine of Nyakang, where the effigy is placed on the sacred stool, which is shielded from the public by a canopy of white cloth. Then the effigy is removed, and the king takes his place on the stool. The ceremony ends with the sacrifice of a bull, and the Reth then enters his quarters and remains in seclusion for 10 days in solemn communion with Nyakang, whose spirit he now incarnates. The king is thus imbued with divine powers and serves at the center of religious activity of the nation. His destiny and health act in response to the welfare of the people, and his life is hedged round with ritual observances. In this respect, the Shilluk people's ceremonies are conducted at the shrines of Nyakang. The two major annual ceremonies are, first, the rainmaking ceremony held before the rains at the new moon, and, second, the harvest festival held when dura is cut, which usually coincides with the end of the rainy season. There is no true grave of Nyakang because he did not die, but disappeared in a great wind. Because every king is imbued with the spirit of Nyakang, the worship rendered at the royal shrines, which all resemble those of

Nyakang, is ultimately a part of the adoration of Nyakang, and through him, of God.

Marquita Pellerin

See also Jok

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SHONA

Shona traditional religion is monotheistic, having belief in the one God called Mwari. The word *Mwari* may have roots in the Bantu Mu-ari, which literally means that which is self-existent. Other expressions of God are *Nyadenga*, which means “Owner of Heavens,” and *Musiki*, which means “the Creator.” This name depicts a separation or distance of the people from God. Furthermore, the Shona maintain that Mwari is the originator of wisdom and knower of all things having no limitation. All phenomena are thus attributed to the Creator, Mwari.

The MaShona are both patrimonial and patriarchal. This holds in the Shona tradition with regard to the religious reality of the people. The spirits that are closest and most concerned with the daily life and welfare of the community are one’s own ancestors of the father’s line, termed *midzimu* (singular) or *vadzimu* (plural). One’s ancestral spirits would all have the same clan name organized along a patrimonial order. The Sekuru, or grandfather on the father’s side, for instance, as well as the deceased sister of the Sekuru, and so on, are concerned with the welfare of their descendants, male or female.

These spirits of the ancestors are ritually cleansed after their deaths by a process called *chimura*. This

ritual cleansing occurs in order for the community to enjoy the benefits of their ancestors having closer proximity to Mwari, and thus vadzimu are more effective in acting on the people’s behalf. Subsequently, descendants enjoy the benefits of their patrimonial vadzimu because the vadzimu intercede on behalf of their people.

The vadzimu are said to live in the air and are called *mhopo*, and are thus always in the midst of their people. They are characterized by not desiring food or sex, but are honored at ceremonies with beer prepared and presented by persons appropriate to the circumstance of the ceremony. Protection from evil spirits as well as granting peace, prosperity, and posterity are functions of the vadzimu. Events of misfortune or illnesses are intended to encourage those affected to seek a spirit medium to find the cause of the predicament and to make amends as recommended by the spirit medium or *svikiro*.

The spirits of deceased royalty or greatly revered holy men and women are considered lion spirits or *mhondoro* (singular or plural). The spirits are said to take the form of lions as they roam in the wilderness. Their concerns in the spirit world extend to all those within their territory. As with vadzimu, the mhondoro find voice by inhabiting *svikiro*. The spirit medium is selected by the spirit and through ritual mediums is confirmed by senior *svikiro*. The needs and concerns of the community are addressed by the appropriate *svikiro*. Matters of national importance are addressed by the mhondoro spirit mediums, whereas matters of a personal or immediate nature are directed to the vadzimu spirit mediums.

Gwinyai P. Muzorewa

See also Nehanda; Spirit Medium

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SHRINES

Shrine is a word of Latin origin, which means a box used to contain a precious or sacred object of worship or veneration. The term is generally expanded to include buildings and places such as churches, temples, mosques, and cathedrals. The African cosmological concept of a shrine is much more expansive. Thus, it could include animate and inanimate objects such as a river, building, rock, lake, mountain, or tree. African cosmology suggests that a shrine would not merely be a means of containment for some sacred or precious object or deity but comprises the essence of that which the African deems divine and worthy of worship and veneration. Because Africans conceptualize the universe and its entities as a composite whole, it is difficult to separate the shrine from the entity it represents or contains. African shrine activities include prayers, libation, sacrifices, divinations, offerings and consultations, and other sacred events.

African shrines vary in form and location. They are generally constructed of natural materials found in nature and can be found inside the African home, the African compound, the African village, and other venues such as forests or river banks.

African shrines are usually maintained by trained priests, priestesses, or family elders. African shrines are often dedicated to deities representative of families, lineages, vocations, clans, and stratification levels. Africans construct shrines as vehicles of interface between the practitioners and the divine entity, which is the focus of their worship/veneration. Shrines may also serve as sanctuary for both animals and human beings. In many spiritual systems, each of these entities has its distinct shrine, which serves as a mode of communication among the spiritual practitioner, a prospective deity, or God within the context of a particular spiritual system. Because of the African's vast concept of God, shrines are rarely dedicated to any Supreme Deity because there is no shrine that can contain the omniscient divinity.

Kefentse K. Chike

See also Rituals

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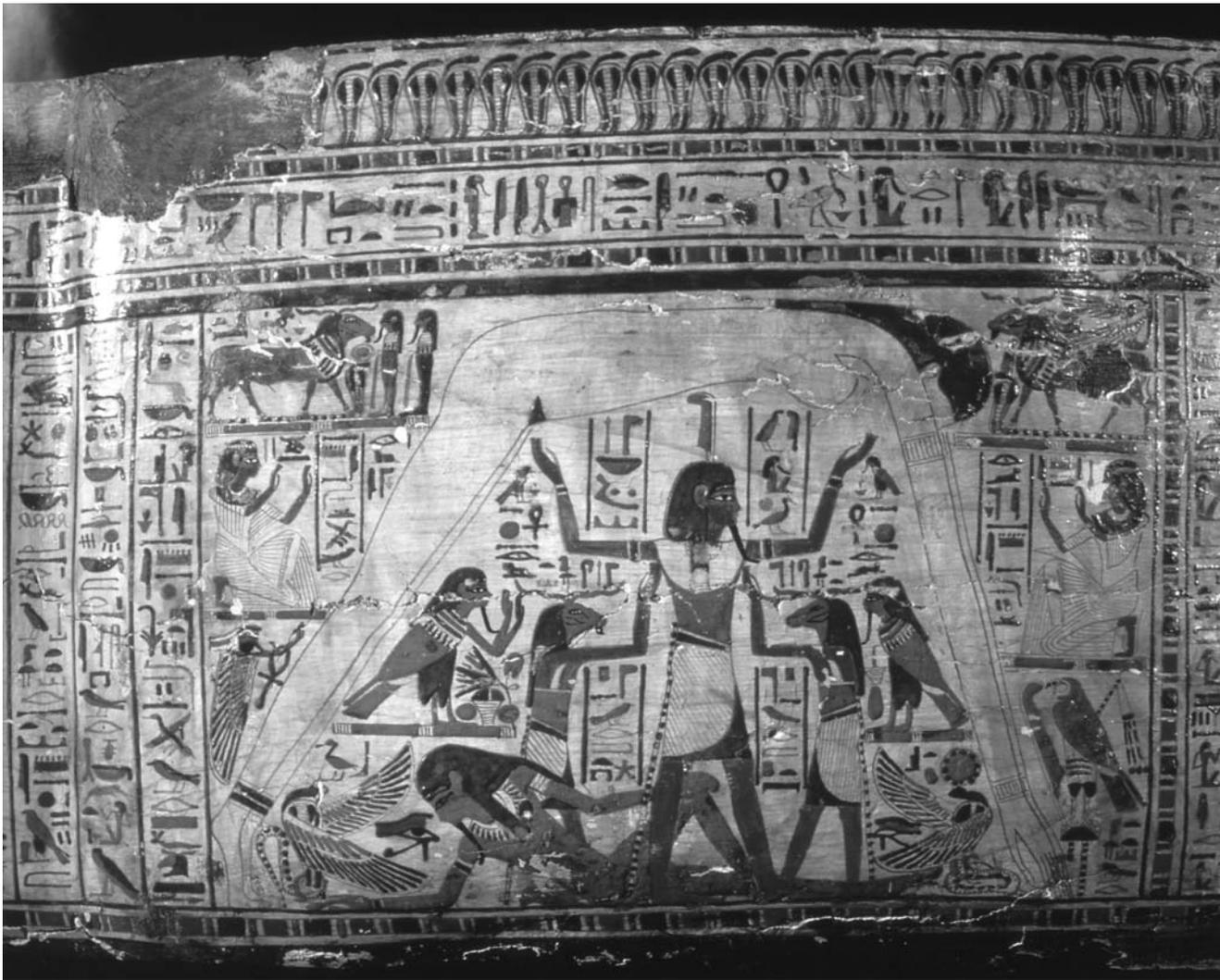
SHU

In the traditions of ancient Egypt, the deity Shu represented air, breath, and the atmosphere. As the god of air and sunlight, Shu's name means "the one who rises up," which is related to the idea that breath and air rise. Shu is a celestial force alongside Tefnut, Geb, and Nut. Created at the beginning of the universe in the narrative of creation, Shu is an essential element in the Heliopolis theology. The terrestrial level of created beings, Ausar, Auset, Set, and Neb-het, came after the creation of the celestial deities. It was believed that Shu and Tefnut were the progenitors of Geb and Nut.

Shu was normally depicted as a man dressed in a beautiful headdress fashioned as a plume. Although Shu is recorded in the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts*, it is not until the New Kingdom that temples and priests dedicated to Shu appear in ancient Egypt, inasmuch as Shu was the deity for life force and the New Kingdom was the era of philosophical and religious emphasis on creation and eternal life.

In the vast history of ancient Egypt, it was clear that the civilization was founded on principles where deities such as Shu, who were linked to lunar deities such as Khonsu and Tehuti, could maintain a system of belief based on the creative power of Atum. Indeed, Shu came into existence because Atum, who was the first deity arising from the primordial waters of Nu, created air and moisture as the basis for all other creations.

The activities of Shu were numerous and included the energy that brought the sun into existence every morning and protected it during its travel in the underworld, from Apep, the snake god who could eat the sun. During the period of King Akhenaten, who was the chief promoter of Aten, the sun-disc deity, Shu escaped being proscribed by the Aten votarists and was considered a part of the Aten entourage who dwelled in the sun disc.



The air god Shu separating the sky goddess Nut from the earth god Geb, assisted by two ram-headed gods. Detail from coffin of Nespawershepi, chief scribe of Temple of Amun. 21st dynasty, c. 984 BC.

Source: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

In the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, there is an account of Ra, the sun god of Innou (Heliopolis), who became the national deity of Egypt. At one point, Ra was combined with the deity Amen as Amen-Ra, but even so as the creator deity the combined deity was able to bring into existence, according to the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture. This is the pattern throughout the history of ancient Egypt.

Because the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day* is about what happens when a soul travels through the underworld, it is interesting that the deceased

is said to pray that his mouth will be opened by the iron knife that Shu holds in his hands for opening the mouths of the gods. Shu is given a prominent place as one who possesses power over the serpents in the underworld and as one who can make the deceased stand erect by the ladder to Heaven upon which the deceased will then climb from the Earth to the gates of Heaven. In fact, the four pillars holding up the four cardinal points of the sky were named the “pillars of Shu,” who was the breath of the Almighty God Ra. Thus, as one of the primordial gods, the personification of atmosphere, breath, and air, Shu is one of the deities of the second

generation after the creator deities. He is dryness, and he and his sister and wife, Tefnut, have two children, Geb and Nut, representing the Earth and sky. Some have claimed that Shu was more related to the solar deities than the lunar deities. Indeed, it is thought that Tefnut was more a lunar deity than Shu, whose association with the lunar deities Khonsu and Tehuti was simply because of his activities. However, Shu was also the deity who separated Heaven and Earth, standing between them with two lions flanking him. Thus, the idea of Shu was associated with Maat and its notions of truth, justice, righteousness, harmony, balance, order, and reciprocity in bringing about morality and ethics in the universe. Shu, therefore, was often portrayed as a man wearing an ostrich feather on his head as a symbol of his power to punish the deceased or allow them to climb to Heaven.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also God

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SKY

The sky, as well as the Earth, plays a central role in African functional systems of beliefs. The sky, like any other place or natural entity in the world, possesses its own ancestral spirit who, like every creative spirit, watches over the daily needs of the African people to promote social harmony and a sense of accountability among them.

Many creation narratives, beginning with the Kemetic civilization, conceive of the sky as the abiding place of the creative force of the universe that in Kemet was Ra, the sun.

Because African ontological systems revolve around the core concept of spirits as the vital universal energy that embodies all living and nonliving things, humans and nature alike, their holistic concept of balance and harmony demands a sense of agency on the part of every human being as well as his or her own responsibility toward the community that gives a sacred or religious dimension to his or her respect for these spirits.

The spiritual dimension of traditional African cultures and religions that refers to a first creator as a carver among the Akan or as a carpenter among the Tiv of Nigeria also conceives of this first creative moment as a generative power or the first coming into being of a great, great, great ancestor or Unkulunkulu as among the Zulu peoples, who created the universe and everything in it, and the human beings whom he gave everything for them to have a pleasant life on Earth and live in harmony with nature.

Although cosmological and spiritual interpretations of the world greatly vary according to the diversity of the people who professes them, African cosmological and religious interpretations of the world show commonalities that conceive the spirits and even the first creator as sharing the same life experiences, needs, and attributes as those of the average human being.

Therefore, the sky and the Earth, respectively, the masculine and the feminine concepts of origin, as well as the metaphor of the two halves of a calabash, are also powerful symbols of creation in the traditional African systems of beliefs and are conceived exactly as any African compound. In the case of the sky, whose chief is often called the lord of the sky, associations of its spirit with natural phenomena that create havoc in the community, such as thunder and lightning, storms, and rain, are common and often seen as a result of the regular activities going on in that particular environment.

In some cases, this functional interpretation overlaps with the concept of the abiding place of the great, great ancestor and, as a consequence, a place for the ancestors' world.

The fact that Semitic and Islamic religions have been impacting African peoples for more than 700 years, as well as the Arab, Jewish, and Christian influences in Africa since the 1st century, in such a persistent mode that they have transformed,

added to, and sometimes even erased the traditional African cultures, makes it virtually impossible to draw a clear line between what can be assessed as consistent with traditional African systems of beliefs and the result of Christian and Islamic influences.

The concept of God that we can almost without exception encounter in the many books and scholarly articles written by either European or African scholars on African religion or African systems of belief is therefore not only the result of a long infusion of the major Western religious conceptualizations in the African culture but is also due to the fact that interpretations of African cultural and religious practices and cosmologies are generally conveyed by the author's own religious orientation.

By the same token, the concept of the sky has systematically been included in these same Semitic or Islamic religious orientations.

However, narratives of creation as diverse as the ones pertaining to the Fon, the Zulu, the Ga, the Yoruba, the Asante, and so on, make clear distinctions between the spirits of the sky, the Earth, the waters, and the forests and equate the lord of the sky either with the chief of the compound responsible for lightning and the stars or just with thunder and lightning, as in the Yoruba and the Ga peoples' perceptions of the universe, or with rain, as among the Asante.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Earth; Fertility; Rain

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SOCIETIES OF SECRETS

African Societies of Secrets are organizations whose primary role is to be the custodians and regulators of the harmonious functioning of a given community. These members help sustain and regulate the development of the ancient wisdom, traditions, and culture of that group. Their most distinguishing factor is their adherence to secrecy. Information regarding the collective wisdom is held secret by its members and is only revealed to those deemed worthy by elders, primarily during and after a rites-of-passage process.

The primary objective for keeping this body of knowledge secret is to protect its integrity and to keep it away from spiritually immature individuals who may use the knowledge for malicious purposes. This body of knowledge teaches its members how to govern society, maintain a balance between social groups, impart knowledge of the universe, and work the instruments of that society to manipulate its environment. This gives the group a competitive advantage over external or internal threats that may disrupt the balance of that society.

This body of wisdom has been passed down through ancestors who are believed to be accessible to those who know how to invoke and harness the energy through ritual. These ancestors have the information on how to draw on forces, powers, and spirits for enhancing the quality of life here on Earth. The secrets on how to properly and successfully utilize these methods are held by qualified members of these groups.

Although African Societies of Secrets have many characteristics, the following three are the main identifiers: initiation rites, caste memberships, and the “sacred society”—the spiritual arm of the corporate group.

Rites of Passage

In many African societies, one is not an adult until one has completed an initiatory rites-of-passage process supervised by the elders of the community. Until people have completed a certain level of this process, they do not share in the privileges and duties of the community.

A rite of passage educates the youth in matters of marriage, procreation, sexual life, and family responsibilities. This marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge that is not accessible to them before their initiation. Neophytes are separated by gender and are taken away from the general corporate community. The goal is to develop latent physical skills, develop intellectual skills, endure hardships to alleviate the sense of fear, learn to live communally, acquire specific vocational training and a healthy attitude toward honest labor, respect elders, and learn the secrets of nature and the male/female relationship.

Initiation rites have many symbolic meanings. The ritualistic death and rebirth process signifies the dying of old habits and ways of thinking, living in the spirit world (thus being in isolation, as in a woman's womb), and being reborn again into the corporate community. Initiates now can wear certain clothing and symbols that were not accessible to them before. They learn symbolic dances, handshakes, and, in adult rites, a secret language only known to members of that group. For example, Dr. Gerhard Kubik discovered that the ideograms called *Tusona* have a philosophic meaning that is known only to the elders who speak the Luchazi language in the Kabompo district of Zambia. Initiates are often given new names after completion.

Initiation is not only for youth; adults experience it several times throughout their adult life, usually until around age 72. A few African ethnic groups that practice such rites are the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Akan of Ghana, and the Maasai and Akamba of Kenya.

Caste

In many African societies, one is born into a caste (not to be confused with hierarchal social castes such as in India, which mark members for life), or one may choose a caste when one chooses a career path. Castes are often associated with such professions as blacksmiths, iron smelters, stonemasons, engineers, farmers, and warriors. These castes are often apprenticeships, in which initiates are taught the secrets of the craft, be it warfare or wood carving. An example would be the Dogon of Mali who have a caste for their "morticians." Although they are different, they all work for the betterment of the society.

Sacred Society

The Sacred Society deals with the spiritual component of a given society. The initiation rites and caste serve a spiritual component as well, but it is this aspect of the Secret Society in which we get our priests who are responsible for the uplifting of the soul. Many African priests use divination as a method to stay connected with spirit and to be able to draw on spiritual energy to successfully complete mundane tasks for the society.

Many cultures in Africa use masks to tell stories of a moral character or, as in the case of the Dogon of Mali, use them to symbolically reenact the movement of the stars in a given constellation during open ceremonies. Only the duly initiated can wear certain masks.

There are many levels one can attain in a priesthood in Africa. The Yoruba priests of Ifa, for instance, have different levels (three, primarily) to their priesthood:

1. Awo—first-level initiate in the mysteries
2. Iyalorishas—mother of mysteries/Babalaworishas—father of mysteries
3. Oluwo—master of the mysteries (men exclusively)

Correlate the above with the three levels known in the ancient Kemetic priesthood:

1. Mortals—students who were being instructed on a probationary status, but who had not experienced the inner vision—*neophytes*.
2. Intelligences—students who had attained inner vision and had received a glimpse of cosmic consciousness.
3. Sons of Light—students who had become identified with or united with the light (God)—*masters of the mysteries*.

Conclusion

African Societies of Secrets serve as the vehicle that organizes and socializes communities and families in a manner that uplifts the society and keeps it cohesive. It also serves as an educational medium through an initiation rite of passage for members at various stages in life. The higher

knowledge held sacred by elders is held secret to outsiders and is only revealed to members worthy to obtain it, usually in steps and phases. This ensures the integrity of the body of wisdom against malicious use by individuals not mature enough to use it constructively. African secret societies are as old as time itself and serve as the fabric that gives Africa its unique characteristics.

Asar Sa Ra Imhotep

See also Rites of Passage; Rituals

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SONGO

The Songo live along the Lundu River in the fertile Angolan plateau. In this area called Songo country, near to Bola Cassache, the Songo have existed for a considerable period of at least 500 to 700 years. They met the first Europeans who entered their territory in the 16th century. However, because of the slave trade, warfare, and migration, it is difficult to find clear information about the origins and ancestry of the Songo. More than 90 different ethnic groups, speaking their own languages, live in the vicinity of the Songo.

The Homeland

It is believed that the Songo and other people were drawn to this plateau because of the fertility of the land and the impressive rivers and streams, chief among them the Lundu River. Two of Angola's

most important rivers and valleys, the Kwanza and the Kunene, converge at the homeland of the Songo. Alongside the Kongo River, these two rivers make a direct highway through the Benguela Highlands into the Katanga region, where there is an abundance of ivory, beeswax, rubber, and copper. The largest populations who occupy this region are the Luimbi, Songo, and Luchazi. They appear to have similar origins because of their common rituals, symbols, customs, traditions, and ancestry.

Narrative Myth

According to the ancient narratives of the people, the origin of the Bié of Ovimbundu, for instance, is told to date back to the marriage of a hunter, Viye, with a Songo princess, Kahanda. In another version, the Ndulu claim that when their founder, an elephant-hunter called Katekula-Mengo, and his wife, Ukungu, came into the region, they got permission from the local king to settle in Kakoko. These narratives of origin are similar and have given rise to comparable cultural forms in terms of religion and respect for ancestors.

Most of the Songo live as fishers. Many of the groups around them, such as the Luena, the Suto, the Lozi, the Bondo, the Jaga, the Luimbi, the Luchazi, and the militarily powerful Chokwe, came into the area as agrarians and pastoralists. The Songo people are related to a branch of the Chokwe called the Imbangala. The Imbangala are descendants of Kasanje Tembo, brother of Ndumba Tembo, founder of the Chokwe, and Muzumbo Tembo, founder of the Songo. These three brothers, the Tembos, are three of the most important state founders in the history of Africa because each one created his own kingdom, while the empire founded by Kibinda Ilunga can be traced at any time from 1550 or even earlier to 1612.

At the turn of the 17th century, a group of Lunda left the country under the leadership of Kinguri. They were under the hegemony of a Luba king who had seized the kingdom. They settled in the area of Kwango and Kasai, but went farther west and arrived in Songo country near Bola Cassache.

When they arrived in Bola Cassache, the king, Kinguri, was assassinated by the local king named Sungwe, who was the leader of the Mboluma people. Kasanje, who called himself Kinguri's

nephew, succeeded to the leadership of the Songo. They fought with the Ngolas and the Pende and were brought under the hegemony of the Portuguese. Like the Jaga, who lived as a vassal people under the Portuguese, the Songo did the same thing until they started to move beyond the influence of the whites. After the death of Kasanje in 1616, the Songo led a new campaign against the Ngola and Matamba. Involved in the slave trade, the Songo established trading stations with the Portuguese. Their culture became distorted and a mixture of Western and African ideals. With the intense slave trade activities, the culture of Songo was brutalized.

Ritual and Spiritual Manifestations

The major manifestations of rituals and ceremonies highlight the value of the ancestors in the development of culture. If there are problems such as physical disorders, psychological illnesses, and commercial misfortune, then the Songo seek to know the invisible force that caused the disruption. The remedy to this condition is through sacrifice, offerings, and ceremonies dedicated to the ancestors. If these things are done, then the misfortune could be expected to vanish if the proper protocols have been carried out. Among the Songo, the traditional priests and priestesses are called on to oversee the precise rituals necessary to bring about a reordering of the cosmos. Thus, despite the inroads made into the character of the traditional ways of the Songo by their early interactions with the Portuguese, one still discovers their moral capacity to create balance in their society because of the continuing commitment to ancestral values.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Ancestors

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SOPDU

Sopdu, a local falcon god, is referred to as a war god in ancient Egyptian religion. Called “Smiter of the Asiatics,” “Sharp-Toothed One,” “Eastern Horus,” “Lord of the East,” and “Great of Strength,” Sopdu was thought to keep watch over the eastern delta lands of Egypt and the surrounding areas. The ancient Egyptians believed that his protective force extended across the eastern desert routes, an area between the Nile and the Red Sea and the Asiatic lands and those areas northeast of Egypt. Sopdu guarded the borders of the delta from foreign invaders and in this capacity was also referred to as the border god. This ancient Egyptian god was also known by the names Sopd, Soped, Sopedu, Sopedu-Horus, and Septu.

Origins

The primary cult of Sopdu resided in the ancient city of Per-Sopdu, which translated to mean “House of Sopdu” during the 22nd dynasty in the 20th Lower Egyptian nome. The ancient city of Per-Sopdu is presently the village of Saft el-Hinna in the eastern delta. The remains of a monument dedicated to Sopdu by King Nectanebo I of the 30th dynasty were discovered there. King Nectanebo I was responsible for the development and restoration of many Egyptian temples erected to the gods. Although Sopdu was the deity of Per-Sopdu, the priest associated with him could be found at several Egyptian sites, most notably Serabit el-Khadim. General ancient Egyptian religious practices consisted of the cult providing their gods with necessary food, drink, and clothing. Members of cults also performed rituals of purification to sustain the gods.

Ancient Egyptians tended to the gods, believing that, in return, favor would be given to them

through the provision of resources and divine guidance to the pharaoh in their affairs. It is believed that the cult of Sopdu originated in the Sinai Peninsula, an area rich in various minerals, among them turquoise and copper. Sopdu served as a protector of the land, its resources, and its people, warding off evil among the living and the Dead. He was known as the Horian god of Saft el-Hinna and one of the guardians of the turquoise mines. The goddess Hathor was the other. Serabit el-Khadim, a major site of ancient Egyptian religious activities and turquoise-mining in the Sinai Peninsula, became the site of a shrine built for Sopdu during the 12th dynasty. Many mining expeditions were launched from the Sopdu nome, making Serabit el-Khadim a center of commerce and trade for turquoise and other precious stones.

The mythology of Sopdu presents him as a cosmic falcon god or avian deity. It was believed that the falcon embodied cosmic powers, making the falcon an important symbol of the king. Falcon gods were the gods of kingship, and Horus, known as the sky god or celestial falcon, was the most highly regarded. Horus was known as the protector of the kings, and ancient Egyptians believed that the king was the earthly representation of Horus. Rulers of early dynasties viewed the falcon's eyes as the sun and the moon, and its speckled feathers were considered stars. According to the Pyramid Texts, the deceased king as Osiris-Orion impregnated the goddess Isis as the star of Sothis, resulting in the creation of Horus-Sopdu. Sopdu has been referred to as the Horian god of Saft el-Hinna.

Beliefs

Considered one of the gods of the four corners of the Earth, Sopdu, whose name means "bearded one," was often shown as a warrior with a pointed beard. Sopdu was acknowledged in several forms. In anthropomorphic form, Sopdu was depicted wearing a crown of two tall feathers or plumes on his head and a tasseled or beaded girdle. In some representations, he carried an ankh, battle-ax, or tall was-scepter. In zoomorphic form, this falcon god was shown as a crouching falcon with a ritual flail over its shoulder while perched on a standard. Sopdu was characterized as having the "teeth of the king," a testament to the invincibility of the

king and possibly the sharp teeth associated with birds of prey. The hieroglyph for sharp, a pointed triangle, is part of the composition of Sopdu's name and is translated as "sharp ones." Sopdu was known as a fierce warrior god; his messengers were feared by the living, and ancient Egyptians believed that one wave of his hand would deter supernatural enemies. As a cosmic or astral deity, Sopdu, the son of Sopdet and Sah, was associated with the inundation of the Nile. Sopdet was goddess of the dog star, and Sah was also known as the constellation Orion.

Akhet, the first season of the year in the ancient Egyptian calendar, started with the appearance of the star Sirius, known as the dog star, and called Sopdet by the Egyptians and Sothis by the Greeks. It was with the appearance of Sirius that the inundation of the Nile would occur. Akhet held another meaning for the ancient Egyptians. Referred to as "The Horizon," Akhet represented a place of transition for gods and the deceased where the sun god died at sunset and was reborn at sunrise. The annual flooding of the Nile represented renewal for the land facilitated by the ancient Egyptian celebrations or festivals "The Night of the Tear," "The Night of the Dam," or "Night of the Cutting of the Dam." The ancient Egyptian mythology of Sopdu consists of the belief that Sopdu originated as the scorching heat associated with the summer sun and the heliacal rising of the star Sirius.

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See also Hathor

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SOTHO

The Sotho, or Basotho people as they are formally called, live in southern Africa, where they have resided since the 14th century. According to most historians, they entered the southern region of Africa from the north. Starting their migration from the Great Lakes region of East Africa, these adventurous people crossed the Limpopo into South Africa, tested by their long journey and the protection of their ancestors along the way.

However, it is generally believed that the history of the Basotho is split into two parts. One part is the history before Moshoeshoe I, and the second part is the history of the people after Moshoeshoe I. Due to his brilliance as a strategist, his integrity as a diplomat, and his generosity to his enemies, Moshoeshoe became, even during his lifetime, one of the most significant kings of southern Africa. He was, in a sense, larger than the times because the route to success that he established for the Sotho outlasted him. He was a historic leader, branded by the experiences of war and diplomacy as a great statesman.

Indeed, the Sotho people gained identity and direction from the political skill of their astute leader. He provided land to the people he conquered and influenced them to follow the Sotho ways. The people who had been scattered in the wake of the Mfecane led by Shaka's army of the Zulus often came to refuge in Moshoeshoe's territory. It is because of the great scattering of the Mfecane that Moshoeshoe established the kingdom of Basotho and integrated the refugees and victims into his nation. The people called him *Morena e Moholo*, *Morena wa Basotho*, meaning Great King, King of the Basotho.

The Basotho believe that the Earth is filled with spirits. Children learn at an early age to respect the environment because it is alive with the spirits of the ancestors. Songs are sung to them during infancy and repeated as nursery tales about the traditions and values of the people. Most of the fables, folktales, and songs were presented at nighttime so the children could get the full benefit of the still Earth. Furthermore, it was said that a horn would grow on the head of the person who told fables during the day. This was obviously a way to manage the teaching of the young so that

they were instructed when they were most relaxed and the evening was still and dark.

The Basotho understood death to be horrible in any form. The *leqhofa*, or house of the dead person, particularly if the person somehow lived alone, would be boarded up and left as a spot unfit for humans to live in again. The Basotho believed that evil spirits, those that may have been left to wander because they were not remembered or ritualized, often returned to the same place to take the person. Moreover, if a person died suddenly because of lightning, which occurs often in southern Africa, the people sought out seers and diviners to make some sense out of the situation. Family members would be told about the death of a loved one only at night. The way the Basotho spoke of death was to say that the person had emigrated somewhere else. The word used was *ofaletse*. The term for "he is dead" is *o shoele*. The term was considered very bad, taboo, and even vulgar in the Sotho language. In addition, there was a taboo against mentioning the name of the deceased. It should be said that "the late so-and-so who lived down the street" was such-and-such. One avoided at all costs the use of the person's name in connection with death. Funerals were mostly held at night, and children were prohibited from attending the funerals or seeing the dead corpse. The aim of the Sotho society was to protect the living from the cruelty of death.

In past times, the Dead would be buried the same day of the death. The community would never leave an open grave dug for the corpse overnight. The corpse had to be placed in it immediately or the grave had to be watched by strong men who were not afraid of the night or the *baloi*, evil doers who might come to destroy the grave so that the dead person would have no place to rest.

The Sotho believed that the Dead should be buried inside of their cattle kraals. The stones of the kraal would often have to be reset if it were necessary for the grave to be made outside the existing walls. The Sotho dug their graves as round holes in the Earth. The body was not laid out in the grave, but rather it was buried sitting up. Besides the body, the family placed food, seeds of maize, mabele, sugarcane, pumpkin, and some dog grass. Sometimes a person's possession such as a pipe or snuff box was also buried. Earth was thrown into the grave to



Sotho Sangoma with bones, Lesedi Cultural Village, Hartbeespoort, North West Province, South Africa. The term Sangoma is used to describe a holy man or woman who is a skilled diviner and healer. The Sangoma's abilities have been based on the fact that he or she is directly connected with or an incarnation of an ancestral spirit or guide.

Source: Martin Harvey/Getty Images.

the level of the head, and when it was lightly covered, a stone plate was placed precisely over the head. Sand was then thrown over the grave to conceal it. The family then swept the area clean so that no dirt was left that might cause harm to the corpse.

Funerals and burials are used to display the rights of inheritance. The heir to the deceased should be the one who throws the first spade of soil to cover the grave. The family members, in order of succession, follow. Among the Sotho, only the midwife can bury an embryo. The smallest embryo can be placed in an animal's horn or broken earthen pot and buried in an ash hill well outside the home area.

Much of Sotho belief is centered on fortune and misfortune and the necessity for the living to remain outside of the realm of misfortune. Therefore, the person seeks to ensure his or her continuation in the community of believers by following all of the recommendations of the diviners and priests. If one is not supposed to kill a particular bird, visit a certain forest, or eat a special food, then it behooves one to refrain from these actions in the Sotho system. Practice of Sotho behavior based on the commonly accepted values is required of the person who will be considered just and righteous.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Funeral; Rites of Passage; Rituals

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SOUL

The term *soul* commonly connotes a human element that is not physical, but vital, energizing, and indestructible. It coexists with the living human body from birth, or before, and remains until the time of death. Subsequently, and according to the cultural myths of a society, there are a number of tasks and responsibilities performed by the soul. Although African religion presents a great diversity of thinking regarding the number of souls possessed by a host, for example, there are nonetheless common threads as a survey of several African traditions will reveal.

The ancient Egyptians described several elements that make up a person. The *Ba* is the element that most fits the definition of soul. It was eternal, dwelled in heaven, could change its shape, and was able to speak to its mummy. The *Ba* resided in the *Ka*, which is best described as the individual's personality and as having a separate existence. The *Ka* could move about on its own, become a heaven dweller, and inhabit inanimate objects. The *Sahu*, the spiritual body, was regarded as incorruptible and had the ability to speak to the soul.

Another of the soul's companions and much like the soul is the *Khaibit*. The latter is spoken of as a shadow that is always near the soul. It could exist outside the body, could go anywhere, and was able to ingest funeral offerings left at tomb sites. Another component common to both humans and gods was the *Khu*. It is said to invest the *Khat*, physical body, with a shining brightness, and it became a heavenly inhabitant after death. The *Sekhem* is a term that is often translated as power, but it is also believed to be a human factor having a heavenly existence. All of these components plus the *Ren*, the name of the individual, were a part of a human being's natural existence forming a close-knit relationship that gave great importance to the preservation of the natural body.

Yoruba teachings speak of multiple souls. The first is represented as the breath of life received at birth from God. The second is called a shadow, and the third is called the *Ori*, head. The latter is partially in the head and is considered to be the ego. The remaining portion, the guardian soul, is located in the heavens. Yorubas attach great

importance to studying a body of knowledge referred to as the Oral Scriptures. They teach that by this study one's soul is advanced; the aspirant's earthly consciousness, Ori, is raised to the level of a heavenly consciousness called Iponri. A devotee's destiny, Ayanmo, is to achieve inner realization of divinity and to live on the material plane as an example of this achievement.

Death is not a finality because the spirit person is then brought before Olofin, the son of God, where a recounting of the spirit person's life on Earth takes place. The reward for living a righteous life is eternal life granted by the Supreme Deity. The spirit person is transformed into rain that falls into bodies of water on Earth. At this point, a further change takes place in which the rain is turned into stone. During a ceremony, relatives of the deceased visit a nearby lake or stream and search for the rain stones by touch and affinity. The stones are then wrapped in the same color cloth as the protecting deity of the deceased. Inside the home, these stones are placed in a clay bowl that becomes a shrine where the family members conduct rituals and offer prayers.

The Dogon people say humans have one couple of twin souls of opposite sex and four sex souls. The Nupe people say humans have two souls. Upon the death of the individual, one soul returns to God while the other reincarnates. In contrast, The Mandari do not recognize an individual soul, but only a life principal that they say returns to the creator when an organism dies.

According to the BaManiangas of the Kongo, a living person has a physical body, an invisible body, and a soul. At death, both the invisible body and soul depart for the other world. This combination is referred to as the life body because it continues to live. The immortality of the invisible body is due to its investiture by the soul. After death, the invisible body may be seen by immediate family, and it is this body that is recognized by the other world. Conversely, the soul cannot be seen by the living, is an independent power, and may leave the body for short periods during sleep, when its whereabouts are indicated in the dream state.

In Mende society, humans have souls, and as ancestors they perform intermediary duties between the living and the Supreme Being. Although the ancestors are spiritual beings, they still maintain and can act out their previous passions and appetites.

This belief is no small reason that the community is concerned and takes care in their ritual observances.

In the Akan teachings, the soul of human beings existed with God prior to being born in the flesh. The soul is regarded as the life force that animates the body and is immortal. Akan metaphysics says the soul comes from an individual's maternal ancestors and ego from paternal ancestry. It is also believed that only humans possess ego and soul. When a person dies, the soul is replaced by the ghost soul that does not inhabit the body, but at the same time is not a separate entity. The nature of the ghost soul is both ethereal and corporeal. In the Akan doctrine, two types of souls are posited. Those individuals who live a life of merit and achievement are accorded the title of Nana after death. This acclaim distinguishes them as ancestors who are represented in clan shrines and are entitled to propitiation and reverence. Souls who are not remembered by the living are considered extinct.

The Sisala cosmology in some ways is much like that of the Kongo, Mende, and Akan. Sisala cosmology purports that every living person has a soul that originated with God and that this soul is the life force of the body. The Sisalas believe the soul can leave the body during sleep, fainting, or death. They also believe all living things have souls, and even shrines and medicines are considered to have soul substance and, therefore, are living things. The Sisalas have two material objects that symbolize soul. One is an iron bracelet worn on the right wrist, and the other is their mud altar. To live in the village of the ancestors is highly desirable, but one can only remain there through the sacrifice and propitiation of the living. When an individual is no longer remembered, his or her soul joins the realm of forgotten spirits.

Some African philosophies allow a soul to be in more than one place at the same time. For example, a soul could be at the grave site, in the land of the dead, and reincarnated on Earth. In much of African tradition, when a soul is no longer remembered, it has reached the finality of death. It is believed that the destiny of all humans is spirit.

Zetla K. Elvi

See also Ba; Death; Ka

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SPACE AND TIME

In Africa, the time–space dimension is viewed as interrelated. The African foundation of spirituality, for example, is governed by the seen and unseen and convergence of time and space. To understand the relationship among humans, nature, and science, it is necessary to consider the concept of wholeness in the African worldview.

Reality has the characteristics of the unseen and the seen, the concrete and the abstract, as with space and time. In fact, what we perceive with our senses are but representations and symbols of this reality. The African idea is that the world extends beyond the limits of empiricism. For instance, physics cannot explain many of the innate abilities and observations of humans such as telepathy, clairaudience, clairvoyance, clairsentience, or precognition. Time is also nonexistent and cannot be measured in the dream state, yet sleep or dream time is measured by time in the physical world. Time, as a vehicle or conduit that delivers the messages to be acted on in the physical world, is also needed for movement.

Time is then a manifestation of a physical world or material existence, a degree of limitation as compared with the subjective realm where time and space are nonexistent. Time is also a representation of eternity and balance. According to some scholars, the ancient African sages knew how to control the vibration of the pituitary and pineal glands in a manner that enabled them to contact any region of the inner worlds that they desired to visit. It is widely believed that as we dream we are having an experience outside of time and space.

Here we can also commune with ancestors of the spirit world, an existence without boundaries or degrees of separation.

African philosophers have said that the universe is considered to be unending in regard to space and time. There is no known edge to the universe, and Africans' idea of time consists mainly of present, past, and little to say about the future. Africans acknowledge time within the cycle of birth, growth, procreation, and death. The major rhythms of time are events like night and day, months in connection to phases of the moon, seasons of rain and dry weather, as well as events of nature that come and go. All of this suggests that the universe will never end despite the transformations we experience in a physical state. The symbolism of circles, used in many rituals, is praised in art and other forms of cultural expression to stress the significance of their continuity. Ongoing and permanent, the universe is eternal and extends beyond what the human eye can detect.

Space is defined as a characteristic of the universe that enables physical manifestations to extend in three directions. Space is then a means by which creation and all life forms can exist and interact. In the West, some have said that space, time, and matter are separate elements; others have contended that they are combined into a fourth-dimensional existence. The Africans have understood that space and time are mutually dependent. This view concurs with those who claim that absolute time is then really the absolute order of events determined by cause-and-effect events and not the measurement of time, which is the subject of ordinary observations.

Ancient Egyptians based time and space on the concept of the number 6. The ancients believed that the number 6 was the cosmic number of the material world. Time in simple mathematics makes up the 24 hours of the day when multiplied by 4; multiplied by 2 it gives us 12 hours of day and night. Furthermore, 6 multiplied by 5 gives us our 30 days in a month. It is also symbolic of the 12 signs of the zodiac multiplied by 2.

Space is also governed by this rule of six because it represents the six directions of extension, such as up and down, back and forth, and left and right. The cube, or, more specifically, a “person sitting on

the cube,” is also a symbol for space and is used in hieroglyphics to symbolize mind over matter. There are those who believe that time and space are opposing forces, but that is not true; they are simply the continuation of each other, perhaps even different explanations of the same situation. They merge and become one when both are reduced.

The knowledge of time and space was known by the Yoruba, Mande, Wolof, Akan, Shona, Dogon, and, indeed, every African ethnic group and all the practitioners of the popular traditional African religions. Nothing escaped the wise thinkers and observers of the ancient African societies. In the past, the African diviners, hunters, scientists of the mind, and observers of space and time used personal observation as the standard of measurement. They were familiar with the motions of objects in the sky, as well as the characteristics of the land. For instance, a solar day was measured as the elapse of time between two successful solar crossings of the meridian or the line that divides the sky in half, east and west. Thus, the contemporary use of antemeridian as the a.m. or morning and postmeridian as the p.m. or afternoon and evening hours was directly related to the ancient observations of Africans in the Nile Valley.

Elizabeth Andrade

See also Akan; Dogon; Yoruba

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SPEAR MASTERS

Spear masters are those who learned the lessons of good and evil as represented in the use of the spear. The Dinka of the Sudan say that long ago there were dances held by lions, and a man was dancing when a lion looked at him and demanded his bracelet. The man refused to give his bracelet to the lion, whereupon the lion bit his thumb completely off. Then the man bled to death. The man had left a wife and daughter behind, but they had no son, and so the widow went weeping to the river. The river spirit heard her and asked her what was wrong. When she told the story of her misfortune, the river spirit said to her, “Lift your skirt and brush the waves toward you so that they enter your body.”

The spirit gave her a spear and told her that the spear was a symbol of her bearing a male child. He also gave her a fish for food and told her to go home and relax without delay. The woman went home and soon bore a son, Aiwel, who had a full set of teeth when he was born, a sign of unusual spiritual powers.

As an infant, he was left sleeping on the floor, but when the mother came back into the room, she noticed that a gourd of milk had been drunk. Not believing that it could have been the infant, she accused her daughter of stealing the milk. She punished the daughter. The same thing happened over and over again. The mother was quite disturbed by this situation and soon became suspicious. She acted like she was leaving the baby alone with the milk, but as she went out she thought that she should hide herself in the bushes and just watch the baby. This she did and, to her surprise, she saw the baby Aiwel get up from the floor and drink the milk. She opened the door and accused him of drinking the milk. He told her not to tell anybody or she would die. She could not keep the secret to herself, and she died as Aiwel had said. He had begun to develop the power of the Spear Masters to make his words come true.

He could no longer live with his family after his mother's death. He went to stay with the spirit father in the river until he grew up. He left the river as a man with an ox of many colors, representing all the colors of his cattle. The ox was named Longar, and from then on the man was Aiwel Longar.

Aiwel Longar tended cattle that had belonged to his mother's first husband, who had died when the lion bit his finger off. Soon a great drought hit the land and the cattle of the people began to die. Aiwel's cattle stayed fat and healthy. The people could not understand why their cattle were dying, but Aiwel's were not. One day a group of young men spied on him. They watched him feed and water his cattle. They saw him give the cattle long-rooted grass. When Aiwel discovered that the young men had spied on him, he told them not to tell anyone or else they would die. They told and they died.

Aiwel then decided to tell the village elders that they had to leave that place to avoid the death of all their cattle. He went and told them that he would show them where there was a big pasture and no death. They refused to believe him. So he went by himself and found the place and his cattle prospered. But soon the people tried to follow him, but it was more difficult now.

At one river where they were trying to cross, Aiwel stood on the other side of the river encouraging them, but as they came up out of the reeds, he would kill them with his spear. Then one of the men, Agothyathik, saw what was happening and decided to play a trick on Aiwel. He would take a large ox bone and give it to a friend to take across the river, holding it on a pole in front of him as he crossed. When Aiwel saw this, he thought it was a human and tried to spear it. Just then Agothyathik grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground.

Finally, Aiwel tired and gave up the wrestling and told Agothyathik to bring the people over. Some were afraid, but to those who came Aiwel gave fishing spears to carry when they prayed and war spears when they fought. He gave them deities to worship and a blue bull whose thigh-bone would be sacred to them. The men who received the spears became leaders of clans that are spear masters who keep the most perfect way.

In the end, the spear masters were those who followed the straight path, walked erect, and taught others the lessons of Aiwel that the spear could be used for good, as in fishing, or for defending the clan against enemies, as in warfare.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Dinka; Nommo; Words

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SPHINX

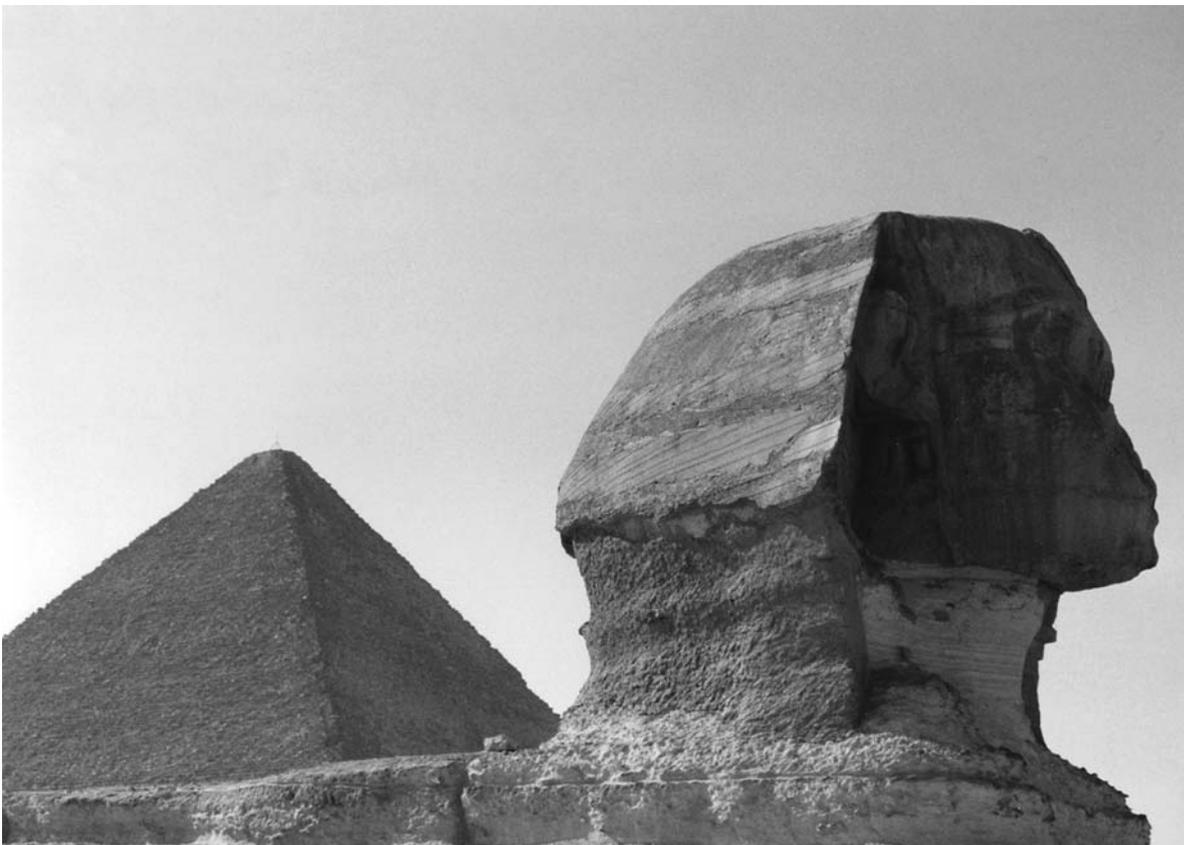
A sphinx is a large stone statue depicting the body of a lion or lioness and the head of a woman, man, or animal, such as a sheep, hawk, or ram. A common sphinx in ancient Egypt was in the form of the body of a lion with the head of a human and the face of the current king or queen. The most prominent Egyptian sphinx is the Great Sphinx of Giza, a manifestation of the sun god, Re. Situated on a plateau and carved out of limestone, the Great Sphinx was erected to be a guardian and protector of nearby tombs from evil spirits.

Origins

These monuments, referred to generally by the name given to them by the Greeks, were common in Egypt and Greece. Primarily shown as a crouching lion, sphinxes were associated with royalty and were placed at the entrances of palaces and tombs to protect the inhabitants from evil spirits and Earthly enemies. In ancient Egyptian culture, many animals possessed religious significance. The lion was associated with the solar deities or sun gods and was revered for its courage, strength, and guardianship. Ancient Egyptians believed that lion gods served as protectors and guarded the gates beginning and ending the day.

Beliefs

Among the most notable Egyptian sphinxes is the conjoined sphinx representing the lion god, Aker. The Egyptians believed that Aker, known as an Earth god, watched over the eastern and western horizons guarding the gate through which the sun would pass each day. Another sphinx, Tutu, was prominent during the 1st millennium BC. One of



The sphinx is the first colossal royal ancestral sculpture in Africa.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante.

the forms in which Tutu was depicted was that of a walking lion. Standing or walking sphinxes were often shown in confrontation with enemies of the Egyptians. The son of the goddess Neith, Tutu was known for his ability to keep enemies away. In Karnak, the path to the temple of Amun is lined with ram-headed sphinxes, also known as criosphinxes. Another sphinx, that of Queen Hatsheput, fifth ruler of the 18th dynasty, builder and restorer of many temples throughout Egypt, was erected in Deir el-Bahri. The connection between lion gods and royalty fostered the belief that sphinxes representing reigning rulers held the power of the king or queen to protect and defend ancient Egypt.

The Great Sphinx at Giza was built to honor and accommodate the sun god Re, also known as Ra or Horus. Re's power on Earth was demonstrated through his ability to provide light, heat, and agricultural growth. The Great Sphinx is thought to be a representation of King Khafre, the third ruler of the 4th dynasty. Built facing the rising sun, the Great Sphinx was also referred to by the ancient Egyptians as *Horemakhet*, "Horus in the Horizon."

DeBorah Gilbert White

See also Animals; God

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SPIRIT MEDIUM

Spirit mediums are people who have the gift or ability to receive messages from the spirit/ancestor world. In America, spirit mediums may practice African traditions. In Jamaica, spirit mediums are referred to as Mother Women. Spirit mediums are responsible for consulting the

ancestors of the spirit on behalf of clients who have come for personal, relational, financial, or health reasons. In ancient Africa, a spirit medium was commonly referred to as a priestess or priest. In present-day African society, it is mostly those persons who have remained a part of the traditional religions who would be referred to as spirit mediums. Spirit mediums exist in many different African religions, such as the Akan, Yoruba, Santeria, and Kumina religions.

In most of the traditional African religions, spirit mediums are the head of the religious center or village. During times of enslavement in America, spirit mediums were called witchdoctors and Obeah workers in Jamaica. Spirit mediums provide spiritual, health, and relationship interventions to help restore balance. When our lives become physically unbalanced, it is because of the spiritual imbalances that we are experiencing in the invisible realms. To be unbalanced physically means that our invisible chi energy fields have become disturbed and blocked. Spirit mediums help to restore these balances by consulting the ancestors on the other side for information that will help them to restore the imbalances and bring harmony and success into our lives again.

Communication Practices of Spirit Mediums

The communication patterns that occur between the spirit medium and the ancestors take place within the confines of the spirit medium's mind body. The ancestor usually overshadows the indwelling spirit of the spirit medium. The spirit medium may appear to be in a trancelike state because her normal personality is no longer visible and her verbal and nonverbal communication patterns are distinctly different. Spirit mediums do not become possessed by the spirits of ancestors; they share their mental and physical body with these spiritual entities. There are a number of indications to show that the spirit medium's body is being shared with the ancestors:

- A slowing of the heart rate
- A slow deep and steady breathing pattern
- A lowering of the body temperature
- Greatly reduced reaction to touch or pain
- Various degrees of unconsciousness

In addition to these changes in spirit mediums, their voices may change, they may have broken speech patterns, they may reverse sentence structures, and there may be an overall change in their grammar or language usage. Spirit mediums continue to be an important part of the African religious experience. Today they are being sought out more frequently because of the despondency that people are experiencing with modern Western religious practices.

Oftentimes in ancient and present-day Africa and the diaspora, spirit mediums are consulted when there is no medical or physical explanation for a person's problems or when there is a consistent pattern of calamity in a person's life.

Edona M. Alexandria

See also Healing; Seers

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SPIT

Spit, or saliva, is almost entirely pure water. It consists of only about 1% solid material. The ritual significance of spit in African tradition has in the beginning been that of a creative agent, but it has almost always afterward been visualized as a transformative and healing agent.

The great importance of spit to the ancient Egyptians may well be indicated by its location in the realms of myth, divinity, medicine, and social practice. In the *Medew Netjer*, a large vocabulary pertaining to *spit*, *spittle*, and other cognates amounts to more than 20 words and expressions,

thus indicating the relative importance of spit to the ancient Egyptians.

The first written reference to spit in the history of humanity occurs in the earliest Creation Story of the African people, the Kemetyu creation myth. Here, Itm, Atum, the Creator Divinity, creates Shu, the Divinity of Air, and Tefnut, the Divinity of Heat, with and from His *psg*, his spit. In this archetypal instance, spit is a creative agent in the realm of divinity. Numerous examples of the creative force of spit as well as other applications of this popular medical remedy follow in the *Pyramid Texts*, the *Coffin Texts*, and other parts of the spiritual literature of ancient Egypt. A wide range of beings and things, including some divinities, pharaohs, demons, plants, animals, and the Earth, are the products of ritual spitting, which is covered by such notions as creation, blessing as well as cursing, washing as well as healing, venom, decay, and death.

The ritual significance of the spit lies in the fact that it comes from inside of the person or being. This represents the essence or vital aspect(s) of the person or being and so his or her power. This is demonstrated in the story of Isis and Ra, in which Isis employs Ra's spit, mixed with Earth, to gain his secret knowledge and so power over him.

This notion of spit as a healing and thus a transforming agent is securely based on a biochemical fact. Spit is the only source of a potent chemical called *histatin*, a protein with antifungal properties. Histatin functions as a healing agent, inhibiting the growth of yeast and bacteria and so hastening the healing of wounds.

This is undoubtedly the basis of the practice of spitting on things, along with licking them, which are said to have magical (or ritual) application in the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, a seminal ancient Egyptian text. Spitting and licking are employed as healing actions in Chapters 17, 72, and 102 among several others in the *Book of Going Forth*. In Chapter 146, an epithet for a protective female divinity is "She Who Licks," an epithet that recalls the protective gesture of a cow that licks her young. It is the same with many other animals. The importance of spit is further emphasized in a number of ancient Egyptian creation stories.

Spitting is common today in African communities on the continent. Spitting on cuts, bruises, and sores is a fairly common practice among children. Spitting is also known to be practiced by adults. Many traditional healers spit preparations directly onto affected parts of the human body. Ritual spitting is also part of the living libation ritual in some parts of Africa (e.g., among the Ewe people, who live mainly in Ghana and Togo).

Africans in the communities abroad have also retained this tradition, but in a truncated form. Many Africans in these parts of the world will spit onto Mother Earth, or into their own hands, as a way of showing that what they are saying is a sacred oath, which must therefore be taken seriously because Africans do not make this oath except on the most serious of occasions. In West Africa, among the Kru people in Sierra Leone, spitting on the ground is a way of showing agreement or emphasizing a point. In Suriname, a Winti mother licks her child's forehead three times and then spits three times in different directions during an afterbirth ritual. This demonstrates the ritual significance of spitting, which is the focus of our discussion here, as well as the ritual significance of the number 3.

Kimani S. K. Nehusi

See also Blessing; Rituals

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SUICIDE

Suicide in Africa has an indigenous aspect, a modern aspect, and a large grey area where the two blend that has yet to be thoroughly studied. The relatively few modern studies include such small populations that any general statement would be inadequate, except that suicide exists in modern

Africa, and most of the cases documented are linked to depression, drug or alcohol abuse, pesticide poisoning, physical illness, or mental illness. However, in the traditional context, suicides were seen as the result not of personal troubles but of a conflict between one or more members of the community. For example, a person who kills himself would do so with the understanding that, as a ghost, he could inflict evil and harm on his enemies more effectively. Also, the person who kills himself knows that the community will go after the person or persons who caused him to commit the act, which is another way to exact revenge. In fact, it could be said that an indigenous African community's perspective on suicide is that it is an act of homicide. That is, if a person were to take his life, the community would immediately begin to look for the person who caused the person to kill himself, or "the murderer." Among the Tshi, if a particular person was named during the suicide, that person could possibly be killed in the same manner. This type of suicide was rare, and if it happened, families would opt to receive damages by the offending party. With the living forced to bear the burden of a suicide, the threat of suicide in the traditional setting was a serious matter. Nor was death in this context feared. Kassena women of northern Ghana knew that if they killed themselves, it would ruin their husbands. Husbands were well aware of this fact, and it functioned as a form of social control. Among the Bavenda, all the relatives of the person who has committed suicide are called before the chief, and the goods and wife of the person are confiscated until the guilty party declares himself. A diviner may be consulted to determine the cause of death. If it was a spirit, then the goods are returned to the family. Even in suicide, African religious culture is consistent. First, suicide is not just about the individual. The community in some way is held accountable and suffers the consequences. Second, the spirit world plays an active role in the perception of suicide. If Africans did not believe spirits have the ability to interfere with man, suicide, as a form of revenge, would be a pointless endeavor.

Denise Martin

See also Death; Taboo

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SUMAN

In African religion, and especially among the Akan, the presence of suman is a significant part of the culture. A suman is a material object that is dedicated to religious purposes because of its energy. Because religion is based on a set of beliefs, suman is an aspect of the religion that is derived from a belief in the energizing capacity of certain objects. Most African cultures accept the following hierarchy: God, the ancestors, the spirits, the totem, and suman, also called charms.

The suman is a specialized piece of art that is used as a talisman or charm for offensive or defensive capabilities. A suman is not a fetish, a word derived from the Portuguese word *fetico*, which originally referred to an object that was used as an amulet. The idea behind fetico was that the object was the religion. This is why so many people in the West thought of African religion as fetish religion. In fact, long before they knew anything about African religion on a practical or philosophical level, many people in Europe and America referred to African religion by the Portuguese-derived term *fetish*. To use the word *fetish* is to collapse the full meaning of African religion to the “things” of religion.

Suman is not the same thing as obosom. Whereas suman is a dedicated religious artifact, obosom means deity. These are two different concepts in African religion. The suman is an object that might be used to fend off evil spirits, create protection around the defenseless, or empower people to achieve something that they did not know they were capable of doing.

One receives the suman from a priest who has sanctioned its use as an object set apart for the purpose of spiritual energy. Thus, it is not something that can be taken from the environment without being “sanctified” by the proper rituals of the religion. To be effective, the suman must be made powerful and can be considered a form of magical power because the material object signifies the means through which important power can be activated.

In some senses, the idea that evil exists in the world calls into being the existence of a power that is equally strong, and that force is channeled through the suman. Therefore, the suman serves as a personal security and protection device, much like a weapon for combating evil or an instrument for doing good. African religion takes the suman as a necessary component of the religion when one is confronted with evil that is unexplained or that occurs as a result of malice.

The suman can be used by diviners, medicine men, herbalists, and rainmakers to bring about good in the world. In contrast, the suman can be used to create chaos for one’s enemies. In light of the various uses of the suman, it is important for the student of African religion to know that the suman’s activation is dependent on the proper rituals being carried out by the proper officiate.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Amulet; Magic

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SUN

The sun is generally perceived as a powerful likeness of the creator, although all traditions do not perceive the sun as exclusively benevolent. Its first

power is over darkness or night. Others are the powers of light and warmth and the ability to change seasons and spur growth. The sun is frequently likened to God or seen as a manifestation of God because of its endless benevolence of these life-giving attributes. Other attributes of the sun that are associated with God are the omnipresence of the sun's rays, its endurance, and its eternal nature. This close association between God and the sun appears in cultures where the name of God and the sun are the same: *Ruwa* among the Chagga, *We* among the Ashanti, *Kazooba*, among the Ankore, and, among the Nandi, *Asis* for God and *Asista* for the sun.

A close association between God and the sun was detailed in ancient Kemet with the sun god, Ra, and his many manifestations: Atum-Ra, Amen-Ra, and Ra-Horakhty. Atum-Ra was Ra at sunset or "the all" at the completion of the sun's journey. Amen-Ra is the hidden sun. Ra-Horakhty is the sun as Horus. The sun is also personified as a child in the morning, a strong adult at midday, an elder in the evening, and a dying old man at night who will be reborn the next morning and repeat the process.

Creation stories also reflect personifications of the sun. Nut, the sky goddess, gives birth to the sun every morning and swallows him at night. Among the San, the sun is a man whose light was only shown when he lifted his right armpit. He became round and the sun as we know it when children, after instruction from women in the village, waited until he fell asleep and threw him into the sky, commanding him to take the form of the sun. Although the sun is usually considered masculine, among the Dogon, the sun, *nay*, is female. *Nay* also means four and has the same derivation as mother and cow, ancient mythotypes for fertility and other life-giving qualities. Perhaps the four relates to the key positions of the sun throughout the year: two solstices and two equinoxes, the latter of which are marked among the Dogon with special rituals. The "middle of the south sun" is the vernal and the "middle of the north sun" is the autumnal equinox.

In addition to rituals to mark solar events, Africans also use structures to mark solar events such as the Temple at Karnak, which is aligned with the setting sun at the summer solstice of 3700 BC, and the temple of Ramses at Abu Simbel,

which is built so the sun does *not* shine on Amen, one of the four deities located within the holy of holies.

The sun is not always seen as a life-giving force. The Nuer believe that the devil lives in the sun. This reasoning is based on the extreme heat, thirst, and death caused by the intense equatorial sun that can harm humans. This aspect of the sun is Set, the neter from Kemet associated with the desert and drought, whose name means burning, fire, or rays of sun.

Denise Martin

See also Ra

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SUNSUM

The Akan universe is endowed with varying degrees of force or power. This force or power is referred to as *sunsum*, which is also understood as "spirit." All things, animate and inanimate, contain *sunsum*, which has the power to hurt and the power to heal. It is for this reason that we consult the Nsamanfo (community of ancestors) before making and acting on many of our daily decisions. On an individual basis, the *sunsum* originates with the father and refers to an individual's spirit, the basis of one's character and personality.

The Akan believe that each individual consists of certain material and spiritual elements. The *honam* (body) and *mogya* (blood, connection to matrilineage) represent the material or physical components, whereas the *kra* (life force/soul), *honhom* (breath of Divine Life), and *sunsum* (spirit, connection to patrilineage) represent the spiritual or non-physical components. Nyame (creator) bestows these material and spiritual elements on us at conception and birth; however, when we "die," the *honam* and *mogya* join *Asase Yaa* (Mother Earth) while the *kra*, *honhom*, and *sunsum* return to Nyame. The

sunsum is a functionary of the kra, in that when Nyame gives us our kra at birth, it is the sunsum that escorts the kra; upon owuo (physical death), when the kra returns to Nyame, it is again escorted by the sunsum. Therefore, the kra and the sunsum are purposeful counterparts of one another.

The Akan believe that the Sunsum is capable of leaving the body at night when we are sleeping and returning before we awake. It is the sunsum that is the “actor” in our dreams and often encounters and communicates with other sunsum. For example, many awake from sleep convinced that they “saw” a deceased loved one in their dreams. The Akan would argue that the sunsum of the “dreamer” and the sunsum of the deceased loved one met and that the “dream” was a reflection of that meeting. Conversely, the departure of the kra from the honam signifies owuo.

This conceptualization of the sunsum is paramount to an understanding of the Akan life cycle. The Akan view life as a series of transitions from one stage to another. The sunsum is of particular significance to the stages of conception, birth, and physical death. At conception, arguably the beginning of the life cycle, it is believed that the sunsum of the father mingles with the mogya of the mother. Although this joining of spiritual and physical components gives rise to the physical bond between mother and child, providing the foundation for the matrilineal system of descent characteristic of the Akan, it also produces a unique spiritual relationship between the child and his or her patrikin. Although the child belongs physically to the abusua (family) of its mother, she or he is connected spiritually to the abusua of his or her father. In fact, during the outdooing, the customary naming ritual associated with birth that involves introducing the child to the world, it is members of the child’s patri-line that officiate at the ceremony and give the child his or her names. Furthermore, whereas the child’s first name will be reflective of the day of the week on which he or she was born, the day he or she received his or her kra, the child’s second name, referred to as *agyadzen* (father’s name), is given by his or her father and oftentimes is reflective of the family’s belief that the sunsum of a departed ancestor has reincarnated in the child.

Upon owuo, after escorting the kra back to its divine source, the sunsum is transformed into saman (the likeness or reflection of the personality of

the deceased, shadow), journeys to the Asamando (ancestral world), and awaits nomination to the status of Nsamanfo. Because the Akan calendar operates on a 40-/42-day cycle, we believe that it takes at least one cycle before the sunsum finally departs from the world of the living and transitions to the Asamando. Ayie (Akan funeral rites) are taken quite seriously because it becomes the responsibility of the deceased’s family members to perform proper and timely customary rites to ensure that the sunsum can properly transition to the Asamando; otherwise, it can transform into a sasa (an unsettled and malevolent spirit) and may come back to harm the family. Other circumstances under which the sunsum may transform into sasa include unusual deaths, such as suicides, homicides, or accidents. The ayie, traditionally performed within the 40-/42-day time frame, further include all of the ceremonial rites performed for the entire year after physical death.

To assist the sunsum on its journey to the Asamando, chief mourners or the closest living family members place final gifts, including cloth, a handkerchief, jewelry, perfume, money, and a calabash, in the coffin, items all believed to be needed by the sunsum on its journey and signifying the person’s status in the Earthly realm. Taking place in four stages, with the exception of the asie (burial), the entire host of funerary rites is performed at or near the family home, the place most familiar to the sunsum. The Akan believe that once the sunsum transitions to the Asamando, it comes back to await rebirth in the area near the family home. Once the sunsum, in the form of saman, arrives at the Asamando, it is put “on trial” and, if found worthy, admitted into the company of the Nsamanfo. Some of the criteria for attaining ancestorhood include, but are not limited to, having lived to an old age, having been productive in the community, having achieved a certain level of wisdom in one’s lifetime, and, often most important, having birthed or brought up children. If these criteria are not met, or if the saman is found to have led an unethical life on Earth, then it is pronounced “guilty” and excluded from ancestorhood. The guilty saman will have to reincarnate to undo its misdeeds, at which point it transforms back into sunsum and is reborn into the same abusua.

Yaba Amgborale Blay

See also Akan; Asamando; Asase Yaa; Nyame; Soul

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SUSU

Susu people are the third largest ethnic group in Guinea. Aside from Guinea, there are also communities of Susu people in Sierra Leone and Senegal. Estimates indicate that they number upwards of 1 million, with about 900,000 or so in Guinea and constituting about 20% of the nation's population. The Susu are believed to be descendants of the 12th- and 13th-century Takur kingdom called Sosso (Susu), which was ruled by Soumaore Kante (also known as Sumanguru). Sumanguru was defeated by Sundiata Keita in 1235 at the battle of Kirina, leading to the collapse of the Sosso kingdom and the formation of the Mali Empire. In 1725, the Susu are said to have moved to their present location to escape Fulani domination and conversion to Islam.

Precolonial Guinea was homeland to several ethnic groups, prominent among them being the Mandinka (Malinke), Fulani, and Susu. From indications, the Susu people were one of the earliest inhabitants of the region. Beginning in the 15th century, Fulani herders migrated from the Futa Toro Empire in the area of present-day Senegal to the Fouta Djallon highlands. Gradually, they conquered the whole area and created an autonomous Islamic theocracy—the longest in Africa. Although the early batch of the Fulani migrants followed traditional African practices, subsequent ones were largely Muslims who not only sought to introduce their religious beliefs and practices in the area, but also enforced them. Eventually, they formed a strong Islamic theocratic state. By the 18th century, Fouta Djallon was a strictly hierarchical society with a ruling class essentially led by two families, the Alfyas and Soriyas. It was from these families that leaders called *alimamies* were chosen. At the bottom

of the social ladder were non-Muslim Fulanis and non-Fulanis, such as the Susu people who served as artisans, menial workers, and slaves.

To escape repressive rule and virtual servitude, the Susu people moved to the coastal areas of lower Guinea. They established trade relations with the Portuguese, who had been trading in West Africa since the 15th century and later with the French, Guinea's colonial masters. To this day, the Susu people largely occupy the coastal areas of Guinea, where many of them make a living through fishing and the production of salt. A good number of Susu people are also farmers who cultivate millet and rice (the two principal crops in Guinea), mangoes, pineapples, and coconuts. The Susu are also noted for their craftsmanship, particularly in the use of metal and leather and also for their skill at trading.

Except for a difference in language, the Susu share similar customs, beliefs, and practices with the other large ethnic groups, such as the Malinke and Fulani. Like other ethnic groups in Guinea, the Susu people speak an indigenous language besides French, the Guinean national language. The Susu language, also called Susu, is similar to that of the Yalunka, another ethnic group in Guinea. In fact, both languages belong to the Niger-Congo-Mande language group prevalent in many West African States. The similarity between the two languages has led some to speculate that the Susu and Yalunka people used to be one ethnic group living in the Fouta Djallon region before they were separated by the Fulani people.

The Susu have extended families, as is common practice among many African peoples. More so, because polygamy is accepted among them, many of their men marry multiple wives and have many children. Members of both nuclear and extended families often live together in large family houses. Another common practice among the Susu is marriage between cousins.

The majority of Susu people and Guineans in general are Muslims, although some still adhere to African traditional religious practices. Statistics from the *World Fact Book* show that about 85% of the Guinean population are Muslims, about 8% are Christians, and 7% are adherents of African traditional religion. Friday prayers and meetings at the mosque constitute an important religious and social event for most Susu people.

When Guinea gained independence from France on October 2, 1958, the country came under the rule of Ahmed Sekou Toure, a Malinke, and his Guinean Democratic Party, which was largely made up of people from the Malinke ethnic group. During the almost 30 years that Sekou Toure ruled, the Malinke ethnic group enjoyed a prominent position in the political and social life of the country to the chagrin of the Susu and other ethnic groups. But for the political dexterity and sometimes repressive rule of Toure, the resentment between the other ethnic groups and the Malinke could easily have led to war.

However, the situation has changed in the past 2 decades in favor of the Susu people. In 1984, Colonel Lasagna Conte, a Susu, seized power in a bloodless coup soon after the death of Sekou Toure and later became the president through a disputed general election. Conte's more than 22-year rule has undoubtedly given the Susu prominence in the Guinean society. In addition to the fact that the ruling party, the Unity and Progress Party, is dominated by Susus, many of the top political, civil service, and military positions are held by persons from the Susu ethnic group. In general, most Susu are economically and socially better off than persons from other ethnic groups because they face no economic or cultural discrimination.

Moses Ohene Biney

See also Ancestors

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SWAHILI

The Swahili or Waswahili are a community of people who were originally merchants and traders along the coastal regions of East Africa in countries such as

Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Somalia. These historically African people subscribed to a variety of traditional African religions, values, customs, and beliefs. Scholars suggest that, as the Swahili community evolved, they intermarried and developed close relationships with a variety of other ethnic groups, also traders and merchants, who were mainly Persians and Arabs as well as members of other African communities. Because this indigenous African community exchanged goods with Persians, Arabs, and members of other ethnic groups, there was a reciprocal sharing of culture. As in many ethnically diverse communities, this cultural sharing produced distinct artifacts, foods, and music particular to the East African indigenous communities along the coast, later called Swahili. Moreover, scholars argue that the Swahili are one of the oldest African civilizations. There are several accounts of travelers who specifically wrote about the indigenous people of the East African coast, the most common being the account of *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* written by a Greek traveler in the 1st century.

Over time, through marriage, business, and other social relationships, the indigenous communities, the Swahili people, converted to Islam while still maintaining significant aspects of their African religion and other Africanisms. As a result, today the Swahili people are mostly Muslim, followers of the Prophet Muhammad with a monotheist belief in one God. The Swahili people, like many other African peoples, had a prosperous and flourishing civilization long before the arrival of Europeans. Details about the intricacies of that indigenous population and their daily inner workings are still being uncovered. The evolving Swahili people moved to various places throughout East Africa, and Swahili culture remained intact except with some varying differences, mainly in the dialects. Some scholars argue that the Swahili people have a much longer and intricate history than was once believed. Unlike a great majority of other African people who come from oral traditions, the Swahili have an old writing tradition, which was considerably influenced by Arab settlers. However, even with Arab influence, the Swahili people are distinctly African, having close ties to a variety of other ethnic groups.

There have been numerous debates regarding the origins of the Swahili and their authentic identity. Today, scholars are revealing that the Swahili

people were not, as some have suggested, a European or Arab cultural extension, but rather that their history began long before their interaction with Arabs, Persians, and other peoples. The Swahili share a collective culture, language, and religion. Although many Swahili are said to be Muslim, some of whom incorporate Africanisms within the religion, there are arguably a small number of Swahili who do not subscribe to Islam. There are quite a few Swahili legends, songs, and myths that speak to the historic longevity of the Swahili people that have been discounted by some scholars in the past.

The Swahili are mostly a coastal people making a living and living off the resources provided by the sea. Therefore, Swahili people were mostly involved in trade, fishing, and some farming. The Swahili have maintained their language over time, even with their expansion across East Africa and their intermarrying with other peoples. Although the Swahili have borrowed some Arabic terms, Kiswahili, a Bantu language, is clearly African in origin.

In the 15th century, Europeans attempted to colonize East Africa, but the Swahili rigorously defended themselves, and although many were massacred, they prevented Portugal from staying long-term in the region. The hatred and cruelty of the Portuguese as well as other European invaders against the Swahili were both racial and religious because the Portuguese were Christians. Like Arabic for the Arabs, the Swahili language is significant to Swahili ethnicity. Arabs typically speak Arabic from birth and Swahili speak Kiswahili, although many Arabs and Swahili share the same religion, Islam.

One of the more notorious figures of the Swahili culture was Tippu Tib, a Swahili-Zanzibari slave trader. He lived from 1837 to 1905 and made a reputation as a plantation owner and governor. His real name was Ahmed Bin Mohaded bin Juma el Marijibi. He worked for many sultans of Zanzibar in the slave trade. He remains uncelebrated by the people of the coast because of his brutality.

The Swahili people celebrate all Islamic celebrations and participate in Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca, and Ramadan, the obligatory Muslim fast. They also subscribe to other Islamic customs. Today, many people believe there is no clearly

defined Swahili culture. Although Kiswahili is the official language of Tanzania, and all people born there are sometimes referred to as Swahili, many East African governments do not see the Swahili as a distinct ethnic group. Swahili is currently spoken in parts of Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Madagascar, Mozambique, Zanzibar, and elsewhere.

Bayyinah S. Jeffries

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SWAZI

The Swazi are a Nguni-speaking people who live in southern Africa among other Bantu people. It is believed that the Swazi originated in East Africa and moved from that area during the great Nguni expansion southward to their present location. They crossed the Limpopo River and settled in an area called Tongaland, which is now Mozambique. The leader of the Swazis at this time was Dlamini, who became one of the legendary leaders of the people. His descendants established a dynasty that lasted for more than two centuries.

They lived near the Ndwandwe people, another Nguni-speaking people, until economic and commercial interests brought them into conflict, and the Swazis moved to their new area and created a complex kingdom based on their ancient traditions.

The traditions of the Swazi are inculcated into the young right after birth. When a child is born, plants and animal fur related to the child's clan are collected and placed on a fire heap, and the baby is forced to inhale the smoke as a way to protect the child from danger and illness. All children are associated with age-group organizations, and the

boys are placed into war regiments and tribute labor teams that are called to work for the king four times a year.

At the core of Swazi communal life are praise singing and poetry. Almost every event calls forth a poem or a praise song about a person or phenomenon. Other arts such as pottery and sculpture are minor in relationship to the culture. Praise singing usually employs a person's surname because every surname has a corpus of praises that extend the name. One may use the praise names after stating the surname. For example, one may say *Dlamini* and then add, *wena wekunene* (you of the right), *wena weluhlanga* (you of the reed), and *mlangeni lomuhle* (beautiful one of the sun).

Praise singing is a highlight during all weddings. However, to marry, a man must do more than poetry; he must pay lobola. Marriage among the Swazi relies on lobola, which a man gives to the bride's family. Usually the man pays the woman's family in cattle.

Every family is connected to ancestors by rituals and ceremonies. When a person dies, he or she is buried right on the homestead to demonstrate the relationship to the living family members. Only kings and high royal family members are buried in mountain caves away from the family homestead. Yet the rituals of purification occur for all dead members of the community, whether they are buried far or near. The Swazi believe it is necessary to cleanse the community of the contamination of death.

When the Swazi worship, they honor the Creator Deity and the spirits of ancestors who deal with the ordinary daily affairs of humans. The people often sacrifice animals and serve beer to propitiate the ancestors. All religious experience is related to medicine because in Swazi culture there is an integral relationship between the ancestors and health. Traditional healers, *inyanga*, use herbal medicines, and they also work with *sangoma*, diviners, who are usually female, to discover the cause of social or physical problems. *Umtsakatsi* are individuals who study the use of natural phenomena and who may apply their knowledge in harmful ways.

The Swazi culture shows evidence of migration and integration during contact with numerous

other ethnic groups, but they maintain, through their intact genealogical linkages to the older clan founders, a remarkable attachment to their ancestral values and traditions.

The royal family tree put Dlamini I as the significant founder of the Swazi people. Kings who came after him, in order of succession, include Mswati I, Ngwane II, Dlamini II, Nkosi II, Mavuso I, Magudulela, Ludvonga, Dlamini III, Ngwane III, Ndvungunye, Sobhuza I, Mswati II, Ludvonga II, Mbandzeni, Ngwane V, Sobhuza II, and the present reigning monarch, Mswati III.

King Ngwane III is said to be of special importance in the history of the Swazis because it is he who gave the nation one of its names. When his people began to settle in present-day Swaziland, they called it *kaNgwane* (the place or country of Ngwane). The name *kaNgwane* has remained to the present time and is the one by which the Swazi people usually call themselves.

The Swazi tradition provides that the King and his mother must reign together. Thus, at any given time, there is a king and Indlovukazi and two royal headquarters or residences. The king's residence is the administrative headquarters, and it is here that the king's day-to-day business is carried out.

The Indlovukazi's residence is known as umphakatsi, and it is the national capital and the spiritual/ceremonial home of the nation. It is where all important national events such as the Incwala ceremony take place. The present national capital is Ludzidzini.

The oldest known Indlovukazi to whom we can attach years to her reign is Layaka Ndwandwe. The lineage of Indlovukazi in the kingdom is as follows: Layaka Ndwandwe, Lakubheka Mndzebele, Lojiba Simelane, Tsandzile Ndwandwe, Sisile Khumalo, Tibati Nkambule, Gwamile Labotsibeni Mdluli, Lomawa Ndwandwe, Nukwase Ndwandwe, Zihlathi Ndwandwe, Seneleleni Ndwandwe, Dzeliwe Shongwe, and the present Indlovukazi, Ntombi Tfwala.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Dance and Song

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T

TABOO

The word *taboo* means the system or act of setting apart a person, an object, or a place as sacred or accursed. In African societies, taboo primarily serves the purpose of ritual protection or ritual hygiene. Recent African studies corroborate the fact that taboo is embedded in the myths and religion of Africans. Among the Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Wolof Shona, Zulu, Kikuyu, and Ga, and in most African countries and communities, taboos are numerous, they cover almost every aspect of Africans' life, and they are taken seriously. There are taboos associated with initiation, childbirth, marriage, excretion, diseases, sex, gender restrictions, death, and burial. There are also taboos connected with eating, drinking, language expressions, occupation, and associations, while some also guide administration of rituals.

Meaning

The original meaning of the word as shown by its etymology is its derivative of the Polynesian term *tabu*, which means forbidden. It is similar to the word *isfet* in the most ancient African language of Mdw N̄tr and also to *sacer* (in Greek), *kadesh* (in Hebrew), *nso* (in Igbo), and *è̀wo* in Yoruba. Among the Akan, it is *akyiwade*, which also means that which is not permissible. Another word in Akan, *mmusu*, conveys the idea of that which must not be touched, done, or used to avert evil or danger. Among the Yoruba, the word *è̀wo* conveys the same meaning as Akan's *mmusu*—something

or some action forbidden for religious or other reasons, persons or objects not to be handled, a place not to be entered, and something not to be associated with or used.

Taboos and Morals

Taboo in the strictest sense is not ethics, and it has not much to do with morality. For example, stealing, lying, infidelity, homicide, and so on are moral but not taboo issues. Most of the moral issues are universal, and they can be coded by the society and are not necessarily cultural. But taboo may either be religious or cultural; it is better placed within the domain of African meta-ethics. African ethics is beyond dos and don'ts. They are the dimensions of Africans' way of life that is beyond moral or general ethics; they can be simply deity service or religious. Unlike ordinary wrongs, taboos, especially the *mmusu* type, are taken more seriously. Sacrifice may be required to appease the divinities and seek their forgiveness when one engages in what the society deems as *mmusu* or *è̀wo*. Most taboos stem from history or the myth of a community and initiation into a deity service. They may apply to a community, a family, or an individual.

Some Taboos and Their Purported Reasons

Among the Yoruba and in most African societies, there are taboos connected with gender, especially female restrictions. The Yoruba say *obinrin ki m'oro* (i.e., it is forbidden for a woman to see or take part in an ancestral cult called *oro*). It is even held

that any woman who enters the *oro* groove by accident will be barren for the rest of her life or she may give birth to a monster. Also, in most African societies, it is forbidden for a pregnant woman to go out at night or go to the market in the afternoon. If she does, she will give birth to an abnormal baby.

There are prohibitions on devotees of certain deities. For example, an initiate of *Orisanla* (the creation divinity) should not drink palm wine. This is because in the Yoruba mythology of creation, *Orisanla* got drunk with palm wine and made some mistakes while creating human beings. *Orisanla* created people with hunchback, leprosy, paralysis, and all kinds of disabilities with which humanity has been bedeviled. As a result of this, it is a taboo for any initiate of *Orisanla* to drink palm wine. If an *Orisanla* priest or priestess drinks palm wine, he or she will have complicated skin problems. This can be treated only through the pacification and application of *Orisanla*'s medication.

There are professional taboos. An *Ifa* diviner or *Babalawo* should not eat rabbit. The reason given for this prohibition is that rabbits are believed to be professional diviners because they always have kernels in their holes. It is believed that any *Babalawo* who eats a rabbit has "eaten his professional colleague."

There are taboos associated with some category of deaths. In almost all societies in West Africa, it is a taboo to bury a person who died by drowning in a river away from the river where the victim drowned. The reason is that the onus of performing the rites of burial is on the priests and priestesses of the river divinity. Also, the priests and priestesses of *Sango*, the divinity of thunder and lightning among the Yoruba, and *Amadiora*, among the Igbo of Nigeria, must bury a person who died through lightning in a thunderstorm. Failure to meet the terms would cause more people to die.

There are dietary taboos. It is held especially among the Yoruba that drinking of coconut water can cause forgetfulness. Also, in eastern Nigeria, it is forbidden for some Igbo women to eat gizzard because it can cause barrenness.

Some taboos have to do with what children should not have fun with. For example, collecting rainwater with the hollow of the palm when it is raining is outlawed because doing so may invite the wrath of *Sango*, the god of thunder,

who can launch an attack on the offender with a thunderbolt.

Some expressions are tabooed usually for propriety-related reasons. Among the Yoruba and the Akan, especially, because of the taboos associated with the king's office, a number of alternatives are used in reference to the *oba* or *ohene*'s death. The Yoruba would rather say *oba waja* (the king has entered into the roof), whereas the Asantes would say, for example, *Nana asore* (the king has stood up).

Evidently, these taboos are not moral issues; they are issues bordering on sacredness, things in bad taste according to social norms, or things that one should not be associated with to avert ominous consequences. Thus, they are designed to establish good behavior in terms of social and individual etiquette in relationship to one's participation in a particular deity service or group.

Taboos and Sanctions

There is an intricate relationship between taboo and sanctions. In most African societies, it is observed that in virtually all taboos there are inherent sanctions. The taboo is believed to be potent enough to be able to sanction its violators. Thus, in taboos, there are intrinsic powers of social, natural, and divine justice. This, of course, goes a long way to validate the virility and viability of taboo.

The breaking of a taboo is always against the "sacred or necessary order," and therefore it is held to be sacrilegious and abominable. By its very nature, a taboo protects itself, and it is believed that it is not possible to escape the consequences of breaking one. An individual who breaks a taboo may not be arrested by police or be probed by any court of law. Incest, for example, in Africa is a crime and a taboo. One who commits this kind of offense is liable, and he must face sanctions by the community. But beyond this, it is believed that if the necessary propitiatory rites are not performed, the male violator will become impotent, whereas the female will become barren for life. The consequences of breaking a taboo are believed to be always fatal and irrevocable except if propitiatory and usually expensive sacrifices are offered. Violation of taboos according to traditional African belief systems may result in

epidemics, drought, famine, plagues, pestilence, and so on. Hence, traditional Africans are always careful not to violate or break a taboo.

Taboos and Modernity

Taboo in Africa is faced with the problem of rationale and scientific verifiability in the face of modernity and globalization. Christianity and Islam, coupled with modernity, claim that taboos stemmed from myths that do not correspond to historical chronology, and that therefore, belief in the potency of taboo is tantamount to primitivism, backwardness, and superstition. To obey a taboo is therefore considered absurd and incongruous with development. But taboos in Africa are truth forms that are independent of the confines of time. Taboo is sacred; the fact of its potency can be found only in the depth of the mind, where merely rational thought cannot penetrate so as to discover its reality. This, in our opinion, is the tragedy of Western science and modernity, where reality is subject only to rational and scientific verifiability that, in fact, has no access to the real content of the sacred or the divine.

Significance of Taboo

The significance of taboo can at least be seen in the contribution it makes to the cultivation and promotion of life of carefulness and reverence for the sacred, including nature. In the midst of injustice with which our contemporary world is plagued, the existence of natural and divine justice, that is, justice that is devoid of the rigors of litigation, is a validation of the relevance of taboo.

Deji Ayegboyin and Charles Jegede

See also Sacrifice

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TALLENSI

The Tallensi people live in the northern part of the modern country of Ghana. They are descended from an agricultural people who inhabited the savanna region of Ghana. It is believed that the Tallensi govern their land with an elaborate clan system based on kinship. All government must be under the control and guidance of the high priests of the Earth, as well as the kings of the people. These two groups represent two independent clans, and therefore the functions of the priests and the kings are always separate, a sort of separation of the church and state. The current population of Tallensi is no more than 300,000. Speaking the Talni language, the Tallensi have been closely identified with the Gur language group.

Almost all of the Tallensi customs, traditions, and values are related to rituals dealing with the first-born son. As a polygamous people who trace their lineage through the father's line, that is, a patrilineal kinship system, the Tallensi value inheritance founded on the principles of father-firstborn son relationships. Like other African ethnic groups, the Tallensi value family and see the kinship links as sacred. Thus, the relationship of parents to children, and especially father to firstborn son, is fundamental. Therefore, the Tallensi believe that it is the purpose of families to produce children, and the aim of every father is to have a son. The essentiality of producing a son creates all types of social and behavioral responses that may cause tensions in the family or the village.

The reason for this strong emphasis on having a firstborn son or firstborn daughter is that a person can never achieve the fulfillment necessary to become a revered ancestor after death if he or she does not have children to carry on rituals. The birth of a firstborn son or firstborn daughter makes a man truly mature and fulfilled, and it represents his ascendance to the highest position in the society. This is also the beginning of the decline of the man because his child will one day supplant him in the world. Many Tallensi rituals, ceremonies, and taboos are related to the firstborn son and the father.

When a boy is 6 years of age, he may not eat from the same dish as his father. This is a taboo. Other taboos relate to the use of the father's weapons, the father's clothes, or the father's tools. Furthermore, when a son arrives at adolescence, around the age of 12 or 13, he cannot enter the house compound at the same time as his father. If, for some reason, the son violates this taboo, then there must be purification rites. The firstborn daughter cannot look into her mother's storage containers, vases, pots, or tubs; this is a taboo.

Of course, among the Tallensi, this is considered the proper way to maintain the community because the relationship is sacred between the parents and the children. Thus, when a person dies, it is the firstborn son or daughter who leads in the ritual ceremonies. Only at this moment can the son actually put on his father's cap and his father's cloth and walk in the father's shoes. One of the elders of the village will then guide the son, even if the son is an adult by this time, to the father's granary and show him what is inside. At this point, the moment of realization of what is in his father's house and granary makes him a mature person who is responsible for all of the sacrifices to the ancestors in his family. His main function becomes the celebration of his own father's life. The late father being recently dead becomes the mediator between the living and the remote Dead.

The Tallensi use the word *kpeem* to mean secular eldership, that is, an old person in the lineage. They use the term *yaab* to refer to deceased ancestors. They do not refer to the ancestral dead as *kpeem* but, rather, as lineage eldership. However, to the Tallensi, the *yaab* represents a connection to a spiritual mode of existence that is heavily dependent on ritual ceremony. Thus, the Tallensi take the term for elder, *kpeem*, and the term for ancestral Dead, *yaab*, and use them in their teaching of values and customs. Technically, the word *yaab* means grandparents, whereas the word *kpeem* means any older person. Everything in the Tallensi society works together to maintain this balance between the secular lineage and the ancestral dead.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Akan; Ga

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TANO RIVER

The Tano River runs 400 kilometers (approximately 250 miles) from the Ghana–Ivory Coast border in the north down toward the Atlantic Ocean, where it empties into the sea. It is a highly regarded river by the Akan culture and has been associated with many of the great events and historical deeds of the Akan. Indeed, at the head of the river, where it begins, is the Tano Sacred Grove noted in history and by custom for its beautifully mystical clusters of striking sandstone formations, all enclosed in a semideciduous forest. Here the earliest settlements of the Akan are said to have taken place. The people emerged from the land in this region and then began to create the first centralized state. These Bono people, as they were called, were the first to identify the headwaters of the river with the sacred designation. Originally called Bono-Manso, this kingdom grew and was called the Techiman-Bono kingdom.

In time, the Tano River was associated with some of the greatest and oldest deities on Earth. In fact, Taakora, the greatest of the Akan gods on Earth, was said to dwell at the source of the Tano River in the grove. This has always been a place of the highest sanctity and worship for the Akan. Although the Supreme God Onyankopon (Onyame) is a sky deity, Taakora is the highest deity on Earth.

The waters of the river are used for purification. Indeed the Tano Shrine is kept nearby in the town of Tanoboase. However, the chief priest takes this powerful religious shrine annually to the

sacred grove. At this time, the people come from many kilometers away to pay homage to the deity. At the grove that gives rise to the Tano River are festival sites that are used quite regularly for some of the more important occasions. For example, the Apoo Festival is held deep in the grove each April or May as a place for the people to ask for spiritual cleansing, rededication, and renewal.

As in many African cultures, the practice of renewal among the Akan can take place in many sites. However, here at the headwaters of the Tano, priests of the Atano abosom centered on the sacred river Tano performed some of the most important rites in all of Akan.

Among the Akan who come to this sacred place, drum texts, ritual statements, archaeology, oral narratives, and proverbs allow the people to reconfirm in their hearts the holiness of the Tano River Shrine.

Clearly, the deities who frequent the Tano River are not small deities; they are extremely important and popular with the almighty Onyame. Actually, all tutelary deities are extensions of the Supreme Being and are personalities.

Now the deity called Tano is the stool deity for Obo. It came with the Amoakade matrician from near the head of the Tano River in an area that is now called Brong Ahafo near the Ivory Coast border. The stool drums recite the famous poem that includes the lines: "The stream crosses the path. The path crosses the stream. Which came first? Pure, pure, Tano. The stream is from long ago." It explains that the deities were here before the people.

Thus, the history of sacred rivers in Africa, from the Nile to the Oshun, from the Zambezi to the Tano, is one where humans always seem to understand the value of water. The sacred Tano is central to the Akan's appreciation of nature and its life-giving qualities.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Lakes; Rivers and Streams; Water

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TAUETONA

The Tswana people of southern Africa have an oral tradition that says Tauetona was the first human created. In the beginning of all things, God created Tauetona, who then worked with God to create other humans who were his brothers and sisters, as well as animals, birds, and fish. The Earth was peaceful, and the humans and animals lived among each other in harmony. All of the plants were bountiful, and the land seemed divinely serene. The land was called *Thaya Banna*, meaning "The Place of the Beginning of Humanity." However, as things turned out, all was not as peaceful as it could have been and as God and Tauetona wanted it to be. They soon discovered that there was discord because all of the animals had wives, but men did not have wives. They were disgruntled and felt extremely bad about their condition.

According to the story, men were not happy and could not be pleased, so God sent a message with Tread Carefully, the Chameleon, which told men what would happen to them. The message said that men would all have to die, but that they would then be reborn. Men would be allowed to return later. This was a complicated, strange, and bizarre message to the men. It took Tread Carefully a long time to tell this message to men.

Because God saw that it was difficult for Tread Carefully to tell the message as quickly and as precisely as it should have been told, he decided to send another more exact message to men by the speedy lizard. So when Speedy Lizard got to the men, he said, "God said that your spirits will live forever but you will die just like all the rest of the animals." Furthermore, according to Speedy Lizard, God said that the men would have children. The men asked the question, "How can we have children without women?"

Of course, there was something the men did not know. They did not know that God had created women far away in another valley called *Motlhaba Basetsana* or "The Great Savanna of Women."

One day while hunting, Tauetona came upon some mysterious footprints that looked somewhat like his own, but they were much smaller. He turned to ask someone about them and the only animal he saw was Brown Hyena. So he asked Brown Hyena, "Do you know what these are?" Brown Hyena answered, "No, I do not know this animal." Actually, Brown Hyena was not interested in the footprints because whoever made the footprints seemed much too large for him to catch.

Tauetona looked around and saw Giraffe. He asked, "From your great height can you tell what animal made these footprints?" Turning his head toward the valley where the women were made, Giraffe said, "I can see some bipeds who look somewhat like men. I shall go and ask them to return with me." Tauetona was impressed that he might know more about these animals. Giraffe went and spoke to the women, and he told them that there were men waiting to meet them. The women, apparently, were eager to meet the men as well, and they followed Giraffe across the plains, dancing and singing that they were going to meet men.

While all of this rejoicing was going on among the women, the Mother of God made some medicine from the Mimosa seed and placed the medicine on the tongue of each man so that they would have the gift of speech and be able to speak eloquently to the women, marry them, and have many children.

The Tswana tell this narrative as a part of their instructions to children that the important value in life is to have families and to participate in procreation. Although the people are largely associated with Botswana, they live mostly in northeastern South Africa.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Wamala

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TEFNUT

Tefnut is the deity of moisture in ancient Egypt. The *Book of Knowing the Creation of Ra* recounts that Tefnut was expectorated by Atum-Ra and that she was brought up in joy by Nun. The Supreme Deity created Shu, air, and Tefnut at the beginning of time. Together with Shu, Tefnut created Geb and Nut, who gave birth to Ausar, Seth, Auset, and Neb-het. Heru was the son of Ausar and Auset and was a deity alongside the gods of the Ennead in the city of No or Iunnu (Heliopolis), where Tefnut was the deity of water.

The role of Tefnut in the religious imagination of the ancient Egyptians is seen in the idea of Atum-Ra's reliance on the ability of Tefnut to pursue that which is lost. According to the *Book of Knowing the Creation of Ra*, Tefnut, along with Shu, brought back Atum-Ra's far-wandering Eye, thus giving Tefnut a role in the mythological and magical quality of the Eye of God.

According to one oral narrative, Tefnut left Egypt for Nubia after an argument with Atum and took all the water and moisture with her. As a result, Egypt plunged into chaos for dryness, and Atum, in despair, sent Shu and Tehuti to Nubia after her. They found that Tefnut had meanwhile turned herself into a lioness. Other narratives refer to Atum-Ra's Eye being sent to retrieve Tefnut as the lioness, eventually bringing her back to Atum-Ra to restore his Eye in its place and thus drive chaos away from Egypt.

It is not unusual, therefore, that Tefnut is depicted as both a savior of Atum-Ra's Eye and a lioness, strongly linked to the sun as the Eye of Ra, but also with water for which she stands as the powerful force. Also, the *Pyramid Texts* seem to indicate multiple progenitors of Ausar. He is called the son of Geb, Atum, and Shu and of the goddesses Nut, Tefnut, and Hathor. Thus, it appears that Tefnut is seen alongside two female personalities in the ancient religion who are among the most identifiable characters in ancient Egyptian religion. Nut is the Sky goddess and Hat-hor is the goddess most identified with Auset because of her powerful strength in fertility and productivity. Tefnut, conjoined with them, creates an impressive cadre of female powers.

Furthermore, in the Ptah section, or right-hand section of the Shabaka Stone, which deals with the

Memphite theological system, one sees Ptah “on the great seat” as the one from whom all gods are created, including Tefnut. In any case, regardless of which of the Egyptian theological systems is being addressed, the Memphite system where Ptah’s identification with Nun/Nunet was anterior to Atum or the Iunu Ennead where Atum was at the origin of all creation, the Supreme Deity as Ptah or Atum brought Tefnut and all other deities into existence. What is consensus among authors who have studied the Egyptian religious systems is that, in the Egyptian ontogeny, Nun/Nunet, the androgynous concept, is the primary originator, the cosmic substratum, the potential creative power, or the primeval procreator of all gods who created the universe and all things in it. The androgynous Nun/Nunet begot Atum.

Atum’s Ennead came into being through his own semen and fingers, and also through the teeth and the lips in his mouth, which pronounced the names of all things and from which Shu and Tefnut emanated, who gave birth to the Ennead. In Egyptian cosmogony, where Nun is conceived as the primordial matter or the pretemporal absolute moisture or water, the possibility of life manifested itself by the principle of transformation, Khepera, in the form of sun, Ra or Atum-Ra. This materialization of Nun into Ra by virtue of Khepera, actualization or calling of an essence into an existing form, is at the core of the Kemetic sense of Unity of Being, which is replicated when the sun god, Atum-Ra, conceives of himself with Shu and Tefnut, the principles of air and water, as one.

Tefnut, therefore, contains the divine principle of Nun. Tefnut is at the beginning of the Kemetic concept of divine order and creation, one among the nine primeval gods and goddesses. The *Pyramid Texts* suggests that Tefnut was the female form of Shu and that they both were conceived by Atum to start the sexual, creative cycle as the origin of human beings. According to this myth, Tefnut was the mother of mothers.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Water

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TEKE

The Teke, or Bateke, people are found in the Congo Republics and Gabon areas of Africa. They are well known as traders. The name *Teke* means “to buy.” The Teke live along the banks of the Congo River, where they have an established commercial reputation.

It is in the area of energetic African art in the form of small figurines and masks that the Teke are most significant in a religious way. The Teke are generally known for their sculptured ancestral figures, called *butti* and *nkir*, which serve in the use of a wide range of supernatural forces sent from the ancestral realm. They can be made in the form of shells, boxes, or small figures created out of stone or wood. Neither the *butti* nor the *nkir* are worshipped, but rather they are used to represent the energy, vitality, and power of the ancestors when they are remembered and honored by those who are living. Each figure has its own specific purpose not related directly to its appearance. The *nkir* refer to spirits that are known; they are called *bankir*. In contrast, the *butti* represent the *bapfu*, the spirits that are the anonymous Dead.

The function of the masks among the Teke is like that in other African communities. They represent the communion between the community of the living and the ancestral world. The ritual of wearing a mask and dancing among the Teke is a genuine expression of the most relevant part of the traditional religion of the Teke.

In the African world, masks are prominent in religious practices. For example, the Teke create masks to honor their great ancestral men and women and encourage them to use their special powers to maintain stability and harmony

among the people. The Teke engage in the regular use of festivals and rites to honor the ancestors who were hunters, farmers, or fishermen, although the Teke are now principally traders in the riverine areas of the Congo and Gabon. Yet the complexity of their powerful artistry as represented in the diverse *butti* and *nkir* gives the Teke a prominent position in the history of traditional African values.

Although the *butti* and *nkir* are creative, they are no more powerful than the Teke masks. In the African world, it is well known that, for many centuries, the Teke and other people used masks as a way of expressing thoughts about the natural world, social organization, and the spiritual realm. Masks are traditionally used in village religious celebrations and worn during ceremonial dances. They often represent animal gods usually found in stories, and the dances associated with the masks would help to interpret a myth, set down folklore, or act out an African legend. The art of making masks and wearing them at traditional gatherings is still common in many areas of Africa. In many parts of Africa, masks are still used today to display the spirit beings, departed ancestors, and sometimes the invisible powers of the ancestors.

For centuries, African people have employed masks to venerate the ancestors and bring honor to the living and the Dead. In cultural displays of respect to ancestors, the trained African dancers use these ceremonies with masks to express their connections to those who laid the foundations of the society. These complex ceremonial events, which often use masks, demonstrate the social, religious, artistic, ancestral, and moral values because each performer uses masks to engage and enthrall the audience with the wide variety of traditions present in the African world. Masks have always been used to demonstrate the complex African village. It is impossible to explore African life and custom historically and not have a basic understanding of the use of the mask. The mask has and will continue to have large ancestral meanings and implications for the African world.

M. Tillotson

See also Ancestors

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TELL EL AMARNA

See AKHETATEN

TELLEM

The Tellem people are an ancient African people who lived at the foothills of the Bandiagara Hills before the coming of the more powerful and dominant Dogon people in the 14th century. The Dogon were eventually fully ensconced in their present territory by the 18th century. It is believed that the Tellem were responsible for much of the art and culture that is now called Dogon. In fact, many anthropologists and historians like to refer to the Dogon culture as Dogon-Tellem as a way of referencing the enormous contributions that the Dogon got from the earlier people who occupied their current land.

It is believed that the Dogon originated in the Manding mountains near the borders of Equatorial Guinea and Mali. At the present time, there are 1 million Dogon living mainly in Mali in a region that stretches from the border with Burkina Faso in the east to the region of Sevaré in the west. This vast region extends the length of the Bandiagara cliff.

The Tellem, who the Dogon call “the ones we found here,” are the original inhabitants who farmed and hunted in the Bandiagara cliffs. Yet when the Dogon were fleeing the onslaught of Islam, they sought refuge in the cliffs alongside and among the cliff dwellers who lived inside the cliffs. The meeting between the Dogon and the Tellem was unfortunate for the Tellem inasmuch as the Dogon, with superior weapons and experienced in warfare, often by being attacked themselves, were able to subdue and eventually wipe

out or absorb the Tellem into their social and political systems.

Although the Tellem do not exist as a separate culture and their rich legacy has been absorbed into the Dogon culture, it is important to see them as predecessors to one of the most unique human cultures. One can see the exuberance of contemporary scholars with Dogon culture through a reflection of the Tellem contributions in the sculpture and rituals of ancestors known as Dogon-Tellem water *nommo* forms.

Remarkably, the Dogon have never disavowed the inheritance they received from the ones who came before them to the areas of the Bandiagara cliffs. Like the Tellem, the Dogon have long resisted outside religion, preferring to hold onto the customs and traditions that have been passed down from one generation to another. At the core of their values and social stability is the acceptance of the centrality of the Tellem in their worldview. No one can escape the intricacies of Tellem philosophy and the convergence of the two ideals, the Dogon and the Tellem, in the cauldron that was war, interaction, and ideology. Keeping the Tellem inheritance bequeathed to them as a key component of their response to outside religions, the Dogon have become one of the most visited communities in Africa.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Dogon

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TEMNE

The Temne people are located in Sierra Leone, West Africa. The Temne are 1 of the 15 ethnic groups residing in Sierra Leone. They represent, however, about 30% of the population, and thus

constitute one of the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone (the other one being the Mende). They are a dominant presence more particularly in the northern province. According to Temne oral traditions, the Temne came from the Fouta Djallon region of the neighboring Republic of Guinea prior to the 15th century.

The Temne are primarily farmers. Their main crop is rice, although they also engage in the cultivation of peanuts, cassava, oil palms, and fruits, and they raise chickens, ducks, sheep, and goats. Fishing also constitutes an important activity among the Temne, who reside in the coastal areas of the country.

Temne religion is predicated on the belief in *Kurumasaba*, the Supreme God responsible for the creation of the world. Kurumasaba, like most of its African counterparts, is not involved in the governance of the world. This task is left to the ancestors, who serve as the privileged intermediaries between God and the living. As a result, the ancestors are propitiated through numerous rituals, including sacrifices and offerings. The ancestors are expected to protect the living and send them many blessings, in particular children. Procreation and marriage are indeed of paramount importance.

In addition to the ancestors, there exist other spiritual entities that may be helpful or harmful to people. Therefore, they too are offered sacrifices in an attempt to appeal to or neutralize them. Witchcraft, a force to be reckoned with, is particularly feared. Consequently, precautionary protective measures are often taken, such as the wearing of protective devices (amulets) made by diviners. In addition, special divination techniques are resorted to in order to help identify a witch. "Swearing medicines" will bring about sickness and even death to a person involved in witchcraft and theft.

Special rituals and ceremonies mark life's important moments as one transitions from one stage of one's existence to the next. Of particular significance are the rites of passage that take place at the time of puberty, when adolescent females are initiated into the Bondo (also known as *Bundu* and *Sande*) society and adolescent males into the Poro society. Both institutions have the responsibility to educate the young women and men about the most serious aspects of life, including religious and sexual matters, and to make clear to them the social norms and expectations of their community,

thus completing their socialization and ensuring social order and stability, as Temne traditions are respected and reinforced.

Death also occasions important rituals. Upon dying, one's body is carefully washed, rubbed with oil, and dressed up as the newly deceased person must be prepared to embark on his or her sacred journey to the ancestral world. The deceased are to be buried in the close vicinity of their homes because they are expected, as ancestors, to remain quite involved in the lives of their relatives. Sacrifices are performed at prescribed times, and a period of mourning is observed. It is crucial to observe all funerary rites and taboos because failure to do so would provoke the anger of the spirit of the deceased, prompting it to punish the living by sending them misfortunes.

Twins are treated with particular care, especially dead twins. Indeed, twins are believed to have extraordinary spiritual powers, which, when unleashed in a negative way on the community, have dire consequences. Twins, for instance, may cause their parents to go mad or the crops not to flourish. Thus, annual ceremonies are held to honor them. Also, special rituals are followed at the time of their death. Giving twins a proper burial may, in fact, have positive consequences for the living, such as bringing them children, luck, and wealth.

When an infant twin dies, a wooden twin sculpture is often carved, representing the deceased twin playing with the live one. Death, indeed, cannot separate twins because the latter are, in reality, one single entity. It is the mother's duty to care for the carving. Thus, she will feed it and wash it when feeding and washing her live baby. She might also place the sculpture close to her while nursing the other baby. She also often adorns the carving with white beads around the waist and neck, as a protective gesture. Finally, when the live twin marries, he or she will take the carving into his or her new home. A dead twin frequently communicates with his or her twin sibling through dreams, dispensing advice and warnings. The mother may use the carving during rituals associated with healing or initiation. Thus, wooden twin sculptures play a critical part in the ritual veneration of twins.

Ama Mazama

See also Bamana; Yoruba

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TEMPLES, CONCEPT IN ANCIENT TIMES

Ancient Africans were the first to dedicate a particular structure and a special place for sacred and spiritual activities. These places have come to be called *temples* in the Western world. The word *temple* is derived from the Latin word *templum*, which is technically a plan or template for a precinct to be reserved for worship. However, prior to the presence of such places in the Roman world, the Africans in Nubia and Kemet established massive structures on even more ancient grounds that were sacred sites, *ipet sut*, the holiest of the holy. These sacred spaces were called *het neter* (*ht ntr*) or *per neter* (*pr ntr*), meaning “mansion of the god” or “house of the god.”

The Nature of the Sacred Place

The temple in African religion is devoted to some special activity in a special place based on the historical experiences that occurred at that place. For example, the temple of Edfu was built in its place because it commemorated the battle between Heru and Set. Edfu had been recognized for generations as the spot where good defeated evil. Consequently, a shrine was first erected, probably made of wood or stone, but protected by the priests as a sacred spot, hallowed by the fact that Heru, after many years of combat over the forces represented by Set, killed him at the place where the shrine was erected.



Huge Colossus of Memnon, which stood at the entrance to an ancient Egyptian temple.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

Years later, the people replaced the wooden shrine with a more substantial one that reflected the idea of permanence. Thus, the temple of stone announced a new dispensation in the creative imagination of the African people. From the time the people built the temples at Waset, Men-nefer, Heliopolis (On), and other religious sites, there was a continuation of the idea of permanence as material, hard, stone, and physical.

When the Greeks visited Africa as early as the 9th century BC, they found temples that were more than 2,000 years old. What became temples in Greece and later Rome were really relatively recent buildings compared with the antiquity of ancient Africa. Indeed, a site as grand as the Angkor Wat site in Cambodia is merely from the 12th century of this era. Thus, to speak of the ancient Egyptian and Nubian temple sites in the same contexts as others is to diminish the meaning of the term. The temple in the ancient Egyptian conception was often called “the god’s house.”

Whenever the people wanted to donate gifts to the gods, they brought them to the temple, and there the priests and priestesses managed them in the name of the gods. These gifts and endowments were essential to the wealth of the gods. In the city of Waset, for example, during the New Kingdom, no god was as rich and powerful as Amen. Like other temples, the Temple of Amen owned land, farms, pastures, livestock, and boats and received the spoils of war in an effort to support a massive staff of temple helpers, priests, and assistants. In some cases, an entire town was used in the service of the temple to prepare and harvest food for the temple or make boats and art for the temple.

The Great Temple of Karnak

Karnak, the massive temple at Waset, now called Luxor, is the world’s largest religious structure. Yet it might have been rivaled in the past by the Temple of Ptah at Men-nefer or the Temple of Gebel Barkal in Nubia. In antiquity, Egypt had no peer in the construction of large stone temples. It would not be until the appearance of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam that there would be huge religious structures to compare with the African temples.

The temples of the Nile Valley, Kemet and Nubia, were often more than religious sites. They were also places of education and healing. In this sense, they were the first universities and hospitals. If someone was interested in certain information or in discovering the answer to a particular question, the temple was the place to visit. People who found themselves desperately ill with no relief from local healers might make their way to the temple for expert advice. Although these functions were possible and common, it was more likely that the priests were concerned only with the care of the gods. Taking care that the gods were happy meant that the country would prosper.

Types of Temples

The ancient Egyptians had mortuary temples dedicated to royals. These temples were usually created for ceremonies and rituals for the dead king or queen. The famous temple of Hatshepsut is a mortuary temple. Because the *per-aa* was a god, he required a *per neter* or a *het neter* just as all gods did. Thus, the regular and mortuary temples were used to maintain the name and life of the king or god.

It appears that some temples in ancient Egypt were used for political purposes, such as marking the southern boundary of the country. The great temple of Abu Simbel in southern Egypt, with its two large chapels, one dedicated to Ramses II and the other dedicated to Nefertari, his wife, seemed to serve a political as well as a religious purpose. Certainly the temple of Nefertari was the house of Hathor because the temple of Ramses II was dedicated to Amen, Ptah, Atum, and Ramses II.

Temples could be used for other purposes as well. For example, there were the temples that were used for the Sed Festival, the Jubilee Festival, for the king. Other temples were used to serve as the residence of the *ka* of the king; these *ka* temples were necessary to protect and serve the souls of the dead kings.

Many religious buildings in ancient Egypt may be called temples because they served sacred purposes and were specialized spaces for major deities, for the *kas* of kings, for mortuary ceremonies, or for coronation activities; others served as massive



The Karnak Temple is the largest religious site in Africa.
Source: Molefi Kete Asante.

gateways to mortuary chapels. Some of these structures were quite complex, having been added to for generations by various kings intent on demonstrating their devotion to the god of the house.

Temple Organization

Temples tended to have similar organizational structure. Indeed, many of the religious buildings in Christianity and Islam reflect the influence of the African structure. They often had huge entrance pylons. The floor plan included an outer section and an inner section. The outer part would have an entrance corridor, followed by a columned courtyard. The pillars in the courtyard were inscribed with the name and title of the king. The architects of these temples ensured that the gods of the northern region would be honored by scenes oriented to the north on the northern columns, as well as scenes oriented to the southern gods on the southern columns.

A long corridor leading to the inner sanctuary with niches for statues in the front chapel is standard. There is the inner sanctum that houses the god, and behind this chapel is an offering hall. There were also storage and annex rooms on the sides of the main corridor. Of course, there were slight variations in this structure in some cases. Inasmuch as the objectives were different in the regular houses of the gods and the mortuary temples, it was possible to see annexations and additions to the original idea in the regular complexes. One can see an exception to this idea in the great mortuary temple of Djoser at Sakkara, where the original structure was built on by succeeding kings and became a place of national sacredness.

Among the temples that have been recognized as major sites in ancient Africa are Abu Simbel, Aghumi Temple and the Oracle of Amen at Siwa, Amada Temple, Great Temple of Aten at Amarna, Beit el Wali Temple, Bes Temple at Bawiti, Dakka Temple in Nubia, Dendera Temple, Dendur Temple (now in New York), Heru Temple at Edfu, Kalabsha Temple in Nubia, Kom Ombo Temple, Karnak Temple, Luxor Temple, Temple of Montu, Philae Temple of Auset, Khnum Temple at Esna, and the Mortuary Temple of Merenptah. There are hundreds of other sites made sacred by tradition, time, and myth.

However, one cannot assume that the idea of the temple is located only in the Nile Valley, because Africans have dealt with the notion of the house of the God in every region of the continent.

The Idea of the Temple of God

It would take the imagination of the priests of the forests and priests of the pastoral groups to create a new way of viewing the temple that held the deity in perfect unity with the universe. The temple of god came to be viewed in terms of the Earth, the sky, and the massive and infinite universe. To show the temple of God would be to show the universe. The idea in African thought, after thousands of years of structured buildings to contain God, was ultimately that God was uncontainable. This was expressed in the response of the African priest in Benin, who, when asked by a European, "Where is the temple to your god?" replied, "God is too great to be contained in a mere building." This knowledge came down through the ages in Africa after the earlier priests had constructed huge monuments in the name of God to contain the image of God. They discovered that houses could be destroyed, become infested with vermin who ate the provisions of the gods, and rot and decay. It is this wisdom that one sees in the proverbs of traditional Africans about the immensity of the Supreme Deity. No one would now consider the idea that Olorun, Nyame, Abasi, or Mwari could be contained in a building where people would go to see the deity. One can hold only ancestors in shrines or temples, not the Supreme Deity. In the ancient times, one could find temples dedicated to Ra, Amen, Ptah, and Atum, but in more contemporary times, the traditions in Africa have leaned toward the majesty of the creator as too great to be contained in a mere temple.

Molefi Kete Asante

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TEMPLES, USES AND TYPES

Traditional African religious temples are places where Heaven, Earth, and underworld converge. For example, the early temples of the Nile valley were composed of stone and referred to as *akhet*, “the radiant place.” They were timeless images and backdrops for the celebration of spirituality. The ancients perceived temples not only as a constructed symbol of the cosmos, but as a symbol of the “first time” of creation. As priests entered the temple, they ascended gradually, passing through the columns’ replica of a papyrus plants forest. The floor rose toward the sanctuary and was roofed by a replica of the constellations or the divine Nut, goddess of heavens. The floor led

from the symbolic outermost edge of the universe to the innermost sanctuary, the symbolic center of the universe where the primeval mound stood, the hill on which Amen-Ra stood to bring the world into existence and to create order and stability.

Generally speaking, within the sacred space of African temples, creation happened again, disorder was eliminated, and then order was renewed. Also, within the space, moral values and spiritual relationships were reaffirmed. Temples in Africa were more than symbolic; often Africans used them extensively for various rites and ceremonies. They provided a place and passage for rites, elevating the child to adult, the human to king or queen, and the mortal to immortal. Also, they contributed to the deification of leaders, male or female.



The view of one of the oldest temples dedicated to a divinity in the world. The temple of Edfu that was devoted to Heru is seen in this photo.

Source: Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama.

The temple was the body of God; thus, to be in the temple was to experience the divine. Accordingly, they were a sacred location for the struggle between order and chaos, the nexus of sacred space and sacred time. Temples were places for divine rituals that affirmed and transformed the royal leader into a divine image. They were gates to unseen worlds and gathering places for the ancestor spirits and deities.

In summary, temples were not just mortuary buildings, as Western research often classifies them; in fact, they were built to affirm and sustain the living spirit of the deceased in the hereafter. Temples symbolized the divine and were important to political, economic, and social stability of the African community and nation. Throughout Africa, they were central to the religious and political organization of the state. The “luminous place,” then, was a spiritual location, a branch of the cosmic government, where one could participate in ordering the universe and where the human touched the divine and the Earth touched the heavens.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Amen

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THOTH

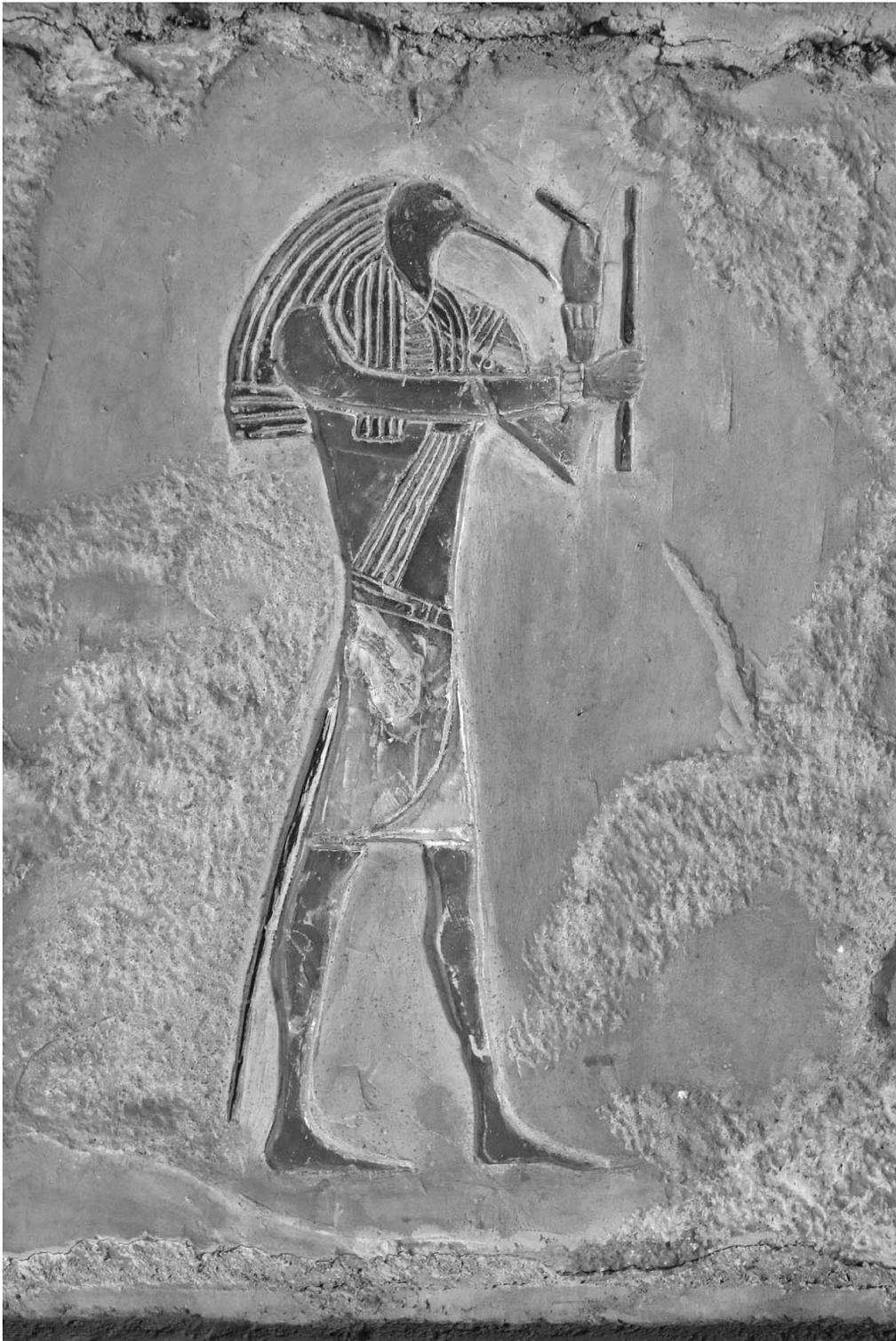
The ancient Egyptian god of wisdom, Djehwty, Tehuti, Djehuty, was called by the Greeks Thoth. He was depicted in either one of two forms, an ibis or a baboon. The most popular representation was a human form with the head of one of those animals. His main cult center was Hermopolis Magna, the 15th nome of Upper Egypt (Al Ashmunein nowadays), where the ibis was the sacred animal of the site. It is almost halfway between Heliopolis and Luxor. Remains of his cult

temple still exist; other temples were built for Thoth in different parts of Egypt, such as in the Delta, El Kab, and Upper Egypt. Some remains of his sanctuary were discovered at modern Luxor on the western bank of the River Nile to the south of the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Madinet Habu at a place called *Qasr El Aguz*, that is, “The palace of the elder.”

Thoth was associated with the moon and so was the ibis, with its white and black feathers resembling the light and dark stages of the moon. As for the baboon form, it was also related to the moon. In earlier times, there was a clear identification between the attitudes of the apse in relation to the different phases of the moon. Thoth was known as the scribal god, and he witnessed several important events that needed recording, such as the final judgment, the weighing of the heart, and the name of the king inscribed on the sacred tree. He was believed by the people to be the master of time and the god of mathematics, astronomy, and reading. The most significant ancient Egyptian source for this god is his book known as *The Book of Thoth*. This book had two chants in it, each with a certain transformative power if you read it in a loud voice. The first chant will help one understand all kinds of beasts and birds. As for the second chant, it is one of the ways to bring the Dead to life.

Many texts referred to him as the son of Re, as well as one of the earliest created gods in the myth of creation of Hermopolis, where the first eight gods in the universe started. Thoth was the god responsible for the announcement of the death of the king and the recognition of the newly enthroned royal character. With the help of goddess *Seshat*, goddess of art and writing, he recorded the years of the king and allowed him to celebrate the *heb Sed* (the 30-year festival of ascending the throne). His role with the Dead is not limited to the final judgment, but he helps the deceased in various ways. He unites his head after his body has fallen apart, he gives him a heart, he gives him the Horus eye, he opens his mouth using his magical power so he will be able to speak and defend himself in the afterlife, and he protects the deceased and gives him the green stone, which is most probably the stone of life.

There were a couple of festivals related to god Thoth. It seems that these were early festivals



Replica of antiquity wall engraving from ancient Egypt—The god Thoth (Tehuti).

Source: iStockphoto.

because they were mentioned in the pyramid texts from the 5th dynasty. There is a festival carrying his name celebrated on the 26th day of the first month of the year, the month named after Thoth. The actual dates of these festivals were mentioned on the most important calendar from ancient times at the temple of Esna. The calendar identified the dates as the 4th, 19th, and 21st of this month. The calendar also described two themes for two of these days: one for the 19th as the festival of Thoth, the great, in the whole country, and the second for the 21st to celebrate the triumph of Thoth in the presence of Re.

Shaza Gamal Ismail

See also Ausar; Auset; Min

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THREE

The number 3 has been significant in the language and iconography of Africa from the time of Kemet, being extensively represented in the rituals and general cultural life throughout the ages. It conveys the ancient Egyptian notion of plurality and often that of unity. In the mental universe of the Kemetyu, there was singular (1), dual (2), plural (3 and more), and, oftentimes, very many or an indeterminate number was expressed as 9, that is, “the plural of plurals,” which was also, but less often, represented as other multiples of 3.

In keeping with this status, the number 9 also represented everything in the Kemetyu universe. This much is conveyed in such terms as *psdt*: “Ennead,” literally, “group of nine.” This representation of indeterminate plurality was given rather concrete expression in the concept of the Nine Bows, the summation of Kemet’s traditional

enemies. The nine petitions made by the farmer in the ancient Egyptian story called *The Eloquent Peasant in Egyptology* also may have represented the notion of a considerable quantity and therefore indeterminate plurality.

The number 3 also represented a closed system of units that are simultaneously complete, interactive, and representational of the cyclical nature of some aspects of reality. The Kemetyu divinity Ptah-Sokar-Wsir illustrates this. Here is a trinity, a three-in-one divinity that represents Creation or Birth, Death or Decay, and Rebirth or Resurrection—an entire cycle.

It is therefore not surprising that the number 3 continues to be of great significance in many rituals in African communities on the continent and abroad.

One of the clearest contemporary expressions of this continuity from the ancient African past is seen in the pouring of Libations at the Libation and Orison (orientation of important persons and paraphernalia) during the opening ritual of a Vodou service. In fact, the significance of water as well as the number 3 may be observed here. At a certain point in the ceremony, water is poured three times before the center post or *Potomitan*, then three times at one entrance, and sometimes at three entrances to the peristyle (the building or part thereof in which the service is held). Next, lines are traced to the peristyle, which is then kissed three times. Water is then poured three times before each of the three drums, which together form the *batière*. At a certain point in the rites marking the initiation or introduction of someone into the followers of the divinity Erzulie Freda, the *Houngan* (Vodou priest) or the Mambo (Vodou priestess) recites the Ave Maria, the Credo, and the Confiteor, each three times—a total of nine recitations. Certain other things are done three times as well during other ceremonies.

The number 3 also resounds in the drums, which constitute a most important part of African sacred rituals and indeed in general African cultural expression. Three drums are played in most African spiritual ceremonies.

In Candomblé, there are three drums. These are collectively called *atabaques* and are believed to have been war drums in Africa. Each also has its own identity and its own name, hence *rum*, the largest and deepest-toned; *rumpi*, the middle drum in size as well as tone; and *lé*, the smallest drum

and the one with the highest tone. These patterns are almost identical in other contemporary manifestations of the African spiritual system.

In Vodou, the three Rada drums are called *bula* or *petit*, the smallest; *seconde*, the second or middle drum; and *maman*, which is the largest.

The trinity of drums also lives among the Rastafari. Collectively called the *akete*, the drums comprise the *repeater*, also called the *kete*, the *funde*, and the bass.

In Santería, the three batá drums also vary in size and sound, from the *iya* (*iya* in Yoruba means *mother*); the *itotele*, or the middle one; and the *okonkolo* (also *okonkilo* or *orele*), the smallest. In Yorubaland, these drums are respectively known as *Iyá Ilú*, *Omele*, and *Kudi*.

In other places such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyane, three drums are also ubiquitous, with each performing a different but complementary function in the ensemble, hence one drum to *damme* (to announce), another to *refoule* (to send the rhythm back), and the third to *coupe* (to cut).

In Guyana, this significance of the number 3 in drums is preserved in two variations. The terms *rondel*, *tampalin*, and *sassi suzina* represent Kongo influences, whereas a Central African influence is reported in the terms *tuta*, *ja*, and bass.

Kimani S. K. Nehusi

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representing either the feat of a supernatural being, the symbol of divine power, or the vengeance of an enraged deity. As such, thunder never goes unnoticed, is always treated with awe and caution, and may even become the object of a cult.

Thunder Cult in Africa

In fact, thunder cults are prominent among a number of people in Africa. For example, among the Yoruba, *sango* is *orisa ara* (the god of thunderbolt). The thunderbolt deity is called *kamalu* by the Igbo and *sokogba* by the Nupe people of Nigeria. The Basoga Uganda assert that *kiduma* is the divinity responsible for the rain, wind, and thunderstorm, while *Kyaka* is the god of lightning.

The Cult of Sango

The thunder cult seems to be exceptionally renowned among the Yoruba. In the religion of the Yoruba, Sango, the owner of lightning and the wielder of the thunderbolt, represents the manifestation of God's wrath. For this reason, Sango is called by his praise name *Oba Jakuta*, meaning "the king who hurls or fights with stones." It is believed that Sango hauls thunderbolts at evil doers and strikes them down with thunder. Any person who dies as a result of Sango's thunder must be buried ritually by the priests of Sango. Despite his seemingly ruthless nature, Sango is nevertheless one of the most revered divinities because he is remembered as standing for justice and fair play. Sango is the minister of justice in God's government; he is known to punish wicked and evil people. The Yoruba believe that Sango hates and forbids stealing, lying, witchcraft, and society. It is believed that only the heinous are struck by lightning. Sango's staff is represented by a double-bladed axe. The axe is regarded as the symbol of the thunderbolt hurled by Sango. This symbol signifies that none, no matter how distant, were beyond the reach of his authority. On Sango's altars are placed wooden axes, stones, and carved mortars because the pounding of food in a mortar sounds like thunder. Smaller stones and clay axes may also be found. It is

THUNDER

Thunder is the loud sound following a flash of lightning. However, most Africans do not just perceive it as such; they "see" beyond the lighting and "hear" beyond the loud sound. This is because they consider the phenomenon as

claimed that these may be used as charms or votive objects by Sango worshippers.

Deji Ayegboyin and S. K. Olajide

See also Shango

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TIBONANJ

Within the Vodou ontological structure in Haiti, the human being is conceived of as being made of three parts: Although the most obvious one is the physical body, the human being also has a bipartite spiritual component, the *tibonanj* and the *gwobonanj*. Whereas the *gwobonanj* is the manifestation in human life of the immortal and divine spirit, God itself, the *tibonanj* represents the more personal side of an individual. This ontological structure is reminiscent of and derives from original African ontological models, such as the ancient Egyptian spiritual duality *kalba* or the Fon *semedo/selido*.

The *tibonanj* has essentially two functions. First, it plays an identifying role because it represents one's unique qualities and one's personality. In that respect, the *tibonanj* can be controlled by another person through spells. The second important function of the *tibonanj* is moral because it represents one's conscience and one's morality, as revealed in one's actions. The *tibonanj* ultimately allows one to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong and hopefully make the morally correct decisions.

Haitian Vodouists do not necessarily think of the *gwobonanj* and the *tibonanj* as separate entities.

Much to the contrary, they believe that both are tied into an organic relationship on which the well-being of the person is predicated. The *tibonanj* and the *gwobonanj* must function in harmony because they ultimately mirror one another. Only at the time of death will the *gwobonanj* and the *tibonanj* separate. The *tibonanj* will not leave the Earth until the ninth day after death has occurred. Although much attention is paid to the *gwobonanj* at the time of death, this is not the case with the *tibonanj*, which, on being expelled from the body with the last breath, assumes an anonymous status, and becomes of little, if any, use to the living.

Ama Mazama

See also Ba; Ka

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TIME

Perhaps one of the most discussed concepts in relation to religion and philosophy in Africa is time. Time has been postulated as the distinctive element in defining the religious reality and philosophical thought of the African peoples. This was originally formulated by the famed African theologian and philosopher John S. Mbiti, who argued that the African concept of time is distinct from the Western mode of formulating time. Although critiqued by subsequent African scholars, the basic premise of the theory still holds.

It states that African time has two dimensions: a dynamic present (*sasa*) and an ever-increasing past (*zamani*), meaning that history for the African never moves forward, but ever backward. The future dimension is strictly limited to the near future, which in essence remains only a projection or extension of the present. Time in the African conception is not linear, but a cyclical motion that is partly governed by the rhythms of nature. Even when linearity seems to predominate certain modes of African time (e.g., birth–initiation–marriage–old age–death), it is only with the introduction of the Judeo-Christian concept of *eschatology* that a distant future emerges in African thinking.

Greek concepts *chronos* (“wristwatch time” measured with precision) and *kyros* (event oriented time) might loosely exemplify the Western/African distinctions in relation to time. In contrast to the Western (Judeo-Christian) conceptualization of time as a linear projectile headed toward a *telos* (death and judgment), the African concept of time maintains something of a spiral that seems infinite, with death only as a doorway to the parallel universe of the spirits and the living dead. Always reaching to the past as its framework of reference, African time connects mostly with the present and hardly envisions a distant future.

Rather than relate to time as an abstract reality that exists outside of human experience, the African thinks of time as the product of human activity. “You make time!” Reality is not merely a product of time to which human experiences are appended. Rather, the opposite is the case. Time has to be formulated in relation to metaphysical reality to which it is subsumed. For this reason, time can only be articulated in relation to human experience and environmental realities (e.g., sunrise–sunset, seasons [wet and dry], festivals, and ceremonies). Instead of time being a dominant construct that controls life, relationships are the dominant criterion of human existence. So, although old age is viewed as divine blessing, it is only surpassed by how one spent life in relation to others. Rather than seeing time as an essence to be gained or lost, the African sees it as something to be harnessed, a positive reflection of reality.

Andrew M. Mbuvi

See also Age Groups

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TIV

The Tiv are an important people who number about 7 million in Nigeria and Cameroon. The Tiv are divided into two patrilineal descent lines from the original ancestor Tiv. This ancestor had two sons, Chongo and Pusu. A Tiv person is either a member of MbaChongo, descendants of Chongo, or MbaPusu, descendants of Pusu. These descent lines are further divided into several major branches. These branches are often further divided until one has the smallest unit of the lineage called the *ipaven*. One could be in an *ipaven*, but also a member of the kinship community called the *tar*.

Like a few other ethnic groups in Africa, the Tiv have no kings, chiefs, or councils. The idea of leadership exists, but is based on age, personal influence, and industry. The idea of clans, kindreds, and family groups is a European classification of the Tiv structure. They are governed by those individuals who best represent the interests of the family because of their age and wisdom.

The Almighty Creator among the Tiv is called Aondo. This name refers to the Sky Deity who created the entire universe. However, once Aondo had created the Earth and the universe he left humans to themselves. The Tiv must rely on their ancestral spirits instead of Aondo for personal matters. Although one does not pray to ancestors or worship ancestors, one can make offerings to them just to ensure that the world remains stable.

The Tiv used many musical instruments for specific religious and social purposes. For example, the

kakaki instrument was used to announce important community events. Among the Tiv, the kakaki was used to announce a birth, a marriage, or a death. They also used the ilyu, a wooden instrument, to call members to the public square, the palace of the leader, or the market. The indyer was used for all festivals, ceremonies, celebrations, and masquerades. Also, the agbande and ageda instruments were employed in the festivals. However, the adiguve, a stringed instrument, was used for dancing. It could also be played when announcing the death of a leader. Therefore, the Tiv of Benue State in Nigeria and Cameroon use their traditional instruments to maintain their cultural community.

The Tiv created a system of marriage, where each man was the guardian of his sister, and at the time of marriage the sister was exchanged for another man's sister who then became his wife. This form of marriage caused many arguments and violent outbursts among family members. It was discontinued during the British intervention in 1927. Marriage by bride price became the subsequent form of gaining a spouse after the prohibition of the exchange system.

Religion among the Tiv centers on ancestral respect. A community can only create harmony and balance by attending to the needs of the patrilineal lineage ancestors. To assist the people with the ordinary situations of daily life, the culture defines *akombo*, magical forces, as the key to interpreting the meanings of life. One is said to have mastered or used *akombo* effectively when one employs the emblems necessary to harness the best powers of the ancestors. A person who masters the *akombo* is a diviner who might be used to carry out certain rituals for curing the community of evil. Most men study the traditions and learn the secrets of mastery of *akombo* to protect their kinship lineage. Using their knowledge, the diviners ensure that the community is protected from all forms of disrepair and evil. They learn to use decorative art, sculpture, and graphic symbols to control *akombo*. Of course, *akombo* is not alone in the process of community survival. There are no shrines or temples to *akombo* because no particular personalities are attached to them. Each *akombo* might be tied to a disease or symptom that would need to be regulated by sacrifice or some other form of intervention such as medicinal rituals. The *akombo* exist, but must be activated

by *tsav* that might be called charisma, talent, energy, dynamism, or ability. One can employ *tsav* to create a new environment for a family or establish an authoritative interpretation of some event. Some people even claim that *tsav* is evil or people can manipulate *tsav* for wicked purposes. However, it is clearly used by some to protect, pacify, ritualize, and galvanize the ancestral world. Those people who possess the value of *tsav* are said to be the *mbatsav*.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ngewo; Zulu

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TOTEM

In Africa, a totem (*mitupo* in the Shona language of Zimbabwe) is any animal or object that is considered a guardian, protector, or assistant to an ethnic group, clan, or family. An African totem is identified with a kinship or descent lineage. When the apical ancestor of a kinship group is nonhuman, it is called a totem. Many African ethnic groups or clans claim their descent from animals such as antelopes, monkeys, lions, horses, dogs, eagles, or leopards.

When a group presents itself to the world, it normally represents itself through a totemic narrative that explains how the particular people emerged from the kindness, fortune, tenderness, wisdom, or courage of a particular nonhuman animal.

Although the term *totem* originates in the language of the Ojibwa ethnic group of Native Americans, because there is a similar response to the environment and descent narratives among Africans and other people, the word *totem* has been applied to the same cultural practice in other cultures. The Ojibwa use the word *odoodem*, “his totem,” to refer to a belief associated with the apical ancestors. It is from this usage that we get the meaning that the totem is usually an animal that represents spiritually a group of connected and related people.

It appears that in Africa the totem incorporated the idea that the particular people shared intrinsically in the totemic narrative in a spiritual way. When the apical ancestor appeared, it gave to all of the descendants the same protection and guidance. It was not a one-generational gift, but an eternal, everlasting linking of the people with that particular animal.

Some scholars believe that African totems reflect a way to deal with the physical environment in relationship to classificatory systems; this is useful, according to these scholars, for explaining phenomena. Others have seen the idea of totems in Africa as metaphorical, but Africans tend to see the totem in strictly spiritual terms as the ancestor to the clan or ethnic group. Nothing is more rational than the fact that the totem in being protector is also protected, and therefore an ecological purpose is served as well. Some people do not eat a particular animal because it is totemic. You cannot eat your own totem, although you may eat the totem of another group. These ancient representations of the apical ancestor seem to follow the same patterns as among the Native Americans, ancient Nile Valley Africans, and some original Australians. Among the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest one finds totem poles of lizards, frogs, birds, and bears. In China, there is the Sanxingdul culture of southern China, often considered related to African cultures, that dates to 5,000 years ago, where bronze- and gold-headed animals were used as totems. Totems are essentially ideas that derived from the Africans’ interaction with nature, animals, and each other, and out of this reality the people were able to establish a connection to a nonhuman apical figure. It has been suggested that totemic culture

spread from ancient Central Africa throughout the rest of the continent. This is dated to the Ishango bone culture period of 28,000 years ago. One of the more recent great examples of totemic use was the hongwe bird found on the Great Zimbabwe to indicate the people’s affection for, loyalty to, and respect and reverence for the apical animal of their culture. In a contemporary sense, the totemic culture is still alive in Zimbabwe, where there are 25 identifiable totems among the Shona in addition to the 60 praise names (*zvidawo*) of the society. Every clan among the Shona can be identified by its *mutopo* and major praise name (*chidawo*).

Throughout the continent of Africa, the totem became identified with unification, solidarity, pride, and the future vision of a people. One could also discover in the totem (*mitupo*) a reason to guard against social, moral, and cultural defilement. Men and women who have the same totem cannot marry in some cultures because they are relatives. One uses the totem idea in Africa to praise someone in poetry or dance, as well as to express social identity. If clans share the same totem, such as a lion (*shumba*), they will have different praise names such as *Murambwe* or *Nyamuziwa*.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ekpo Secret Society; Naming

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TRANSCENDENCE AND COMMUNION

Transcendence and communion in African religion commonly refer to the ability for beings—God, the divinities, the ancestors, and humanity—to communicate and uphold relationships with one another across physical and spiritual boundaries.

These concepts are most clearly expressed by the relational dynamics between Africans and their ancestors, as well as with the divinities.

According to African religion, ancestors are the spirits of the deceased heroes, heroines, leaders, elders, and other members of the extended family. There are, however, certain requirements for becoming an ancestor. Indeed, an ancestor is a person who has experienced adulthood, marriage, and childrearing. She or he must also have died of natural causes, not from mishap, such as an accident, childbirth, or suicide. Death by means of an unclean disease, such as tuberculosis, epilepsy, or leprosy, would disqualify one from this honorable status. Furthermore, an individual must have exhibited an outstanding moral and sociopolitical life, and she or he must also be a veteran hero to become an ancestor.

It is believed that the ancestors have certain powers and act as mediators. As such, they possess greater access to God and can exercise their influence on the circumstances of their living relatives. This privileged status places them above humanity and gives them greater insight into the affairs of their living relatives. From this vantage point, ancestors patrol both private and public morality, rewarding the faithful and punishing the offenders. They protect the life and interest of their respective families, fighting evil forces and providing healing. Ancestors are God's messengers, agents, and mediators.

In reverence to the ancestors' power and influence, those who follow the African religious tradition greatly respect their ancestors. For example, the Akans perform an ornate ritual for their ancestors on special occasions. One such event is called *Eguadoto*, which means "the feeding of the stool." Prior to a chief's death, his or her stool is white. But after his or her death, the stool is completely blackened by smearing a mixture of soot and egg yolk. Then the stool is relocated to a sacred location, a stool room, and treated as a shrine, that is, with great respect and reverence. Similarly, the Yoruba organize *Egungun* ceremonies, which are always big affairs involving the whole community, to honor their ancestors.

Although these rituals have been misunderstood as ancestral worship, they are not. In fact, Africans do not place their ancestors on the same level as God or the divinities. These practices and

other similar rituals are simply central to the nature of communion between the living and the Dead. Rituals such as *Eguadoto* help maintain the communication between the physical world of the living and the spiritual world of the ancestors. In this respect, family ties are strengthened beyond death. Through libations, sacrifices, and prayers, Africans uphold communion with their ancestors. Recognizing that the ancestors are spirits, rituals are the manner in which Africans address them as such. Through these means, they pay homage, show hospitality, and express gratitude.

The ancestors are close to the living community. Although ancestors are spirits, they remain to be understood as relatives of the living Africans. They maintain their familial titles such as mother, father, aunt, or uncle. The continuity of these familial and communal relationships demonstrates the transcendent nature of African traditional religions.

In the hierarchy of power, the divinities are above the ancestors and below God. They are the children of God. Unlike humanity, the divinities are not created, but are called into existence. Similar to the ancestors, their primary role is to mediate between God and humanity. Although some divinities are the manifestations of divine attributes, most are nature spirits. They lodge temporarily in lakes, streams, rivers, trees, forests, mountains, hills, and groves.

God is not worshipped directly by humanity, but indirectly through the divinities. During daily, weekly, or annual worship, traditional priests and priestesses serve the divinities. This religious activity occurs in shrines, temples, and groves. Through this life of worship, the divinities have communion with humanity.

There is, however, another important means used by Africans to establish direct contact with spiritual entities, such as the ancestors and the divinities. This is often referred to as "possession," but is more correctly described as transcendence. For most African people, human beings have a complex spiritual core made up of two and sometimes more elements. The Egyptians, for example, believed that a person was made up of the Ka, the Ba, and the Khet. Such a view is common in other parts of the continent. The Akan, for example, believe in the Okra, the Sunsum, and the Ahom as the fundamental components of the

human person. Transcendence occurs when a part of the spiritual components is displaced and replaced by an ancestral spirit or by a divinity. Such displacement is usually induced by the living, often in their attempt to elicit information about a specific and critical situation, such as the cause of a misfortune, illness, or death and the needed remedy. It takes someone specially trained, that is, a priest or a priestess, to orchestrate the coming of the spirit. Sometimes, however, spirits may take the initiative and “mount” a person. When mounted by a spirit, a person usually experiences changes, such as the alteration of his or her voice, facial features, and personality. Transcendence exemplifies the dynamic and intimate relationship that Africans cultivate with the spirit world. Being mounted is seen as an honor and a privilege.

Communion also exists between Africans and God. Although God is understood as a being with human characteristics, God is uniquely the Divine. She or he is omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, immortal, and the sustainer and ruler of the universe. Meals and drinks are offered as a customary means of communion between the divinity and those committed to God. Oil is poured daily on the emblems of the divinities, and a meal is offered on their sacred day. Through such rituals, Africans live in quasi-constant communion with God.

Based on the interrelationship of God, the divinities, the ancestors, and humanity, African religion maintains communion and transcendence beyond the physical and spiritual boundaries. Communication between God and humanity is upheld through the mediums of ancestors and divinities. As described earlier, Africans feed the spiritual beings, and, in response, the ancestors grant blessings on the people and society. It is also noteworthy to consider the context in which these ceremonies take place. Shrines, temples, and groves function as an intersection between the physical and spiritual worlds. Beyond these sacred centers, the most pronounced reflection of communion and transcendence is represented in the ties between the ancestors and the living humanity. Not even death can undermine the bonds of family and the significance of outstanding moral behavior.

Bruce Grady

See also Ancestors

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TRANSFORMATION

Transformation in the African religious world is spiritual, symbolic, and figurative. Instances of transformation are vividly described in African sacred and secular literature, such as the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, *The Famished Road*, and *Palm-Wine Drinkard*. The Dung Beetle (*Khepera*) of Kemet was the symbol of Transformation in a classical period of African history. The ancient Kemetic text illustrates transformation as it applies to the spiritual world. Ancient Africans spoke of transformation as part of a divine process in which the deceased passes through several phases of change in the transcendent world. Two clear examples of transformation are Amen Ra, who undergoes daily transformation, and the deceased emulating Ausar. Both repeatedly went through transformations on the path to becoming reborn or becoming *akh*, a luminous one or an ancestor. Daily, they confronted various challenges in the sacred underworld transforming into various animals and creatures or bearing witness to this process.

Secular African literature such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* describes the main human character transforming into trees, water, rocks, and mountains as he goes on a quest. In the world of the living, some diviners claimed transformation as part of their spiritual abilities. Sometimes the literature, both sacred and secular, describes wayward spirits who, in their quest to return to the

living world, attempt to transform into humans. However, their attempt often fails, leaving them trapped as animals or strange beings. In *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, for some curious reasons, the spirits are unable to transform correctly. They try to hide and exist among humans, but seem to have difficulty remembering what living humans look like. Consequently, *abiku* (spirit children) see them because they have oddly arranged their human parts and are readily identifiable to those who have one foot in the living and one foot in the spirit world. Transformation is the ability to change from one form to another, an ability shared by both the living and the deceased in both the sacred and secular contexts.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Neb Ankh

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TREES

Trees have served as important symbols and spaces in African traditional religion. Although the actual significance attached to trees differs from region to region, Africans could call on a shared spiritual vocabulary that gives trees a sacred and cosmic meaning. In fact, many African creation stories designate cosmic trees as the source of all human life. Because of this association with life, trees are also linked to fertility, regeneration, and even death.

For example, one creation story from the Mbuti tells of how a tahu tree housed a chameleon. When the chameleon heard noises from within the tree, it knocked back on the bark. Suddenly a flood of water rushed out, carrying Earth's first man with it. It is clear that this tree served as a cosmic metaphor for the process of labor and birth. Because of their central role in creating and sustaining human life, some trees were also thought to have been protectors of

newborn children. Other African groups believed that nuts from the branch of a palm tree could help a barren woman become fertile again.

Trees were also metaphors for regeneration. Some African groups believed that the nuts, leaves, roots, or branches from trees could help cure sickness, thus regenerating those who were ill. Trees also acted as sacred spaces for important coming of age and initiation rites. For example, initiation into Kore society among Mali's Bambara cultural group involved bringing young boys into a sacred grove (a cluster of trees that performed as a site of spiritual activity). The boys would lie around the sacred tree in the center of the grove, where they would experience a regenerative second birth. After they had been regenerated by the power of the tree, the boys would mark the end of their childhood and their entrance into adulthood.

Just as trees are traditionally associated with life and regeneration, they are also linked to death. The Akamba, for example, believed that the wild fig tree was the place where dead souls resided. Southern Nigeria's Indem tribe possessed trees that served as intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the Dead. When villagers would die, their souls would pass through these sacred trees. Other powerful spirits and minor gods could also dwell in African trees, as the Xhosa believed the tree spirit *Huntin* did.

Different trees, of course, had different meanings in the various traditions of Africa. The iroko, baobab, fig, palm, and silk-cotton trees all had their own particular significance to different groups in Africa. Nevertheless, Africans have long associated trees with the qualities of life, birth, fertility, regeneration, and death.

Edward E. Andrews

See also Creation; Death; Groves, Sacred; Rites of Passage; Spirit Medium

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A baobab tree in the northern region of Limpopo Province, South Africa. In Africa, the baobab tree features largely in fertility rites and ancestor respect rituals.

Source: Elzbieta Sekowska/iStockphoto.

TRIADS

Triads are statuesque portraits of divine trinities. The trinity is a concept that embraces the trilateral manifestation of a divine force. Among the earliest triads were those of the ancient Kemetians. The divine triads of ancient Kmt were usually represented by a familial image of a father, mother, and other familial relation that might be female or male depending on the customs and particular history of the locale.

Because rulers were also considered divine, they were often depicted in triads. Regardless of the trinity's membership, the central character was often the father with the mother on the right and the progeny on the left. These manifestations were commonplace in the royal temple art of ancient Nile Valley societies. With the resurrection of Kmt (called Egypt by the Greeks) and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, nobles and professionals included statues of trinities in the shrines dedicated to their journey to the next life.

Examples of Nile Valley triads include the following:

- (Mn-Nfr or Memphis) Skmt–Pth–Nfrtm, later replaced with Imhtp
- (Wst or Thebes) Amn–Mwt–Khnsu
- (throughout Kmt or Egypt) Ast–Asr–Hrw (often referred to in their Greek renditions: Isis, Osiris, and Horus)
- (Abw of Nbw or Elephantine of Nubia) Khnwm–Stt–Anwkt

The employment of triad statues in the Nile Valley societies seems to have had two purposes. First, they presented an image of combined powers highlighting a divine team. In Mn-Nfr, the patron saint of the early dynastic rulers and Kmt's craft guilds, Ptah, connected the forces of the original creation with Skmt, his wife and right-hand goddess who was seen as an enforcer of his will and a protector of her son, Nfrtm. Nfrtm, in contrast, was identified with the procreative force of the sun god that arose from the lilies and ushered in daily life. In unity, they were attributed with having brought about a national life of justice, right ordering, and mastery of governance.

Pharaohs, the divine rulers who were considered incarnated deities, were also presented in triads that illuminated their teams. Pharaoh Mnkara had triad statues that featured him, his patron goddess on his right, and governors of specific nomes on his left. The emphasis was on the team of divine forces. The triad presentation had a second function, which was that of reducing disunity by emphasizing the collective aspect of the god force and encouraging cooperation between the priesthoods that represented each divine force. The triads involving Pharaohs displayed teams of political unity.

Another key aspect of triad statues is their usual portrayal of the left leg extended as if the figures were in a forward walking motion. This stance was symbolic of action and steadfast purpose.

Many scholars have asserted the mathematical and supernatural significance of the number 3 for the ancients. Divine speculation was advanced in the Nile Valley, and much of the speculation inspired much of the religious development from ancient times through Christianity. The "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are a trinity in Christianity that reveals continuity with the tradition of divine

triads that were common in the Nile Valley. Other subtler triads pepper the Christian doctrines and not all were divine, again as in the Nile Valley societies. One of the subtler triads that played a semi-divine role in the Christian text was that of the three wise men who visited Jesus in his manger.

D. Zizwe Poe

See also Amen; Khonsu

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TSONGA

The Tsonga, also called Shangaan, are a large African ethnic group that lives in Mozambique and South Africa. The history of the Tsonga people is connected to their once powerful empire called the Gaza Empire that was created by the legendary military genius Soshangane. The capital city was Mossurize, which sits on the border between Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Comprising a huge area, the Gaza Empire was formidable in its day and extended from southeastern Zimbabwe to southern Mozambique and parts of South Africa. Soshangane moved the capital from Mossurize to Gaza Province for greater protection. When he died, Muzila, his son, ascended the throne, and after him came Ngungunhane, who was imprisoned by the colonial Portuguese in 1895.

It is believed that the Tsonga people have been exposed to many unsettling philosophical and spiritual ideas that make them reject some of their more traditional beliefs. Actually, the name Tsonga was given to them to refer to a vast group of people who speak a similar language. Most of the people who are called Tsonga also accept the identification as Shangaan because the name relates to the military leader who originated among the

Zulu, Soshangane. These core Zulu people are said to have conquered or annexed the Tsonga who were known by some as the Mashangane.

Thus, in many traditions and customs, the Tsonga are like other Nguni-speaking populations. Their language is part of the great Bantu system of languages found in East, Central, and Southern Africa. They have retained much of the terminology that relates to clans, social and kinship ties, and ceremonies. The custom of *lobola*, for instance, although frowned on by the church that has captured many Tsonga, is still found among the masses of Tsonga. To break the tradition of bride's price would be to destroy the heart of the Tsonga marriage custom. Consequently, the people have maintained their wedding traditions despite a profound commitment to Westernization as seen by churchgoers.

European writers during the era of apartheid in South Africa sought to divide and conquer the people by making some of the Tsonga believe that if they accepted the Christian doctrine, they would be superior to those who practice African traditional religion. There is no state religion of the Tsonga; however, there is a powerful pride in the achievements of the Gaza Empire, and in many ways, the deference paid to the first leader of the people to make a mighty kingdom is the fountain of their constant use of Soshangane as a figure of great respect.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Xhosa; Zulu

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Tswana

Tswana is a group of Bantu people living in Southern Africa. Batswana are mostly found in Botswana, South Africa, and, to some smaller extent, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The origin of this group of people is not clearly known, although some scholars suppose that they came from the Great East Africa Lakes before they spread to southern Africa. Nevertheless, history documents that by AD 1600 they had already settled in their present settlements. In their settlement, the Tswana had their own peculiar way of doing things that included political, social, and religious organizations. These ways were not easily perceivable to strangers of Batswana culture. So this fact disqualifies the colonial mentality that the Tswanas had no culture, especially in religion.

The Tswana deity is called *Modimo*, which literally means the Great High God (Spirit). *Modimo* can be neither personified nor gendered. It is something that cannot be accommodated in a building or in space. Nevertheless, *Modimo* has the several attributes that include being supreme (*Hlaa-Hlaa-Macholo*), invincible (*gaOitsiwe*), the source (*motlhodi*), the Enabler (*montshi*), Mother (*mme*), and the Light (*lesedi*). *Modimo* lives in the sky. *Modimo* wills good to humankind, and *Modimo* preserves justice. *Modimo* normally acts through *Badimo* (ancestors). Last, but not least, *Modimo* may intervene directly to draw attention to the breach of taboos.

Something of chief interest about *Modimo* is that, like most African deities, it is neuter in gender. It is an attribute that seeks to empower both men and women together in societal functions, duties, and privileges. Thus, the representation of *Modimo* in *Setswana* spiritual space by the indigenous divining set (*ditaola*) illustrates that domination of one gender, male or female, was not characteristic. This attribute should be emulated in all religions because it does not marginalize

and oppress the other. However, it is an exaggeration to say that in *Tswana* society there is complete balance of gender roles and property ownership since ancient times to our post-modern era.

In *Tswana* society, the concepts of the divine, the nature of humanity, the end of life, the conquest of fear, and the quest for the attainment of harmony with nature and other humans were taught by respectable people in initiation schools called *Bojale* and *Bogwera*. These schools were significant in the sense that they prepared boys and girls, respectively, for their specific roles in adult life. Precisely speaking, the initiation schools were preparatory, nonclass, and also used as critical avenues in search of Modimo. However, this does not mean to overlook the issue of gender imbalances that existed in the *Tswana* society. For example, boys at all levels were prepared to become leaders, a right that was strictly denied to women and girl children. Finally, when Christianity landed, the schools were made extinct, Modimo was colonized, gender imbalances were perpetuated, but some traditional ways of worship persisted. This includes the use of water for healing rituals, use of drums for music, and invoking spirit possession as well as divining.

Mussa S. Muneja

See also Tsonga

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TUTANKHAMEN

Nebkheperara Tutankhamen (1342–1323 BC) was a short-lived and relatively insignificant ruler during a troubled time in the history of Kemet. He became king during the fabled 18th dynasty, but was responsible for nothing remarkable. Few people had ever mentioned his life or his rule prior to the 1922 discovery of his tomb by the Englishman Howard Carter, who had been commissioned by Lord Carnavon. Buried with Tutankhamen were treasures that had been undisturbed by grave robbers, a rarity in the Valley of the Kings, and thus the discovery assured the king of historical fame. Tutankhamen was named at birth Tutankhaten after the deity his father Akhenaten had chosen as the state deity of Kemet. He later took the name Tutankhamen, “the living image of Amen,” to reflect his return to the great deity Amen.

Tutankhamen became king at the age of 9 years old. Surrounded by a royal house that had made its home in Akhetaten, the new city established by Akhenaten, the boy king seemed to have enjoyed his life under the watchful eye of his grandmother, Queen Tiye. She would prove to be the most politically astute keeper of the royal throne in the history of Egypt. She had been the wife of Amenhotep III and was the mother of Akhenaten and the grandmother of Tutankhamen. Queen Tiye never forgot the ancient god Amen and may have influenced the court to return to the worship of the deity.

Art and Spirituality

The pictorial art found in Tutankhamen’s burial chambers introduced the world to the incredibly rich material culture, as well as the spiritual philosophy, of ancient Kemet. The sacred language on the papyri as well as on the Neb Ankh, called by the Greeks “sarcophagus,” represented the complex spiritual system of the ancient Africans. Information from the tomb confirmed all the findings that indicated that the ancient people of Kemet lived for immortality. Death was merely the end of life, but not the end of existence. Tutankhamen’s tomb gave a clearer understanding of how the African artists were able to represent the quest for eternal life.

The Afterlife

Tutankhamen's tomb suggests that the philosophy of eternal life was pervasive in the Nile Valley. The story of the afterlife transcribed on his tomb suggests that death is the entrance into the afterlife. It is in the afterlife that one receives a new life and mission for the next life. His tomb also explains the religious tenets of immortality.

Christianity and Tutankhamen

Many of the words and verses of the Bible come to life and take on new meaning when one begins to examine the life and death of Tutankhamen. It is in his death and the discovery of the tomb that other religious beliefs gain more credibility. The detailed pictures and words describe religious beliefs that were before a mystery to religious believers. His tomb explains the meanings of the words "being born again" and to "receive life after death."

Healing and Tutankhamen

When Tutankhamen's tomb was opened, at least 50 jars of essential oils were found in his tomb. These are the same types of oils that are today used for healing purposes in both traditional hospitals and alternative medical practices. The use of essential oils has developed into the practice of aromatherapy, which is a regenerated healing practice that came from Egyptian religious practices. These ancient practices have been incorporated into modern-day religious ceremonies, especially the use of frankincense, myrrh, and hyssop.

During most of Tutankhamen's short reign, the country was actually run by senior officials most likely under the command of Queen Tiye. The senior officials brought peace to the political process that had been disrupted by Akhenaten, and they put an end to the worship of Aton, who had been introduced by the former Pharaoh. It was the vizier Ay (who would become the next Pharaoh) who oversaw the return to Amen. They abandoned Akhetaten and returned to the city of Waset.

Tutankhamen's Death

Much controversy and speculation has occurred about the death of Tutankhamen. It was believed by scholars for many centuries that he was treacherously murdered. Recently, it has been found that he died of natural causes. He actually died as a result of a leg wound that became infected and led to his early death. Tutankhamen was one of the few pharaohs whose burial remains were not stolen by tomb robbers.

Tutankhamen and Rituals

Many of the pictographs that were found in Tutankhamen's tomb describe in detail the religious rituals that were used before his death and in the afterlife. Thanks to the graphic nature of the panels found in his burial chambers, we can now understand in simplistic form the necessity for rituals in all spiritual beliefs. Tutankhamen's return to Waset and the worship of Amen represented one of the lasting historical moments in Kemet's history. Yet when he died at the age of 18, he probably would have remained generally unremarked had it not been for the discovery of his grave in the 20th century.

Edona M. Alexandria

See also Akhenaten

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TUTSI

The Tutsi have lived in close proximity to the Twa and Hutu in the forested great lakes area of Central Africa, what is now known as North-western Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Southwestern Uganda. The Tutsi,

like other groups in the area, speak a Central African Bantu language, Kinyrwanda or Kirundi, depending on whether one is in present-day Rwanda or Burundi. Within the language, the folklore, myths, proverbs, poetry, and parables are all important in teaching the community spiritual, ethical, and moral standards and understandings. Many of the stories told are said to have come from a mythical king named Gihanga. This king also may have been an ancient famed griot, one who has a kingly status as an ancestor because of the importance of the oral record in the Tutsi tradition, as in all African traditions and cultures.

The creator or high God of the Tutsi is called *Imaana*. This God has the power to grant life, death, and wealth, and the kings of the Tutsi share in the power because they are living or human manifestations of the divine. Also important for the Tutsi are the ancestors because it is they who will act as intermediaries between humans and the divine. Called *Abazima* by the Tutsi, the ancestors act as intermediaries and messengers to *Imaana*. Humans must honor the ancestors and bring offerings to them to remain in their favor. Misfortune can be attributed to dishonor of the ancestors or dishonor to themselves because they represent their ancestors.

The Tutsi creation myth begins with an original couple who lived in paradise. This original pair, however, was sterile, so they asked God for help in having a child. God then mixed saliva with clay in a pot and made a small human figure. The pot symbolized the womb of the woman, and then God ordered the woman to stir and pour milk into the pot every day for 9 months. She did this, and in 9 months, the small human figure had grown limbs; she then pulled the new human being out of the pot, and she now had a child. This is a symbolic story meant to illustrate the process of a woman's pregnancy and childbirth. Further, this story also illustrates the woman's intimate connection to the divine and her knowledge of the mysteries of life.

Death, like birth, is important to the spiritual and religious understandings of the Tutsi. At birth, Tutsi children are taken through a naming ceremony that proclaims the name of the child to God, the ancestors, the living, and the yet unborn. In death, the community and family members

offer prayers and mourn for a short period after the death and funeral. During this period, the close family members avoid work and sex to mark their mourning and loss of a loved one. At the end of the mourning period, the family members and community come together for a feast to celebrate transition of life.

Paul H. L. Easterling

See also Baganda; Batwa; Shona

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TWA

See BATWA

TWINS

Twins are two babies who are born together. Arthur discovered that twins are the clones of nature, each descended from the symmetrical splitting of a single fertilized egg into cells that contain the identical sequence of even tinier DNA molecules. There are two types of twins: identical twins and fraternal twins. Identical twins are genetically identical.

In many cultures, including Africa, the birth of twins is viewed as an unnatural occurrence. The birth of twins is a bad omen. In some cultures, they are believed to cause misfortune, sickness, or death in the family, and some believe that they should be eliminated at birth. However, in other societies, that was not the case.

There are several myths that African people hold about twins. Although some still hold on to the beliefs, other beliefs have disappeared over time. There is a belief that twins are dangerous. In Shona culture, twins are called *manyambiri* ("the two"),



Two identical Lossi masked dancers mirror each other's steps precisely, illustrating the Yoruba belief that twins share the same soul and are inextricably linked through life.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher/Getty Images.

which denotes things of unusual form. The twins are given identical names that have the same meaning. At times, the names are unisex. In the past in Southern Africa, when someone gave birth to twins, both were killed. This was done because it was believed that if they were left to live they would cause some natural catastrophes that would affect the entire society. Because deliveries were conducted by midwives, the husband was not told about the anomaly. The killing was done secretly by elderly midwives. Even when people stopped the practice of killing twins, the underlying belief still remained that twins do not survive.

There is a belief that twins have a natural link in their state of health. If one falls sick, the other is expected to experience the same illness. For instance, if one has a headache, it is believed that the other will have it also. If one of them dies,

some rituals have to be conducted so that the other can survive.

On twins' birth order, people believe that the one who comes out first is young, whereas the last is the senior. The senior one is believed to have pushed the junior to exit first out of the womb at birth. So the senior exhibits leadership qualities. Also, as children at play, twins' patterns of behavior are the same. They do many things together. They behave in the same way and share the same experiences. If one is beaten, the other shares the same pain. When they go to bed, they sleep on the same bed regardless of their sexuality. Likewise, it is believed that twins wear the same clothes, or the same color for the opposite sex, and that if one twin attains success, the other expects the same. If one is given something, then the other expects the same gift.

Another belief is that twins look alike. When it comes to twins, at times it is hard to tell the two apart. Because of that, they are therefore regarded as an anomaly. Evans-Pritchard portrays Nuer twins as ambivalent and dangerous. Evans-Pritchard has also compared Nuer twins to birds. Basically, the reference is to their system of pairing and closeness, just like birds.

Yet another belief is that twins have some special powers that may be evil. But of the two, one is believed to be the good twin, whereas the other is the evil twin. Perhaps this explains why twins can fight and also why sometimes one is killed when the other is spared. The idea is that the evil is eliminated while the good is preserved for the good of society.

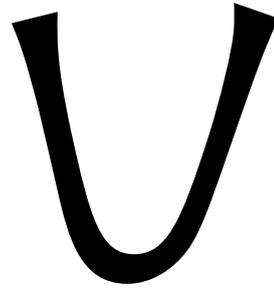
Although many cultures regard twins as dangerous, in some countries, such as Cameroon, they are highly respected. Minyi mothers of twins

are given respect and ritual. Cameroon has the highest number of fraternal twins in the world. Due to the influence of Christianity, twins are considered a gift from God. They are symbols of power and prestige. Some regard them as a delight, but many still feel they are a problem.

Tabona Magondo Shoko

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UMBANDA

A significant number of people of African ancestry have a profound propensity for a spiritual way of life or passionate religious expression that is parallel with their worldview, ethos, and cultural location. The extreme physical and psychological conditions to which the Africans were subjected during the African Enslavement Holocaust, including the brutal imposition of Christianity, did not manage, however, to totally dislocate them from their various West African traditional spiritual systems or religious expressions. Millions of African Brazilians are an example of people who resisted and retained many sacred aspects of their West African traditional religious system. They creatively embodied and eclectically mixed the religions of Kardecism, Yoruba, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the spiritual system of Brazil's indigenous people. The synthesizing of various religious practices in Brazil, primarily Kardecism with Angolan and Yoruba centered cultural and spiritual systems, in the 1950s developed a religious phenomenon labeled Umbanda.

In 1885, Parisian Leon Rivail reported that after a séance he started receiving messages from a Druid Spirit announcing itself as Allan Kardec. Psychographic and spiritual communications occurred for 15 years between Rivail and Kardec, and the outcome established the foundation for the philosophical, scientific, and religious expression of Kardecism in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during the early 1900s. Initially, Kardecism appealed to

the Portuguese-Brazilian intellectual and upper-class population, but when West African ritual and belief elements of the preexisting Yoruba centered Candomble Orixas pantheon was synthesized with it, the working-class and economically poor African Brazilians became devoted practitioners of the new religion. In addition, with some ritual and belief elements of Kardecism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the spiritual system of Brazil's indigenous people, they created a complex spiritual expression.

Umbanda is mystically centered on a system of beliefs in spirits and spirit transcending as a channel to connect with the spirit world. The supernatural entities are believed to be benevolent, and when summoned they can positively intervene in human affairs. The supernatural entities provide Umbanda followers with practical advice, positive results to personal tribulations, and spiritual reinforcement in their worship places and spiritual spaces. Umbanda rejects any negative spiritual methods to project harm on a human. Although Umbanda was brought forth and developed as a positive and unique spiritual way of life that was synthesized with some established religions, it still suffered a fate of oppression and illegal status in the two largest states of Brazil. A twofold attack emerged from ignorance and fear toward the new religion of Umbanda. The two main carriers of those attacks were a prejudiced police force in the 1930s and the Catholic Church in the 1950s in Rio de Janeiro (as well as in São Paulo).

For example, government police harassed, extorted, and shut down worship houses and

destroyed spiritual artifacts. In addition, the local police imprisoned followers of Umbanda for chanting and drumming in the late evening hours and labeled the Umbanda religion as “black magic” and a “hotbed” of communist sympathizers. The Catholic Church’s attack on the religion of Umbanda was just as vicious as the Rio de Janeiro police force’s, if not more so. The Catholic Church undertook a well-organized campaign to misrepresent, discredit, and undermine primarily African Brazilians from their preaching pulpits and through mass media channels to the point of excommunicating those who displayed a dual religious affiliation.

Despite the aggressive police mandates and intense Catholic religious offensives to eradicate Umbanda from Rio de Janeiro, this was not accomplished due to the deep African spiritual consciousness of thousands of Brazilians, which could not be unearthed and moved from its center. In fact, the physical and religious assaults caused the African-centered form of Umbanda in 1952 to develop the Spiritist Umbanda Federation, whose explicit aim was to provide legal registration, attorney advice, and governmental support to avoid infringement on religious rights. In addition, the Spiritist Umbanda Federation sponsored collective ceremonies, organized spiritual processions on holidays, and taught doctrine and ritual practice for Umbanda. In 1956, devotees of Umbanda established a journal, created the Spirit College of the Southern Cross to enlighten intellectually, formed coalitions to enhance their political interests by sponsoring candidates for positions in the government, and established unity among the Rio de Janeiro Afro-Brazilians and Euro-Brazilians. Although informational, scholarly, and organizational development of Umbanda constrained some of the racial and class tensions, there still remains just beneath the surface of Brazil’s complex human social dynamics and extremely dysfunctional mind-set a strange state of spirit that was borne from the hellish enslavement relationship between Portuguese and West Africans (and indigenous people). The Portuguese plantation owners projected themselves as superior humans and the enslaved plantation West Africans as inferior minds and souls. Currently in Brazil, the polluted water of supremacy and

inferiority runs under its social soil—and in spiritual spaces. The White Umbanda is considered superior because it is associated with Kardecism, and Black Umbanda is deemed inferior because it is connected with traditional African spiritual ritualism, such as Candomble.

Actually, African Brazilians offered to Umbanda a spiritual system that has evolved for thousands of years near and in the ocean water, on the sandy shores, and on the black-brown soil of their ancient ancestors. Elements and the essence of African Brazilians’ spiritual system that was given to Umbanda are the deepest depth of spirituality, passionate devotions, Orisha calling songs, spirit calling drums, call-and-response chants, soul-transcending ceremonies, healing houses, spiritual spaces, sacred festivals, and processions to the water. After sunset on December 31, the devotees of African Umbanda (and Candomble followers) lead and conduct their largest spiritually rich African-centered ritual procession and ceremony on the Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Thousands of devotees, followers, worshippers, and tourists come to the warm sand, near and in the inviting ocean water (the water womb, from whence humans came), to participate in a powerful and uplifting African-centered spiritualized ritual. The powerful Mother and Ocean Orisha, Yemaya, is summoned to protect, bless, and heal the people in the gathering as the old year ends and the New Year begins. The African Umbanda (and Candomble) followers offer to the Orisha Yemaya their best cooked food, strong spirits, delicate perfumes, colorful flowers, burning candles, sincere prayers, praise songs, and spirited polyrhythmic drumming, all as an appeasement and expression of thankfulness, while they are dressed in their best white clothing. The massive ceremony on the warm beach is one of many rituals the devotees of African Umbanda use to maintain the mystical manifestation of a spiritual system that enhances their cultural and sacred bond with their ancestors in the old country, thousands of miles across the enormous Atlantic Ocean, where the first traditional African religions emerged.

Ibo Changa

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UMBILICAL CORD

The umbilical cord is the lifeline between a developing child and its female parent. Many African cultures consider the umbilical cord as an essential part of birth rituals. The umbilical cord's drying up or falling off connotes the full coming into being of a new person. Once an infant comes into the world from the womb, it remains attached to the mother until the umbilical cord is cut, tied, and then cut or detached in some way. The baby is no longer a part of its mother's womb, but is now a part of the family and community into which it is born. The umbilical cord is reflective of continuity because the baby is usually reflective in some way, shape, or form as a continuation of its ancestors, elders, and family group. The umbilical cord connotes collectivity as the child becomes an extension of its immediate and extended family. The umbilical cord's departure or falling off is perceived as symbolic of the actuality of a new family member who is now a part of the family group. African people reinforce their cultural traditions in this trireality via their birth rituals and ceremonies.

Kikuyu, Yansi

In birth ceremonies and rituals, Africans include the umbilical cord, along with the placenta, in various ways. Sometimes both the umbilical cord and placenta are buried before, during, or after a naming

ceremony. In some instances, only the placenta is disposed of through burial. The Kikuyu of East Africa bury the placenta in an uncultivated field because open pastures symbolize, for them, all that is new, fertile, and strong. The Yansi of Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo) throw the placenta's physical remnants into the river as a way of showing that the child belongs to the community.

Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, a baby is named only after the umbilical cord has dropped off. Prior to this time, it is thought that the baby does not yet have an identity of its own. In Sierra Leone, people treat the placenta as a special object. Following birth, the placenta is buried by the child's maternal female elders. A hole is dug below a banana tree by the wife's mother or another female elder at the house of the maternal grandmother. The placenta is placed in a circle, and the end that connected the child to the mother is placed upright. People of Sierra Leone believe that if this end is buried in a downward position, it will cause sterility. The disposal of the placenta indicates that the child has transformed from being alone in the mother's womb and will take its place in the family and community during the naming ceremony.

Africans Born in the United States

The Mende people have a strong connection to Africans born in the United States. Midwives report that the Gullah or Geechee people of South Carolina share with the Mende people of Sierra Leone language, crafts, and rituals. Common beliefs and rituals are documented and still practiced among these two groups of Africans. One of these beliefs concerns the umbilical cord, which is buried (along with the placenta) to remind the child where he was born. Usually a fruit tree is planted to ensure the child that he will never go hungry.

Fang

Among the Fang community of equatorial Africa, the image of the umbilical cord is a symbol of continuity. The Fang claim that the umbilical cord is ever present in Bwiti (a religion practiced in Gabon

and Cameroon). The umbilical cord is represented in the Fang's birth ritual by a braided red and white yarn that is worn around the waist and held in the left hand while one's genealogy is recited. The Fang associate their genealogy with a long line of umbilical cords that attach people to their direct ancestors and great gods in the land of their ancestors.

Shona

Ancestors are not the only part of the family to play a central role in African birth rituals inclusive of the umbilical cord. The Shona people of South Africa acknowledge the significance of the umbilical cord in their naming ceremonies. The elders or grandparents of the family play a central role in carefully disposing of the umbilical cord. The baby's umbilical cord must be given to the child's grandparents. The grandparents bury the umbilical cord in a small clay pot during the child's naming ceremony. The grandparents do this for the firstborn and all of the offspring in the family.

Xhosa

When the Xhosa perform a birth *amasiko* (ritual), the entire family is involved, the living and the departed, the seen and unseen. The baby is welcomed by the elderly females until the *awise inkaba* (when a piece of the umbilical cord falls off). The time prior to the *awise inkaba*, *ifuku*, is noted by the mother's confinement to the location where she gave birth, usually her family home. *Ifuku*, the mother and infant's hidden period, is a time when the community is made aware that the new addition to the family belongs not only to the immediate family group, but also to the whole community.

Ifuku is essential because it cements familial relationships among the Xhosa mother and child and the entire community. Both the females of the immediate family and the females of the neighborhood are afforded the opportunity to *ukufukamisa* (participate in nurturing the mother and infant prior to the umbilical cord falling off). *Umdlezana* (lactating mother) and infant are seen only after the *inkaba* (umbilical cord) has fallen off and been buried in a religious manner by the elder females of the community.

The burial of the *inkaba* cements the attachment of the newborn to its ancestral land. The

site where the *inkaba* is buried is used to refer to one's place of birth, one's ancestral home. The site where the umbilical cord is buried symbolizes the connection among the individual, his or her family group, the land, and the spiritual world. The burial place of an *inkaba* (umbilical cord) is sacred because this is the location where one must *thonga* (go to connect with the ancestors). When the individual experiences life challenges, she or he must *thonga* at the burial site of the *inkaba*.

When *awise inkaba* occurs, a ritual is performed, *imbeleko ukuqatywa*. *Imbeleko ukuqatywa* is a public call to everyone that a specific group has a new family member who needs a welcome to the community. The Xhosa believe that if the processes of *ifuku*, *ukufukamisa*, and *imbeleko ukuqatywa* following *awise inkaba* do not occur, then the individual will suffer spiritual imbalance throughout his or her life until these rituals are performed for spiritual appeasement.

Mossi

The Mossi females of Burkina Faso use *biigas* (wooden dolls) to display the significance of the umbilical cord in their culture. Many of the *biigas* are used as toys that assist in the education of children; however, some are used as symbolic fertility dolls for adult females. Mossi *biigas* are carried with the adult female even when she leaves her father's home to live with her husband. The *biigas* are believed to allow the woman to become pregnant within 1 month of her marriage consummation.

The Mossi adult female will nurture (feed, wash, clothe, carry in public tied to her back in a baby wrapper) her *biiga* on a continuous basis if she has not conceived within a month. When she has conceived, the Mossi adult female will continue to nurture her *biiga*. When her child is born and the umbilical cord is cut, the *biiga* is washed, rubbed with shea butter, and placed on a mat beside the mother; then the infant is placed on a mat beside the mother. The *biiga* takes its last ride on the Mossi adult female's back prior to the infant taking its place on its mother's back for the first time.

Asia Austin Colter

See also Birth; Rituals

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UNDERWORLD

The underworld was known as Tuat or Duat in ancient Africa. It was the residence of the spirits and the abode of souls belonging to the deceased. Africans regarded the Tuat as the place that Ra passed through after he, in the form of the sun, set in the evening sky. The Tuat in the 18th dynasty was personified as Ausar. It was one part of the tripartite division of the cosmos by Africans: Pet (Heaven), Ta (land), and Tuat (Underworld). It was also a place where the unrighteous, those whose souls were heavier than the feather of Maat, could be banished to a terrible fate. However, the Tuat was principally the place where the ancestors enjoyed immortality.

A 19th-dynasty Kemetic text situates the location of Tuat as beyond Earth and Heaven, separated by a range of mountains, which provided an opening for both the sun (Ra) and spirits. Every day Ra would enter the underworld and reenter the world passing through the mountains going and coming. As Ra passed through on his way to the region of sunrise, his light refreshed the strength of souls, making their journeys enjoyable as they secured a place on a divine boat, and when he went into the night, he also brought blessings with him. The underworld is bounded by Manu, the mountain of Sunset, and Bakhau, the mountain of Sunrise. Like Kemet, the Tuat had a celestial river that ran through it. Two main texts describe the journey of souls through the underworld. The book of *Ami Tuat*, which was favored by the nobles, and the *Book of Gates*, favored by the common masses of people, were the two main works on the Underworld.

The book of *Ami Tuat* is divided into sections called *hours*. The oldest copies are found in the tombs of Amenhotep, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep III of Thebes. The deceased sailed in a boat from the mountains of Western Waset until they reached the swamps in the Northeast Delta. In the *Book of Gates*, the Tuat is divided into 12 parts, beginning with the chamber of night and the ending with the antechamber of day. A serpent stands guard at each gate. It was a challenging place full of perils and obstacles for all spirits that entered. It had no illumination save for the many strange creatures that inhabited it. The Tuat contained several sections, each with unique challenges and creatures obstructing the path the souls traveled. African priests at funerals would cast spells and incantations and offer prayers to arm and assist the souls on their journey through the Tuat. According to the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, there was a special domain of Ausar that contained seven halls, each guarded by three gods: the first was the doorkeeper, the second a lookout, and the third an announcer of visitors. Each god carried a knife. Ausar rewarded his true and loyal followers with estate farms or homesteads in his underworld kingdom; moreover, they received everlasting happiness upon Earth and were rewarded with a seat in his Boat of Millions, sailing the heavens for eternity.

The priests had exact knowledge of the various sections of the Tuat, including the names of the creatures and obstacles that stood to prevent souls from completing their journey. Armed with spells, the deceased then could find their way through the Tuat avoiding its many challenges.

Khonsura A. Wilson

See also Afterlife; Death

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V

VAI

Historical linguistic studies have established that in ancient times the Vai-speaking people lived in the northern region of Mande. During those earlier times, the Vai and Kono people probably descended from a common ancestor. Some conjecture that, at some point, the Vai and Kono split. The reasons for that split, however, are not clear. Some suggest it occurred as a result of a search for salt on the part of some members of the group: Those who went in search of salt would have become the Vai people, whereas those who stayed might have constituted the Kono people. Another hypothesis is that the Vai split from the Kono because of migration, trade, and conquest. In any case, the Vai people currently reside on the coasts of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Momoru Doalu Bukere is honored as the inventor of the Vai script. The original script was composed of pictograms, which included spirits, humans, parts of human bodies, animals, plants, and water. Dots were used to convey plurality. This system of writing is similar to the Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) writing system. In his article “The Vai Script,” Klingenheben provides several examples of the original script. One example of a pure ideogram is a withered tree with drooping branches to represent “death,” “to die,” or “to kill.” Messages might be left for villagers by drawing pictures on the bark of trees. For example, to alert absent villagers of enemies in the immediate territory, a picture of a man sitting down was

drawn to indicate a single man, but for a large number of men, several dots were placed beside this figure. The script evolved to include alphabets, and as late as 1975, Goody, Cole, and Scribner reported that records regarding religious affairs were written in the local Vai script and language.

Although Islam is the official religion, many traditional beliefs continue nonetheless to be followed. The name of the Creator God in Vai is *Kanim’ba* or *Kam’ba*, which means “celestial space,” or *Kan’ba*, which means “big space.” *Kanim’ba* is the creator of all things and is the controller of Earth and everything in it. God is manifested through spirits and nature.

The Vai perform traditional ceremonies for the Dead, which include the practice of leaving clothing and food near the grave of the deceased. Ancestors play a critical role in African life in general; therefore, many Vai believe that the spirits of ancestors can enter into animate or inanimate beings. Magic is practiced by many Vai people. Magic can be used for good or evil purposes, and it can have an impact on the individual, the family, or the society as a whole.

The Vai people maintain and transmit their religious traditions to the younger members of the group through stringent initiation processes.

The traditional school for Vai boys is Polo or Póró society. In the Vai language, the boys’ institution is called *béli*, and one who has been inducted into it is known as a *béli kàì*, “initiated man.” Sessions are held in a special section of the forest called *béli filà*. The society is highly structured: A *dà zà*, for example, is the leader who

stands at the mouth or head of the béli filà. Other officials take on various responsibilities in the educational process.

As part of the initiation process, young boys are educated in all aspects of Vai life and culture in the béli filà. They receive a thorough education, which includes, but is not limited to, the names of all the plants and animals around them and the ability to identify diseases, as well as the knowledge of the plants that could cause or cure those diseases. They are also made aware of the use of plants for the purpose of witchcraft; they know about the potential danger associated with certain animals and the need to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with an animal. The boys can also recognize and name all the big trees; they can identify their most appropriate use, for example, for fire or for building canoes and homes.

Sàndì is the prestigious secret society for girls. Bòndò refers to the buildings and campus while Sàndì is the society. Girls spend a maximum of 1 year learning the role of women. Like the boys, the young girls receive a thorough training because they are educated in the political, social, religious, philosophical, educational, and artistic aspects of the culture of their people. Furthermore, as reported by some scholars, initiation is quite widespread among the women of the Mende, Susu, Vai, Temne, Sherboro, Gola, Bassa, and Kpelle peoples.

On completion of the initiation into Póró and Sàndì societies, boys and girls are considered adults capable of participating in the affairs of the community. Elaborate religious ceremonies are performed at the culmination of the process to welcome the new initiates back into their community.

Willie Cannon-Brown

See also Initiation; Poro Society; Societies of Secrets

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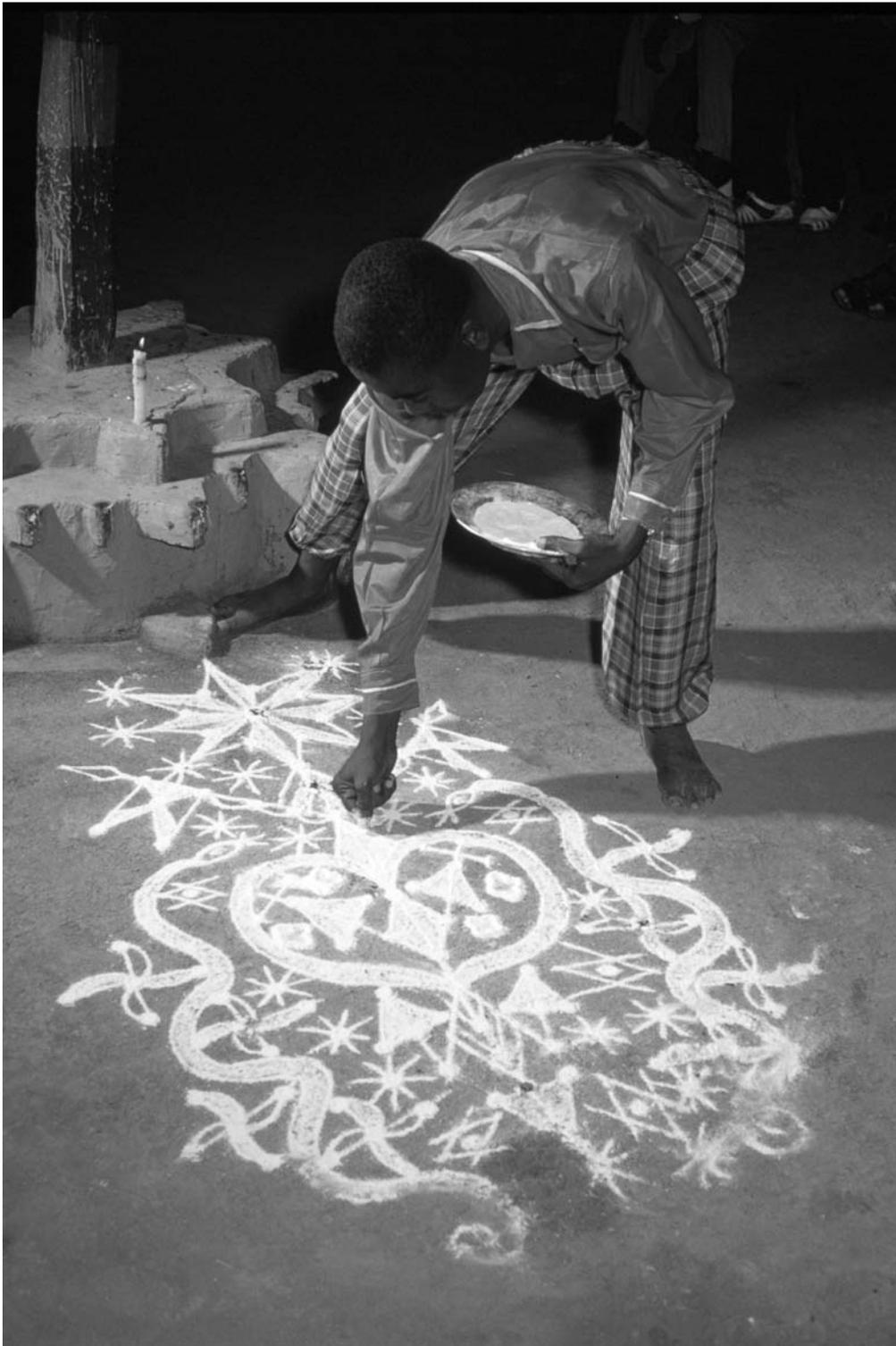
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VÈVÈ

Vèvè are the geometrical drawings that represent the lwa, that is, the Haitian deities of Vodou. Each lwa has its own emblem, and vèvè are therefore numerous and varied, yet somewhat predictable: The central elements are a heart for Ezili Freda, the lwa of femininity and love; two snakes, for the cosmic snakes, Danbala-Wedo and his wife Aida-Wedo; a boat for Agwe, the lwa of the sea; a cutlass (sabre) for Ogu, the lwa of war; a cross for Papa Legba, the guardian of crossroads, and so on. Vèvè can be quite elaborate or simple. They are drawn on the (Earth) floor of the peristyle (Vodou temple) using cornmeal or ashes, and their realization, usually by a Houngan (Vodou priest) or Mambo (Vodou priestess), requires a great deal of expertise and skills. Vèvè are central to Vodou rituals because they are meant to compel the descending or ascending of the spiritual energy associated with a particular lwa. Quite consistently, vèvè are traced near the potomitan, that is, the central pillar of the peristyle, the magical axis through which the lwa are believed to come into the world of the living. In fact, vèvè are a material representation of the lwa and are considered magic points. It is for this reason that food offerings and animals sacrificed to a particular lwa are placed on the lwa's vèvè. It is not uncommon either for the person who is drawing the vèvè to be mounted by the lwa while drawing. When a Vodou service is done for the



A Vodou priest draws a ritual vèvè motif with cornmeal on the ground in Haiti.

Source: National Geographic/Getty Images.

feeding of several lwa at the same time, the vèvè drawn will include the ritual emblems of all the lwa to be involved in the ritual. As one may expect, the final vèvè may be quite complex and cover a large area of the peristyle. At the beginning of a Vodou ceremony, vèvè will be consecrated with the sprinkling of dried foodstuffs, a libation (done three times) of rum, water, or some other appropriate drink, and the lighting of a white candle.

The drawing of vèvè in Haiti is a tradition of African origin. The word *vèvè* derives from the ancient Fon word for palm oil. The latter was indeed used to draw on the ground certain geometrical figures, such as rectangles and squares in Dahomey, known today as Benin. The practice of drawing ritual emblems on the ground, however, is attested not only in West Africa, but also in Central Africa, and the practice of drawing vèvè in Haiti may owe its origin to a West and Central African cultural convergence. Some scholars have also pointed to the existence of a similar practice among the Taino and Arawak people with whom the Africans came in contact in Haiti.

Ama Mazama

See also Lwa; Rituals; Vodou in Haiti

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VILOKAN

Vilokan designates the mythological abode of the Vodou spirits (lwás). An African-derived religion, Vodou was brought to Haiti during the colonization period (1492–1804) and has maintained many West African religious traditions; among

them are those of Benin (formerly Dahomey), Kongo, Nigeria, and Guinea. Vodouists believe that Vilokan is in Africa, and they conceive of it as a city in Ginen (or Guinea) on an island below the sea.

Vilokan features prominently in Vodou's worldview and ritual observances. Vodou's mythology conceives of the cosmos as a sphere made of two inverted halves of a gourd whose edges match perfectly. Inside this sphere are two mutually perpendicular and intersecting planes that, perceived in a cross-section of the sphere, represent the arms of a cross. The plane along which the two halves of the sphere are conjoined constitutes the horizon. The perpendicular line of the cross that transects the horizontal plane forms the second arm of the cross and joins the top to the bottom of the sphere. Both planes provide the framework and supporting axes of the cosmic sphere. Moreover, Haitian and Beninese mythologies conceive of the Earth as floating on water and stretching flat along the plane of the horizon in the center of the sphere. Far beneath the Earth is Vilokan. The vertical arm of the cross that conjoins the top to the bottom of the sphere is said to pierce through the center of the Earth to plunge into the waters of the abyss to the subterranean city of Vilokan.

This vertical arm serves as the point of contact between Vilokan and the world of the living because during a ceremony, the priest (*houngan*) or his assistant (*lapias*) invokes a lwa by drawing its geometric cabbala-like tracing (*vèvè*). As the community intones the appropriate song, the officiant traces the vèvè on the floor of the temple by sifting cornflower between his thumb and index fingers. Vodouists believe that these auditory and visual media summon a lwa to the temple, and, at the appropriate moment during a ritual, the lwa leaves Vilokan and climbs on the vertical arm of the cross to manifest itself in the body of a devotee in spirit possession. Spirit possession is an altered state of consciousness, in which a spirit is believed to mount a devotee like a horse. Through this medium, a lwa is given a voice with which to impart its sacred wisdom to a community and conversely ears to listen to its concerns. Spirit possession, then, is a nonmaterial attainment by which a believer experiences a direct engagement with the spirit world.

At the outset of Vodou ceremonies in the temple (*ounfò*), devotees make contact with the lwas in Vilokan by invoking Legba (or Elegua) through the medium of the priest or his assistant. Vodouists believe that Legba holds the keys that open the gates through which the lwas pass to “visit” their devotees. Moreover, the lwas are said not to speak the same languages as their devotees; Legba is the polyglot who translates the supplications of the devotees to the respective lwas in Vilokan. In short, he is the mediator between Vilokan and the profane world.

Moreover, Vodouists believe that Vilokan is the inverse of the profane world. This symbolism makes it clear that Vilokan is not a vague and mystical place, but a cosmic mirror that reflects the images of the profane world, but reverses them. This mirrored image is symbolized by a number of ritual observances. First, the lwas are referred to as reflecting the deportment and personalities of the living by bearing names like Loko-Miwa (“Loko in the Mirror”) or Agasou-Do-Miwa (“Agasou in the Back of the Mirror”). Second, when a possessed devotee greets another, the two bow while facing each other, reflecting the inverse movement of the other, and then they perform a number of clockwise and counterclockwise turns to represent the mirrored sites of the profane world. Third, the community performs the ritual dances by revolving in a counterclockwise motion around a central pole (*potomitan*) in the temple. This pole is analogous to the vertical arm of the cosmic cross described earlier.

The principle of inversion is fundamental to Vodou’s worldview, theology, and rituals. The relationship between Vilokan and the profane world takes the cosmographic image of a cross that divides the four quarters of cosmic space, symbolizes the fact of communication between Vilokan and the profane world, and expresses the nature of the difference between these worlds’ modes of reality.

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See also Afterlife; Ancestors; Lwa; Vodou in Haiti

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VODOU AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

The events of 1791 to 1804 on the western third of the island of Hispaniola have been demarcated as the Haitian Revolution, the most dramatic revolutionary transformation to occur in modern history. Fundamental to understanding this historical transformation of a slave-based plantation colony, dedicated solely to the profit of European capitalist investors, is the role of Vodou. Vodou, the religion that Africans brought with them to the French colonial territory of Saint Domingue, became the driving force of resistance in the daily lives of the enslaved Africans. Indeed, Vodou

served to bind more closely the various groups of Africans who shared a common plantation experience, eventually leading to the development of a collective consciousness. Vodou was the vital spiritual force that provided respite from the daily torture and degradation of slavery because it allowed Africans on the territory of Saint Domingue, despite the cruel and methodical efforts of the colonists, to see themselves as independent beings. It can be said that, above all, Vodou allowed the Africans a sense of human dignity *and* the capacity to survive. As the great Haitian intellectual Dr. Jean Price-Mars once wrote, “1804 est issu du Vodou,” that is, “1804 derives from Vodou.”

From the beginning, Vodou had figured prominently in African resistance schemes on the colony of Saint Domingue, and the French understood quite well because they greatly feared the revolutionary potential of Vodou. Thus, unsurprisingly, from the start of the French occupation of Saint Domingue, Vodou was forbidden as the colonists tried, in vain, to crush it. Not only was Vodou forbidden among the Africans, but also the popular dance called the *calendas*, which often served as a cover for Vodou gatherings, was prohibited. Despite these restrictions, however, Vodou survived and in fact thrived under slavery for more than 200 years. On the eve of the revolution, it had gained considerable strength and was a more formidable force than in the early days of the colony.

Vodou's role in the making of Haiti is indistinguishably linked to marronage, the most consistent form of resistance to slavery on the territory of Saint Domingue. Because Vodou was outlawed in the colony, its proliferation and practice was often maintained in the context of marronage. As a consequence, the maroon leaders, but for a few exceptions, were almost always Vodou priests or, at least, Vodou devotees. Indeed, the most illustrious and extraordinary of these maroon leaders was François Makandal. Makandal was born in Guinea to a distinguished family that undertook his education at an early age. It is said that he was raised in the Muslim faith and had an exceptional command of Arabic. He was gifted in the leisure arts of music, painting, and sculpture. In addition, despite his young age, he had acquired considerable knowledge of tropical herbal medicine. He

was eventually captured at the age of 12 as a prisoner of war and was sold into slavery. While in Saint Domingue, he escaped from his master and began a notorious career, spanning nearly 18 years, as a prerevolutionary maroon leader. During those 18 years, he established an extensive network of followers who resisted slavery at almost every point on the colony. His primary tool of resistance was poison. Makandal, although not an initiated Vodou priest, adhered to African religious thought and practices, and he was able to extract the most devotional allegiance from his followers. He plotted to poison the water of all the houses in the capital, le Cap, to kill the whites and ignite a revolution that would overthrow the white oppressive regime in Saint Domingue. Ultimately, and unfortunately, he was betrayed and captured in November 1757.

After his capture and death, many blacks believed Makandal was still alive and that he would return to fulfill his prophecies of liberating the blacks. Because of his legendary status, his name became synonymous with fetishism, poisoning, sorcery, and African dances. Indeed, *houngans*, or Vodou priests, were often referred to as *makandals*. Among other maroon leaders or enslaved Africans who resisted slavery and who are also closely associated with Vodou were Jean-François and Georges Biassou Romaine, who operated in the west of the colony; Hyacinthe, who distinguished himself at the battle of Croix des Bouquets; and Jérôme and Télémaque in the north. In the end, Makandal's grand poisoning plan was not an isolated affair. Other black leaders, assisted by Vodou, created an atmosphere of total panic as planters were periodically plagued by the ravages of poison on their plantations (e.g., Médor—a domestic on the Lavaud plantation). Many leaders were seen to possess supernatural powers and convinced their followers that they had nothing to fear from cannons. Vodou provided the Africans with amulets and talismans meant to protect the holder against any harm while in battle. Moreover, Vodou, poisoning, and rampant attacks on plantations created an atmosphere of terror among the white colonists, which eventually resulted in fostering a sense of vulnerability, insecurity, and even paranoia among the white population.

It is within this atmosphere of terror that emerged Boukman Dutty, the man who was to ignite the flame that would formally announce the start of the Haitian Revolution. Boukman, a Vodou priest, known as “Zamba” Boukman to his devotees, exercised considerable influence over his followers. During the memorable rainy thunder-filled night of August 14, 1791, he and Cécile Fatiman, a Mambo (i.e., a Vodou priestess), led a Vodou ceremony in a thickly wooded area known as Bois-Caïman, located in the northern part of the island. Cécile Fatiman is believed to have invoked the African deities, and Boukman rose to deliver a passionate call to arms, which ended each refrain with the words: *Koute lalibete nan tout kè nou!* (“Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us”). In his oration, Boukman called on the enslaved Africans to rely on the forces of the Supreme Being found in all African religions, as opposed to the “false” Christian god of the whites. This call was nothing less than a call for blacks in Saint Domingue to draw from within themselves and from their own beliefs the strength to fight victoriously for their freedom.

With the Bois-Caïman ceremony—a Vodou ceremony at that!—inaugurating the Haitian Revolution, it is interesting to note that the first three black rulers of Haitian independence were against Vodou or, at the least, held Vodou at arm’s length. Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe had to drive their people hard to recapture the former prosperity of the territory under French Colonial rule; they knew that resentment would be an inevitable consequence of their actions and, as such, feared (like the whites before them) the nightly Vodou gatherings. Toussaint is said to have been the strictest of the three because during his reign as nominal governor general, he forbade all dances and nocturnal assemblage. Dessalines and Christophe, in contrast, only banned Vodou dances while permitting the purely social dances. Dessalines, however, was more suspicious of Vodou. He feared that his enemies might use *makandal* against him. As a result, whenever his police brigade reported meetings of Vodou worshippers, he had the offenders shot if they could be caught.

These founding fathers’ public opposition to Vodou, however, should not be confused with their private adoration of Vodou and their devotion to

the African deities. Christophe, for example, showed a great reverence to Roman Catholicism, but rumor suggested that he had greater faith in Vodou and the African gods. In the case of Toussaint, while enslaved, he had practiced the art of healing with herbs; although “herb doctors” are neither houngan nor bôkò (sorcerers), they made use of magical prescriptions. Toussaint knew well the power of Vodou and respected it. He was known to say often that if he did not speak through his nose, it was only because the Vodou (i.e., the Lwa, the Vodou divinities) had cast an evil spell on him. In the case of Dessalines, who had labored in the field while enslaved, he was better acquainted with Vodou than Toussaint, who had been a coachman. Dessalines is said to have frequently consulted Vodou priests and was a servant of the *Lwa*, with particular affinity to Ogu, the African god of iron and war. Unsurprisingly, Dessalines is indeed the only hero of the struggle for independence to have been deified in the Vodou religion.

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See also Bois Caïman; Boukman; Fatiman, Cécile; Makandal; Resistance to Enslavement; Vodou in Haiti

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VODOU IN BENIN

The Republic of Benin, West Africa, is the home of the Vodun religion. In their overwhelming majority, the Beninese people, despite past and current assaults against Vodun, whether overtly or covertly, have remained steadfast in their indefectible support of their ancestral Vodun religion. Benin and Vodun make a natural combination. In fact, Vodun and the Republic of Benin (formerly

Republic of Dahomey) are inseparable. *Vodun* is a word in the Fongbe language, one of the languages spoken in Benin. The word *Vodun* means “spirit” and is used to denote both African deities (*Vodun lèbi*: all deities, all divinities or gods) and the worship of the deities (*Vodun sin sèn*: the belief in and worship of Vodun). The meaning of Vodun is beyond the various representations or emblems that we may see because Vodun is, in fact, the invisible spiritual force that inhabits those representations. In view of this, the Fonnu (the Fon people) call Vodun by many names. Vodun is referred to as *Nubudo* (a principle that cannot be explicated, a force whose point of departure is not perceptible). Another name for Vodun is *Nugongon* (a concept whose meaning is deep). The Fon people also call Vodun by the name *Nujiwu* (a thrilling principle that must be revered, a spiritual force that is beyond anyone’s genie). *Yèhwé* or *Vodun Yèhwé* (*Yè*: “silhouette, spirit”; and *hwé*: “sun, purity”; hence, pure spirituality) is another name by which the Fonnu call Vodun. Finally, the Fon people call Vodun by yet another name, *Hun* (“blood, source of life”). As a matter of fact, the Vodunsi (the Vodun adept or initiated follower of the Vodun religion) is also called *Yèhwési* or *Hunsi*. Likewise, *Hunkpamè* or *Hunxwé* is another appellation for the Vodun convent or *Vodunkpamè*.

Selected Vodun in Benin and Their Attributes

The Vodun pantheon is vast. It includes many deities, divinities, or gods whose attributions, roles, and importance in society vary considerably. The world was created by Nana Buluku, an androgynous supreme God. From Nana Buluku came the twin deities, Mawu and Lisa. Mawu-Lisa (also spelled *Mahu-Lisa*, *Mahou-Lissa*, or *Mahu-Lissa*) is therefore the first on the list of primary deities in the Dahomean Vodun pantheon. Mawu and Lisa (also called *Segbo-Lisa*) are the creator couple of Heaven and Earth. Mawu, the female principle, corresponds to the moon and is associated with night, fertility, motherhood, gentleness, forgiveness, rest, and joy, all characteristics that one sees in women. Lisa, the male principle, corresponds to the sun and is associated with day, heat, work, power, war, strength, toughness, and

intransigence, all things that characterize men. Hence, in the Fon Cosmology, Mawu and Lisa are the sky gods who absorb the nature of the Supreme Being or God Almighty. In its role as the patron saint of the universe and all things and creatures in it, Mawu-Lisa applied a systematic division of labor by delegating specific roles and duties to its children, that is, all Vodun, who serve as intermediaries or emissaries between human beings and Mawu-Lisa. Some of Mawu-Lisa’s children and their respective roles and attributions are as follows:

- *Sakpata*: the oldest child of *Mawu* to whom the Earth was entrusted. He is the god of smallpox and the Vodun of wealth or prosperity. He is also known as *Ayivodun* (god of the Earth) or *Ainon* (proprietor of the Earth).
- *Heviosso* or *Hebiosso* (also spelled *Xèviosso* or *Xèbiosso*) is also known as *Jivodun* (*Ji*, sky; hence, Vodun of the sky): This is Mawu’s second child, who is in charge of the sky, thunder, or lightning, and rain. He is the Vodun of Justice who punishes criminals and evil doers as well as anything, trees and animals, considered harmful, by striking them down, especially during rain. *Xèviosso*’s cult is one of the most important cults in the western part of the Bight of Benin. This Vodun is represented by lightning rounds (or ammunitions) called *sokpin* and a thunder axe known as *sossiovi*.
- *Xu* or *Tovodun*, also known as *Agbé* or *Avlékété*: the god of the Ocean.
- *Gu* or *Ogu*: the god of iron. *Gu* is considered the Vodun of blacksmiths, warriors, and hunters. This Vodun does not condone evil doing insofar as he kills accomplices of wrongdoing when he is appealed to. A famous phrase among the Fon of Dahomey is “*Yé da Gu do me*” (to call on *Gu* to deal with someone or to send *Gu* onto somebody). *Gu* is represented by pieces of iron.
- *Aguè*: the fifth child of *Mawu*, who is responsible for overseeing agriculture and the forests. This is the Vodun that reigns over birds and all animals.
- *Jo*: the god of invisibility, the Vodun of the air.
- *Lègba*: *Mawu*’s youngest son, who barely received any endowments because all had been divided up among his older siblings. This accounts for his jealous inclination. He is, however, the guardian

god considered as the town or country protector, but only on condition that offerings are regularly given to him. In other words, if not cared for, this god can be a destroyer, exemplifying thus the good and evil. *Lègba* is a professional agitator, provoker, aggressor, or instigator who is somehow against the deeds of Providence. He is otherwise called a trickster god. To avoid falling into his trap or getting into his troubles, people regularly give offerings to him. Many images of *Lègba*, in the form of anthropomorphic figures, are found throughout a village. These figures are erected in terra cotta or clay bearing huge wooden phalluses and, in most cases, with horns on their heads.

- *Dan Ayido Huèdo* or *Dan Aidowèdo*: the Vodun of the rainbow, fertility, and wealth. He serves as the link between Heaven and Earth.
- *Dan* or *Dangbé*: the serpent god, whose ancestors are the pythons. It is famous among the *Xwéda* of *Gléxwé* or Ouidah, a historical city in Benin that houses the most sacred python temple.
- *Tohossou*: the Vodun of the waters and of monsters. He dwells in lagoons, rivers, and wells.
- *Hobo Vodun* or *Hobovi*: the god of the twins who are worshiped as well.
- *Kinnessi* or *Kinlinsi*: the goddess of witchcraft. Her home is believed to be Abomey-Calavi in the Republic of Benin.
- *Atinnèvodun* or *Lokovodun*: the god of the trees.
- *Zo Vodun*: the god of fire.

The Vodun Adepts or the Vodunsi

In Fongbe, a Vodunsi is a male or female servant of Vodun, an adept or initiated follower of the Vodun religion. Pronounced another way in Fongbe, *Vodunsi* is translated as a person who belongs to and is under full protection and guardianship of the Vodun. Generally, one is chosen by a Vodun as early as at birth or at any stage of human development—childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. The Vodun elect finds out that he or she is chosen by the Vodun through close observation of events marking his or her life and subsequently by consulting the *Fá*, the system of divination through the *Bokonon*, veritable interpreter of the *Fá*.

To become a Vodunsi proper, one must receive the initiation during an internship that lasts up to

3 years in the Vodun convent known as *Vodun-xwé* (“home of Vodun”), *Hun-xwé* (“esoteric or blood-pact home”), *Hun-kpamê* (“blood-pact enclosure”), or *Vodun-kpamê* (“Vodun enclosure”). Upon entering the *Hun-xwé*, the new member is possessed by the Vodun and she or he becomes Vodunsi ipso facto, more precisely, *Hundéva* (“he or she who has entered the convent”). However, the initiation is a long process that has several stages. During the first 3 months, the newcomer is *Hundoté* (“a new member awaiting initiation”) or *Kajèkaji* (“one more gourd having joined the existing gourds”), that is, a neophyte. In the convent, the neophyte is trained under the supervision of the *Xwégan* (“Head of the house”) and the *Kangan* (“the rope master” or “he who enforces discipline”).

The Hunxwé is a stern training center where the elect is initiated into the immutable rites and principles of the Vodun to whom he or she is consecrated for his or her whole life. Before the neophyte is introduced to anything in the convent, he or she must take a vow of loyalty and absolute secrecy. The guiding principle of the Hunxwé is a saying, “The reason we have two ears, two eyes, and only one mouth is that we may hear more and see more, but speak less.” The curriculum is all-encompassing, and it includes courses on the Vodun code of conduct, its history, rites, taboos or proscriptions, the Vodun language, ululation, cultural chants, Vodun songs and dances, walk on all fours, litanies, and incantations, as well as the healing properties of herbs. The Vodunsi is permanently marked and tattooed all over. Tattooing is both a religious symbol and an adornment for the Vodunsi, especially during Vodun festivals.

During the internship in the convent, the Vodunsi is taught several income-generating activities such as basket weaving, pottery, raffia matting, hat making, tie-dyeing, the rope-making trade, fowl raising, and sculpture, which are sold in local markets by the convent servants. The Vodunsi has a hectic daily schedule under strict supervision of Vodunsi trainers who report to the *Hunnon* (also called *Hounnongan*, *Houngan*, or *Hungbonon*), the paramount Vodun priest. The training is so intensive that the Vodunsi barely has break time. Laziness is considered a scourge because one rule in the Vodun convent is that *Kajèkaji mon no do hwemê mlon*—“the neophyte does not take afternoon naps.”

Upon satisfactory completion of the initiation rites, the consecration and intensive training in the convent, the Vodunsi returns to the world of Kóssi (“laypeople or noninitiates”). Among other important recommendations the Hunnon imposes on the Vodunsi are the cultivation of brotherhood and sisterhood with other Vodunsi and deep love and respect for the Vodun. As a chosen servant of the Vodun, the Vodunsi commands respect in traditional society and is sometimes feared as well. Some grave offenses, such as adultery committed by the Vodunsi or the nonrespect of the solemn vow taken upon arrival in the convent, can lead to excommunication. The Vodunsi may indeed be either a male or female adept, yet only women are said to commit adultery.

Vodun in Benin Today

Although Vodun has never lost its significance per se in the Republic of Benin, when former president Nicéphore Dieudonné Soglo took office in 1991, he did more than anyone in the country to reassert the value of the African traditional religion and boost its image in the country. He transformed the Vodun religion into a fully recognized national religion on an equal footing with the two major foreign religions also practiced in the country—Christianity and Islam. Vodun has regained its vitality, and derogatory words such as *animism* and *Satanism* used to refer to the religion have given way to the proper term, *Vodun*.

Upon President Soglo’s initiative and vision, a 5-day symposium of various leaders of the Vodun religion was held in Cotonou, from May 28 through June 1, 1991. The purpose of the symposium was to restore the significance of the Vodun and establish a legal recognition for this traditional religion, which is so significant in the everyday lives of Beninese people and other people of African ancestry worldwide. Following this historic symposium, a great International Vodun Festival was organized and held in 1993 in Benin. This festival, known as “Ouidah 92,” brought together people of African ancestry from all over the world, particularly from the continent of Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean Islands. Subsequently, January 10 was officially made a national Vodun holiday, which has been observed in the country every year since 1993.

His Majesty Hounnongan Houngouè Towanou Guédéhoungoué II of the village Doutou, Benin, is the current president of the International African Traditional Religion Community and world co-president of the Religion for Peace Network. Similarly, His Majesty Daagbo Hounon Tomadjlèhoukpon II Mètogbokandji of the city of Ouidah, Benin, is the current world paramount chief of the vodun religion. Consequently, even with the rampant proliferation of evangelical churches, Christian denominations, and other sects, including the Islamic faith in the Republic of Benin today, the Vodun religion remains strong and has a bright future still ahead. These foreign religions in the country cannot help starting a genuine dialogue with Vodun dignitaries and accept to cohabit in a country that, in fact, encourages religious cohabitation, unity, and equality. Vodun permeates every aspect of Beninese life, including politics, to the point that some critics have observed that in the Republic of Benin, the population is composed of 60% Christians, 40% Muslims, and 100% Vodun followers. This was to demonstrate that, although some Beninese may want to demean the Vodun religion under the guise that they are Christians or Muslims, Vodun is like all Beninese people’s culture shadow. The faster these people try to run away from Vodun, the faster it follows them.

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See also Initiation; Vodunsi

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VODOU IN HAITI

Vodou designates the indigenous religion of Haiti. Emerging out of the contact between enslaved Africans and white planters during Haiti's colonial period (1492–1804), Vodou is fundamentally an African religion, which, in Haiti, given the peculiar historical circumstances, combined in its theology some Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

Popular Western novels, films, and spurious accounts by tourists have depicted Vodou (and its derivative *Voodoo*) incorrectly as sorcery, ritual zombification, and ritual cannibalism. Such depictions are derisive or even racist because a close examination of the religion's rituals or practices fails to find any evidence that would give credence to these negative views. The word *Vodou* derives from the Beninese (or Dahomean) Fon words *vodu* or *vodun*, meaning “deity” or “spirit.” The word is used in Benin and Haiti to designate a community of divine and ancestral spirits who are identified with the natural forces of the universe and who participate actively in the lives of their devotees. Like other world religions, Vodou is a system of beliefs that instills in its devotees a need for solace and self-reflection; it is an expression of a people's longing for meaning and purpose. Vodou provides an explanation for death, which is envisaged as a spiritual transformation, a portal to the sacred world beyond this life in which morally upright individuals continue to influence their progeny. By extension, Vodou includes a whole assortment of artistic and cultural expressions and the belief in the efficacy of an elaborate system of traditional healing practices.

The word *belief* in Haiti and in Benin has a different connotation than it does to Westerners. *Belief* in English suggests a cerebral process by which one may or may not choose to identify with a system of thought or, by extension, with a community that affirms such a system. To Vodouists, spiritual reality cannot be the subject of casual investigation by skeptics. In the Vodouists' worldview, skepticism is the outcome of an improper or otherwise faulty apprehension of what to them is patently apparent—that the world harbors powerful and mysterious entities that are the cause of all events and ensure the mechanical operation of the

cosmos. Asked if they believe in the spirits, Vodouists think of themselves as “obeying the mysteries of the world” or “serving the *lwas*.” Their statements reflect their outlook on the nature of belief in general. In West African and Haitian cultures, religion is a way of life, and devotees do not merely think of their religion in abstract, but in practical terms. The spirits are the fount of wisdom and the source of all things, and the devotees conceive of themselves as affecting the will of these spirits by the living of life.

Hence, Vodou is an African-derived religion that, through a complex system of myths and rituals, relates the life of each devotee to incommensurable spirits called *lwas* (pronounced *loas*). These *lwas* are thought to direct the affairs of humankind by manifesting themselves in the bodies of their devotees in spirit possessions—altered states of consciousness during which the devotees' souls are believed to be temporarily displaced by that of a spirit. During spirit possession, a spirit is believed to mount the body of the devotee like a horse, and it is through this medium that it is given voice with which to impart its wisdom to the members of the community and, conversely, ears to listen to its devotees' concerns. In Vodou, spirit possession is considered a quintessential nonmaterial achievement, during which a believer experiences a direct engagement with the spirit world; it is also a public witness of one's personal commitment to a spirit and a belief in its authority over the community.

History

The theology of Vodou was transplanted from Africa onto the sugar plantations of Saint Domingue, as Haiti was called during the colonial period. Few details survive about the communities of enslaved Africans during that period, and no one is sure how many Africans were brought to the colony, but general estimates note that there may have been nearly 1 million. A significant number of them were brought to Haiti from Dahomey (modern-day Benin), but others came from Nigeria, Guinea, Kongo, and Angola, as well as many other parts of West Africa. Despite the hardships of enslaved labor, they managed to preserve whole enclaves of West African religious traditions. For instance, the myths

describing the personae of the spirits and many of the rituals performed in their honor continued to bear the mark of Africa. In time, however, many of these were transformed to shape Haitian cultural and religious life.

One such transformation is the assimilation of Roman Catholic traditions in Vodou's largely African theology. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the French colonial invaders regarded Vodou as an aberration and worked unremittingly to extricate it from colonial life. Zealous French Catholic missionaries went to Saint Domingue to convert the enslaved Africans to Christianity in an effort to eradicate African religious practices from the colony. To achieve this goal, they enacted a series of edicts that regulated the religious lives of the inhabitants of all the French colonies, including Louisiana. One such edict, the *Code Noir* of 1685, made it illegal for the enslaved Africans to practice their religion and, under stiff penalties, ordered all French colonists to have the Africans living on their plantations converted to and baptized in the Catholic faith within 8 days upon their arrival in the colony. The Police Rulings of 1757 and 1777 controlled the enslaved Africans' resort to items that might have had ritualistic use. These rulings also prohibited the enslaved Africans from congregating in remote places, especially in the absence of a Catholic priest or a civil servant.

The severity of these laws drove African religious practices underground. To prevent the officious interference of the white owners in their religious rituals, the Africans learned to mask their African traditions with the veneer of the symbols and rituals of the Catholic church. In effect, they used the Catholic symbols as "white masks over black faces," veils behind which they could conceal their African religious practices. In time, they succeeded in realizing a religious amalgam in which they not only learned to integrate the Christian symbols in their African rituals, but achieved a system of correspondences between the African spirits and the Catholic saints. These correspondences consisted of a system of reinterpretation by which particular symbols associated with the saints in Christian hagiology were made to correspond to (or were transfigured into) similar symbols about the spirits in African mythology. Thus, for

instance, Vodou's Ezili, the beautiful Dahomean water spirit, "becomes" the Virgin Mary because of her beauty and because of her apparitions in Catholic popular belief near bodies of water. Likewise, Benin's python spirit Damballa "becomes" St. Patrick because of the triumph of Patrick over the snakes of Ireland in Catholic hagiology. Similarly, Legba or Elegua, the guardian of the world's destiny, the one who holds the keys to the doors of the underworld, "becomes" St. Peter, and so forth.

The encroachment of Vodou practices on Catholicism has caused the Catholic church to campaign vehemently against "fetishism" throughout Haitian history. In 1896, 1913, and again in 1941, the Catholic church, with the assistance of the local police, conducted what it called the "Anti-Superstitious Campaigns," in which it sought and burned Vodou temples and ritual paraphernalia throughout the country. Also, a catechism that was written by the Catholic clergy in a question-answer format that children and adults were made to memorize circulated widely throughout the country. It admonished Vodou by encouraging Haitians to renounce their "superstitious" practices, to renew their vows with the Christian church, to abandon their services to the Vodou lwas, and to promise to raise their children according to the teachings of the Catholic church. More often than not, suppression destroys what is benevolent and gentle, but also inspires violent reactions from those whose religious practices are endangered. The threat of pending violence in the country made Haitian president Elie Lescot order that the campaign be stopped in 1942. These attempts to eradicate Vodou have had little effect on Haitian culture because many Haitians today practice the two religions simultaneously and maintain their allegiance to both. Indeed, they see little contradiction between the two religions.

Recent political developments in Haiti have brought changes in the relationships of the two faiths. Perhaps the most prominent of these is an article in Haiti's 1987 Constitution that guarantees religious liberty to all citizens and accords Vodou a status equal to that given to other faiths. This new provision has allowed a new sense of openness in the devotees' religious expressions

about both faiths and has accorded to Vodouists a religious freedom and legitimacy that heretofore they have not been able to experience.

Theology

According to Vodou theology, the lwas are grouped into several pantheons or families called *nanshons*. Vodouists believe that there are 17 nanshons, although they know only a few of these: the Rada (or Arada), the Kongo, the Ibo, the Petwo, and the Nago (or Anago). Each nanshon has its own characteristic ethos and demands of its devotees certain corresponding attitudes. The Wangol and Nago are the least known in Haiti and derive from the region of Angola. Ibo refers to Nigeria and Benin, whereas Rada derives from Arada, the name of an important kingdom in ancient Dahomey during the Haitian colonial period. Similarly, the Kongo lwas originated in the Bakongo region of West Africa, which was the place of origin of thousands of Africans sent to Saint Domingue. Petwo reportedly derives from a legendary character Dom Pedro, a leader of a rebellion during the latter half of the 18th century. Some lwas bear African-derived names such as Ezili Freda Dahomey and Damballah Wèdo, where both terms, *Freda* and *Wèdo*, derive from the name of the kingdom of Whydah in Dahomey. The lwas are said to reside in the mythological city of Vilokan in Dahomey or, more precisely, on a mythological island far below the sea that few privileged Haitians are said to have visited, having been taken there by the lwas. Some nanshons are known for their healing power and manifest their aptitudes through various medicinal plants or other ritual paraphernalia prescribed to believers by folk healers. Others are cosmic spirits that ensure the mechanical operation of the universe. Hence, the principle that guides the particular choice of the nanshon to which a lwa belongs is based on his or her mythological persona, as envisaged by the devotees.

Because Vodou teaches that a lwa can have several functions related to his or her persona, each lwa can belong to several nanshons simultaneously and bear a different name for each. In spirit possession, for instance, the devotees' behavior reflects the lwas' different personae according to

their respective nanshons, sometimes consecutively or simultaneously. Thus, they can present themselves as creative and destructive or as terrible and beneficent. Despite the notable differences between these personae, Vodouists do not see them as belonging to different spirits, but rather as attributes of the same being, each corresponding to the notion of complementarity of opposites, of what may be called a *coincidentia oppositorum*. On the one hand, a lwa expresses the diametric opposition of two divine personae sprung from the same divine principle. On the other hand, each lwa is a manifestation of Bondye who is the Godhead, the creator, and Grand Master of the universe. Hence, the lwas and their diverse personae are "faces" of the one cosmic spirit who reconciles all differences and whose power transcends that of the lwas; his vital force permeates the cosmos and fosters the forces of good and evil, florescence and decay, permanence and change.

Communal Rituals

The lwas are said to live in a sacred world and can be invoked in the context of religious ceremonies. To invoke the spirits, devotees use every possible auditory and visual means possible in their rituals. Each lwa has its own songs, drum rhythms, and dance movements. Ritual paraphernalia associated with the lwas are used during the ceremonies and are kept in a part of the oumfò's (or temple's) holy of holies. During a ceremony, the houngan (priest) or his laplace (assistant) draws a geometric cabbalah-like figure that includes the various symbolic tracings that are associated with a lwa's personae. The drawings are made on the floor of the oumfò with cornflower that the officiant sifts through his or her thumb and index fingers of the right hand. Vodouists believe that these auditory and visual media summoned the spirits to leave Vilokan to possess them during the ceremonies offered in their honor. The number of lwas who are invoked during a ritual depends on the occasion, the particular feast day in Vodou's liturgical calendar, or the particular needs of the community. Although the rituals are performed in honor of the spirits, indirectly they are offered to Bondye, the Godhead himself for whom, as in West Africa, libation is poured at the beginning of each ceremony.

Unlike Western religions, Vodou rituals are not weekly occurrences. Most temples hold them three or four times a year. They can be occasions requiring elaborate preparations such as the acquisition of flowers, live animals, foodstuff, and other ritual paraphernalia to be tended as offerings to the lwas and for the consumption of the community. Among the significant rituals in the Vodou liturgical year is the pilgrimage and the feast that celebrates the apparition of the Virgin Mary (and, by extension, Ezili Freda Dahomey) near the waterfalls outside of Saut d'Eau, a village in the central portion of Haiti. Thousands of devotees gather at the site on July 16, the day dedicated to the Virgin, to attend the celebration of the Catholic mass in the nearby church of Mirebalais, a town in the central portion of Haiti, and to pay homage to the saint near the waterfalls. Devotees bathe in the pool of water beneath the fall, anticipating spirit possession and spiritual healing. They also tie blue and pink (Ezili and the Virgin's symbolic colors) ribbons about their waists that they remove and tie around some of the adjacent trees near the fall as protection from defilement or as a way of ridding themselves of diseases and misfortunes.

All Saints' Day on November 1 is also an important holy day in the Vodou liturgical calendar. Special ceremonies and offerings are tendered to Gede (from the family of Dahomean Ghedeve spirits), Ginen's gatekeeper. In Vodou mythology, Ginen (or Guinea) is Africa where the ancestral spirits of the "living dead" reside in the primordial waters of the abyss far underneath the Earth's surface; it is the place whence they are said to ascend from their sacred abyss to "visit" their progeny during the rituals. In time, they return to the world of the living by entering a young mother's womb at the conception of a child and may be reborn in the body of a newborn. Gede is then Ginen's guardian, who allows these ancestral spirits to travel back and forth to the world of the living. He is the lord of death, but is also identified with life; his symbols include skulls and crossed bones, but also the phallus, which represents life. Gede is the emblematic coincidence of opposites; he is symbolic of the womb and the tomb, of life and death, of the beginning and the end, and of florescence and decay.

The cycle of funerary rituals entails an elaborate set of observances performed by members of the family to ensure both the passage of the deceased spirit into the abyss and its reclamation into the world of the living. This cycle of rituals lasts an entire year after the death of the person and is based largely on many African concepts of the self. As in West Africa, Vodouists believe that the human spirit derives its existence from sacred and human sources. Through many rebirths, each individual is the continuation of the dead father's spirit, the grandfather's, and so on, extending in retrogression through his or her entire lineage. Thus, in Vodou, as it is in West African religious traditions, the individual self does not exist, but is conceived to be a single-branching organism beyond the self to enlarge its circle out of sight to include limbs far beyond this life. One participates in the visible and invisible worlds simultaneously, and one's sense of selfhood is realized by the acknowledgment of one's dependence on the visible and invisible human family.

Vodouists believe that the human body is a manifestation of the Godhead and that it is constituted of three principal compartments, characterized by their psychic functions in the human body. The first concept of the human spirit is the gwobonanj (which means literally "big good angel"). It is the immortal, cosmic spirit of Bondye—an internal self-generating life force and source of divine energy that ensures the vital signs of life, such as the inhalation and exhalation of the thoracic cavity, the flow of blood, the beating of the heart, and the movements of the body in general. The second compartment of the human psyche is the tibonanj (which literally means "little good angel"). It is the personality, the ego soul that represents the unique quality of an individual's persona and is discernible in one's facial expression and general deportment. The third is the mèt-tèt (which literally means "master of the head"); it is the guardian spirit that has protected a person from danger throughout his or her life and has been the subject of that person's devotion. Shortly after death, a special ritual known as dessounen (the uprooting of life) is performed by a priest that is designed to extract the parts of the spirits from the body and dispatch them to their respective abodes: the gwobonanj and the mèt-tèt

to Ginen and the tibonanj to Heaven (as a result of the influence of Catholicism), and the body to the navel of the Earth where, as an empty shell, it will disintegrate and never rise again.

As in much of West Africa, ancestral spirits exercise authority over the living. That authority derives from a ritual of reclamation performed a year after a person's death, in which the soul of the dead is reclaimed from Ginen and placed into a *govi* (a clay jar or a bottle), where it is kept in the temple. It is from this new shell that an ancestral spirit is believed to assist the living. The memory from past experiences, the wisdom gained from their time spent in Ginen, is preserved as a legacy for their progeny.

Private Rituals

The spirits do not merely manifest themselves in public rituals, but in private ones as well. Many Vodouists may keep *pés*, or altars, in their homes for the Catholic saints and, by extension, for the *lwas*. A *pé* may be a simple table covered with a tablecloth and adorned with vases of flowers, the chromolithographs of a saint, or the picture of a deceased member of the family. Or these images may simply be affixed onto a wall.

The spirits also manifest themselves in times of misfortune in the ritual of divination. Divination is the art of foretelling the future or ascertaining certain truths as they are revealed by an object or an event. Divination is one of the most important aspects of life among Vodouists; they are prompt to consult oracles, especially in circumstances over which they have little or no control, such as a chronic fever, a barren garden, life's sporadic privations or its uncertainties, and so on. The person in need may confer with a religious specialist who is the conduit between the sacred and profane worlds. For theoretical purposes, divination in Vodou may be divided into two categories: intuitive and prognostic. The first may or may not involve spirit possession, but the religious specialist receives his or her answer intuitively from ancestral spirits by the manipulation of an oracular object. The second involves the drawing of meaning from unanticipated natural phenomena, such as an unexpected gust of wind, the sudden appearance of an animal, the occurrence of an

unforeseen event, or an act such as sneezing. These incidents are interpreted immediately as suggesting certain outcomes of impending events. Both types involve the application of interpretive schemes based on observation and with which the community is familiar. The difference between the two, however, is that the intuitive divination requires the assistance of a diviner, whereas the prognostic type does not.

Vodou in the Diaspora

Unfavorable political and economic circumstances in Haiti since the 1970s have forced substantial numbers of Haitians to emigrate into many parts of the world. Living in many of the world's largest cities (namely, New York, Chicago, Miami, Québec, Montréal, or Paris), they have established communities where they continue to perform their sacred rituals. Even the pilgrimages are reproduced in the diaspora.

In many parts of the United States, Haitians have created communities, or *lakous*, that approximate the African rural courtyard. In Haiti, a *lakou* is an area in which an extended family is gathered and where its members live in separate dwellings. The *lakou* often includes matriarchs or patriarchs who serve as spiritual leaders and who are revered by the members of the *lakou* as the links between the secular and sacred worlds.

The *lakou* as a social and religious phenomenon has waned considerably in Haiti since the 1950s. Job opportunities and the prospects for a good education have resulted in the emigration of the *lakous'* younger members to other areas of the country and have engendered the gradual disintegration of the *lakou's* infrastructure. But it has reemerged among Haitians in the diaspora. The house systems are analogous to the *lakous*; they consist of an entire building in which several families live in individual apartments, but share domestic and financial resources. They gather around a priest or priestess whose apartment often functions as both living quarters and a temple.

In the context of rituals, most of the paraphernalia used in the rituals are readily available in large cities in the diaspora. Even the pilgrimages are reproduced. For instance, All Souls' Day in the

Catholic church's liturgical calendar (November 1) corresponds to Halloween in North America, the day consecrated to the souls of the Dead in the Catholic liturgical calendar. Similarly, July 16, the day devoted to the Virgin Mary in the Catholic liturgical calendar, is reserved for Ezili in Vodou. On that day, many Haitians in New York will make pilgrimages to the Lady of Mount Carmel Church in New York and to St. Anne de Beaupré, near the city of Québec, in Canada.

Perhaps one of the significant aspects of Vodou in the diaspora is its multiethnic and multicultural character. Ritual participation is open to members of other cultural and ethnic groups from other parts of the world. The names of the spirits have become familiar to many African Americans seeking to integrate Black Nationalism with an authentic African worldview. The energy, creativity, and resources of these new religious urban communities in the diaspora will undoubtedly change Vodou in the future because their members may well incorporate into the theology of these communities their own cultural and religious traditions—a factor that may not only change the character of Vodou in the diaspora in the future, but distinguish it from its counterpart in Haiti. Moreover, Vodou in the diaspora will undoubtedly be instrumental in the preservation and diffusion of African religious traditions in different parts of the world.

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See also Houngan; Lwa; Mambo; Oumfò; Petwo; Rada; Rituals

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VODUNSI

In Fongbe, a Vodunsi is a male or female servant of Vodun, an adept or initiated follower of the Vodun religion. Pronounced another way in Fongbe, *Vodunsi* is translated as a person who belongs to and is under full protection and guardianship of the Vodun. Generally, one is chosen by a Vodun as early as at birth or at any stage of human development—childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. The Vodun elect finds out that he or she is chosen by the Vodun through close observation of events marking his or her life and, subsequently, by consulting the Fá, the system of divination through the Bokonon, veritable interpreter of the Fá.

To become a Vodunsi proper, one must receive the initiation during an internship that lasts up to 3 years, in the *Hun-xwé* (esoteric or blood-pact home), the convent, also called *Hun-kpamê* (blood-pact enclosure), or *Vodun-kpamê* (Vodun

enclosure). Upon entering the convent, the new member is possessed by the Vodun and she or he becomes Vodunsi ipso facto, more precisely *Hundéva* (he or she who has entered the convent). However, the initiation is a long process that has several stages. During the first 3 months, the newcomer is *Hundoté* (a new member awaiting initiation) or *Kajèkaji* (one more gourd having joined the existing gourds), that is, the neophyte. In the convent, the neophyte is trained under the supervision of the *Xwégan* (head of the house) and the *Kangan* (the rope master) or he who enforces discipline.

The Hunxwé is a stern training center, where the elect is initiated into the immutable rites and principles of the Vodun to whom he or she is consecrated for his or her whole life. Before the neophyte is introduced to anything in the convent, he or she must take a vow of loyalty and absolute discretion. The guiding principle of the Hunxwé is a saying, "The reason we have two ears, two eyes, and only one mouth is that we may hear more and see more, but speak less." The curriculum is all-encompassing and includes courses on the Vodun code of conduct, its history, rites, taboos or proscriptions, the Vodun language, ululation, cultural chants, Vodun songs and dance, walk on all fours, litanies, and incantations, as well as the healing properties of herbs. The Vodunsi is permanently marked and tattooed all over. Tattooing is both a religious symbol and an adornment for the Vodunsi, especially during Vodun festivals.

During the internship in the convent, the Vodunsi is taught several income-generating activities such as basket weaving, pottery, raffia matting, hat making, tie-dyeing, the rope-making trade, fowl raising, and sculpture, which are sold in local markets by the convent servants. The Vodunsi has

a hectic daily schedule under strict supervision of Vodunsi trainers who report to the Hunnon, also called Houngan or Hungbonon, the paramount Vodun priest. The training is so intensive that the Vodunsi barely has break time. Laziness is considered a scourge because one rule in the Vodun convent is that *Kajèkaji mon no do hwemê mlon*, the neophyte does not take afternoon naps.

Upon satisfactory completion of the initiation rites, the consecration, and intensive training in the convent, the Vodunsi returns to the world of Kóssi (laypeople or noninitiates). Among other important recommendations the Hunnon imposes on the Vodunsi are the cultivation of brotherhood and sisterhood with other Vodunsi and deep love and respect for the Vodun. As a chosen servant of the Vodun, the Vodunsi commands respect in traditional society and is sometimes feared as well. Some grave offenses, such as adultery committed by the Vodunsi or the nonrespect of the solemn vow taken upon arrival in the convent, can lead to excommunication. The Vodunsi may indeed be either a male or female adept, yet only women are said to commit adultery.

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See also Initiation; Vodou in Benin

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W

WAMALA

Wamala, venerated by many people in Central Africa, is related to the great Kintu, founder of the Baganda peoples. Narratives of origin of the Baganda peoples attribute to Kintu, the great ancestor, the unity of the Baganda for which he stands as the central symbol. Baganda peoples' mythology claims their ancestry to Kintu as the son of one of the Kabakas who ruled over the region for many generations.

Although as the narrative unfolds this progeny may be unclear, the most accepted version seems to rely on the undisputed fact that Kintu settled in the Baganda region together with Bukulu. Here, Bukulu married Wadda and their progeny, distinguished by their exceptional qualities, entered their people's ancestral and mythological world through accomplishments and involvement in community life, natural phenomena, and the general affairs and ordeals of everyday living.

When the sun and moon fell out of the sky, Wanga is said to have restored the sun and the moon to the sky from where they had fallen; Muwanga, Bukulu's grandson, was appointed the ruler of the balubaale (ancestors) and ruler of all things; Musisi was the spirit/deity of earthquakes.

Musisi's sons, Wannema and Wamala, quarreled one day, and Wamala in anger went into the mainland, where, out of his urine, he made a lake that still bears his name and whose spirit/deity was Mukasa. Mukasa became the most respected

god among the Baganda as reported by the Europeans when they arrived in the region in the 18th century.

Mukasa and Wamala are also known as Mugasha and Wamara and are at the forefront of a dynasty of rulers who entered the historic and mythological narratives of origin among the Baganda peoples as balubaale.

From 1300 to 1600, a period determined by the beginnings of the Cwezi empire and the establishment of the 3rd Rwanda dynasty, the political and social actualizations among a number of founding kingdoms in the southern and western parts of the interlacustrine regions of Central Africa produced, according to some authors, a shift in orientation as far as the ancestor veneration was concerned and transformed it into a kind of cult where Wamala remained as the central spirit figure for the Baganda, Bunyoro, Toro, and Buhaya, while in Rwanda, Burundi, Buha, Busumbwa, and Bunyanwezi, the venerated ancestor and spirit figure was Ryangombe.

These two separated traditions seem to have derived from the dissolution of an empire and the defeat of Wamala as a cultural hero, followed by the consequent transition and transformation of the Wamara custom and tradition into the Ryangombe culture. The political domination of the Rwanda state over the region gave Ryangombe prominence as the venerated ancestor, while the Wamala culture and tradition, diffused with the Hinda and extended in the ritual traditions of the Bunyoro and the Karangwe state, was losing influence. Warfare and political power

in the region were therefore determinant factors in the spiritual and political orientation of the interlacustrine peoples, where the cultures of Wamala and Ryangombe also played a role as political opposites.

Along with ancestor veneration, ceremonies addressed to Wamala, Baganda rituals, and religious performances took place among the Cwezi and the Baganda under a common Ssesse ancestry, in whose traditions Wamala and Mukasa were the central figures. Mukasa, the spirit of the Wamala Lake and the ruler of all the deities of place, is remembered as one of those who accompanied Wamara/Wamala in his passage into the underworld and the realm of the ancestors. As protectors of their people, Mukasa and Wamala conducted them in a long warfare of conquest around the lake, and their influence saved the Baganda from a military defeat.

As a result, the Wamala culture was introduced to the Luba Empire in the 19th century following their conquest by the Yeke, who were originally from the Bunyamwezi region. The successful conquering enterprise of the Baganda people also resulted in the establishment of bonds of unity with the spiritual systems of prominent groups who relate to a common ancestry and share common places, rituals, initiation and ancestral ceremonies, offering patterns, and shrines throughout the region.

The ancestor spirit of Wamala has therefore become more than the spirit of his direct descendant group alone: His prominence and dominance is remembered and venerated by both descendants and those with whom he came in contact.

This is what, according to some authors, has evolved into the belief that Wamala may be the supreme example in the interlacustrine region of a religious idea that has passed to other peoples such as the Bunyamwezi-Luba extension and has found diffusion to northern parts of Rwanda, Kigezi in Uganda, and even farther north to Ankole.

Sacred kinships, such as Wamala's, are associated with initiation ceremonies and with rituals of unity among groups historically connected to the same ancestor that are responsible for keeping the tradition and customs of the religion. Religious ceremonies, narratives of origin and performances, initiation rituals, and Wamala's veneration as placed in their structural historic

and cultural contexts are significant in the understanding of the political and social fabric of Central African countries like present-day Rwanda and Uganda.

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See also Tutsi

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WASET

Waset was the name of the capital of Egypt during the time of its greatest power and glory. Made famous by the kings of the New Kingdom, especially the 18th and 19th dynasties, the city was a magnet for nationals from various other countries in Africa as well as Asia.

Waset is the city that was named Thebes by the Greeks and later Luxor by the Arabs, although its ancient name, Waset, was written extensively on the temples and tombs of Kemet. Called “the city of the hundred gates,” Waset embraced its splendor from its deep origins and came to full bloom in the New Kingdom as a city that had lasted for more than 1,000 years as the center of the world. The ruins of Waset form some of the most extensive wonders in the ancient world. Here was a city that was not as old as Men-nefer (Memphis) or as sacred as Abydos or On, but a city that had the good fortune to be host to the most powerful and glorious dynasties in world history, as well as home to the huge complex of temples known as Karnak.

The city of Waset sat on the eastern bank of the Nile River and stretched about 2 miles inland enclosing the temple of Karnak. Thirteen hundred

years of building produced a city that had no rivals in ancient architectural majesty. By 1500 BC, Waset was a series of gigantic sanctuaries devoted to the gods Amen, Mut, and Khonsu.

There were several important aspects to Waset's splendor. In the first place, it was the seat of the largest temple complex in the ancient world. The famous temple dedicated to Amen projected the intellectual, political, and spiritual power of Waset and underscored the extent of Amen's cultural supremacy in its rise to glory.

Waset was the heartbeat of the Kemetic nation and its massive temple complex the center of the political and religious life of Egypt. All economic and political roads led to the palace of the king or to the domain of the priests at Waset. When a high official of the country wanted to bring a case to the court, it was to Waset that he came with his entourage. When the nation celebrated its national festivals, the bedecked officials sailed their boats to Waset and walked its sphinx-lined streets to honor the gods. No historical site in Egypt is as impressive in its magnitude and magnificence as Karnak in Waset. No humans ever built a temple complex, dedicated to religion, any more massive and stupendous than this architectural achievement. Karnak is actually three main temples, numerous smaller enclosed temples, and several outer temples located on about 300 acres (100 hectares). Of course, Karnak is really the site's modern name. Its ancient name was Ipet-isut, meaning "The Most Select (or Sacred) of Places." In time, many writers and visitors also referred to Waset by this name.

In addition to the tremendous religious site called Karnak, the city of Waset is the closest city to the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, where hundreds of nobles are buried. With the combined achievements in the burial valleys and the religious sites, the city of Waset is within 50 miles of nearly half of the world's ancient monuments, an achievement that staggers the imagination about this one city.

The political power of Waset also surpassed that of any other city during its time because the priests who officiated at the Karnak Temple dictated the direction of the nation for hundreds of years. Even when Akhenaten created chaos and heresy by adopting the deity Aton over Amen, he could not dim the glory that shined from Waset.

The corridors and boulevards of political and religious power were so strong at Waset that when Tutankhamen returned Akhenaten's family to Waset, it was as if the city had not missed a beat. Its slight decline in influence was nothing more than a nuisance to the Wasetian rulers of the world. The city endured, and its fame spread throughout the world. Along its streets walked Amenhotep III, Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Seti I, Ramses II, Tarharka, Shabaka, and Piankhy, among the mightiest kings and queens to ever rule. Its last restoration was under the kings of the 25th dynasty, who vowed to bring it to its former glory during the reign of the New Kingdom per-aas. They made it once again a great city, the seat of Egyptian government, not to be ignored in the world of politics. Nevertheless, in time, with several invasions and sackings, the city was laid to waste, and the former glory of the city was never to return. However, because the name Waset has endured, engraved in stone, it will forever be remembered as one of Africa's mightiest urban areas and one of the most sacred sites on Earth.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Temples, Uses and Types

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WATER

Water is perhaps the single most important liquid in the world. Composed of two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen (H₂O), it is not possible for any form of life to survive without it. Water covers about three quarters of the Earth's surface and makes up roughly the same portion of the human body by mass. This liquid dominated the physical, social, and spiritual environment of ancient Africa. It still does in most of Africa today, as well as in African communities outside of the continent. In the African world, from as early as ancient Kemet



A Kasena baby's first bath with cold water serves as both a ritual awakening and a way to stimulate its circulation.

Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher.

to the present, water, in the form of primeval water, has been at the center of the explanation of the origins of existence. In this world, water is the ultimate cleansing agent, both internally and externally. It is also the ultimate agent and symbol of spiritual purification and a most important offering to the Creator, to other divinities, to the ancestors, and to other cosmic forces that are propitiated by libation and other rituals. In Africa, if humans cannot live by the proverbial bread alone, it is even more certain that all life, human or not, in its physical, social, and ritual aspects, will perish, swiftly, if there is no water.

The ancient African fluvial environment had a profound impact on the African spiritual system, which in turn impacted back on African humanity by giving order, meaning, significance, and higher purpose to daily life. Nowhere is this more dramatic and obvious than in Kemet. It is here that the River

Nile and an imaginary underground river, of which the Nile was undoubtedly the archetype, respectively ordered and regulated the life of the living and that of the Dead and, in fact, profoundly influenced all existence and all conceptions of existence.

The Nile is the longest and one of the most dominant rivers in the world. It runs for more than 4,000 miles from south to north through East Central and North East Africa, from its source in the region of the Great Lakes to its estuary on the Mediterranean; from the place of the beginnings of humans through to the places of the beginnings of civilization, in Kush, also called Ta-Seti, literally "Land of the Bow" or Nubia. People as well as progress also flowed northward, following this waterway along its valley from the heart of Africa. The Nile was the world's first transcontinental cultural highway. But it was not only water, people, and their culture that this river has

carried as it arose in the highlands of Africa and journeyed across varied terrain to empty itself into the Mediterranean. There is another gift. Fertile silt, eroded from upland, has always been transported in its yearly floods and deposited in places that would have been part of the largest desert in the world but for this annual replenishing nourishment from the longest river in the world.

The Nile has run through Africa and the lives of Africans for millennia. In Kemet, at first it brought devastating and fearful floods to vulnerable settlements that clung precariously along its banks to thin margins of land with agricultural possibilities. Then as human knowledge and skill developed, and predictability and flood control evolved, threat became promise, and the Nile flood a welcome deluge to provide for an increasingly more productive and secure future. Here the river provided water for irrigation, transportation, communication, drinking, washing, and sewage disposal. It also yielded large quantities of fish, birds, and other edible animals. That part of the Nile Valley had become a magnet that attracted more and more settlers from all directions. So was born the foremost country in the ancient world, owing much of its life to water in the form of the then foremost river in the world.

The people of Kemet, not coincidentally the most bountiful recipients of this annual act of nature, certainly recognized the importance of the river in their life. They made the Nile in flood the divinity they called Hapi. The Nile was sacred. Its running water was a sacred thing: To dam up Nile water and so detain or prevent it from flowing all over the land was an offense under the Declarations of Innocence, an ancient Egyptian guide to moral living that was to be recited flawlessly by the justified dead before the seat of judgment. So too was wrongfully diverting water in the season of inundation when the flow was strongest. Social ideals arising from the best daily practice surrounding the use of the Nile were invested with the highest sanction, restated as religious and moral norms or as dogma, and so a population was encouraged to aspire to the highest standards of humanity—and to behaviors that tended to keep an elite in power.

Human habitation dominated the east bank of the river; the west bank was the preserve of cemeteries, mortuary temples, and other things to do with the departed. People had to cross the river to

bury their dead. These material conditions strongly influenced images of life and death in ancient Egypt. The east bank of the Nile became synonymous with this world, with the rising sun and transformation, rejuvenation, and resurrection; the west bank with the setting sun, death, and the underworld. Crossing the river became symbolic of making the transition into the underworld. The Dead were called the *westerners*. Apart from the boat and the mythical river, the entire notion of the transition came to be dominated by images of ferrying and the ferryman, the archetype of that now ubiquitous conductor of souls across the Great Divide first attested in the Nile Valley those multiple millennia ago. This symbolic significance of crossing the river has also been retained by many African people in an unbroken tradition down into contemporary times. Examples include the Akan of Ghana and the Igbo in Nigeria.

Every people have their story of the beginning. In the first known African account of the beginning, water is fundamental. In the creation story of Kemet, the nun, or primordial waters, is the oldest and most fundamental substance in the cosmos, containing all the possibilities of existence. Hence, before life, there was water. The first life forms were resident in water, and all life forms, for the first stage(s) of their lives or for all of their lives, are resident in water. All life is conceived in water, develops in water, and is then born out of water and often inside water. Without water, no form of life is possible.

So profound was the impact of water on the psyche of the people of Kemet that, for them, every manifestation of water in the Duat or underworld was in fact an aspect of the nun, the great primeval water that was before creation and surrounds the world on all sides. There were many manifestations of this water in this Kemetic afterlife. One of its branches, in the form of a river, separated this world of the living from the Duat, the place of the departed. Another branch formed the route of the sun in the sky. The sun rode along this river in a wia, a boat—an occurrence that provided the associated explanations of the nightly disappearance of the sun, death, decay, transformation, rejuvenation, and creation.

The Kemetyu certainly did not imagine any world in which water was not a predominant and determining presence. Perhaps they could not

imagine a world without water at the center precisely because of the profound impact of water on their lives and so on their worldview.

It is likely that this fundamental role of water in the cosmology and cosmogony of Kemet was at least a contributory factor to the Kemetyu understanding of pure water as a sacred substance, a view enhanced by the mystique of fertility and power attributed to water because of the annual rejuvenatory role of the Nile in the agricultural cycle and therefore in the entire society indeed. Water from a certain part of the Nile was regarded as pure and so the best for Libation. It is therefore scarce wonder that the Kemetyu called water a *neter*, meaning “a divinity,” and referred to the Nile River as “the water of life.” It was also believed that objects could be purified with water and that water that had been poured over statues and other sacred objects was considered to have thus been imbued with magical and healing properties. This idea of sanctification through running water is one of the fundamental ideas in African spirituality.

In Kemet, water was universally recognized as the supreme agent of both spiritual and physical purification. The latter is a practical necessity for proper human hygiene and therefore of tremendous daily importance. All humans, by the act of living, accumulate impurities: sweat, dirt, and other pollutants obtained through work, play, and the basic biological fact of constant respiration. Therefore, everyone needs periodic physical purification. It is a necessary part of the forever alternating cycle of pollution and purification, which is an intimate aspect of the human reality. Water is fundamental for respiration; water is also fundamental for getting rid of the pollutants built up during respiration, work, and play. The importance of water in Kemet appears to have been further emphasized in medicine: Water was the base of the majority of medical remedies in Kemet, certainly of most of those known to the modern world. The African people in Kemet knew the tremendous importance of water and other liquids. They recognized that to drink water is a sacred act.

These understandings and beliefs, widespread in Kemet, constitute the foundation of the great importance of water in contemporary African spirituality. The waters of the Niger, Senegal, Kongo-Ubangi, and Zambezi River systems serve the same cosmic, social, economic, and other

functions today as those of the Nile did yesterday. Water figures prominently in the creation stories of most contemporary African people. Examples include the Yoruba, Dogon, Bambara, Akan, and Edo in West Africa and the Bapedi, Venda, and other Bantu Africans in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. There is also great reverence for designated portions of naturally occurring running water in rain, rivers, creeks, falls, lakes, and seas. Water is the agent for cleansing persons of physical and spiritual impurities. Water is important to African religion in a number of other ways.

Water divinities populate the spiritual system of people all over Africa and, naturally, in African communities abroad. Such divinities abound in West Africa. Tano or Ta Kora is a major river divinity in the Ivory Coast and Ghana. Ta Gbu is the sea divinity of the Ga people in Ghana. Ta Tale is the Ga female lagoon divinity. To Nu or Ta Nu is an Egun river divinity. Otaomi is a Yoruba river divinity. Yewa and Oshun are Yoruba female river divinities. Yemoja (Yemōnja) is the Yoruba female sea divinity; Olokun is the male. Ota Miri is an important male water divinity in Igboland; Nne Mmiri is the female, the mother of a number of female water divinities with different names in varying Igbo localities. Mami Water covers a number of water divinities of both genders in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean.

In Brazil, Candomblé initiates worship two female water divinities: Yemanjá (Yemōnja) and Oshun. Yemanjá is Orisha of the Sea and patroness of fishermen. Oshun was originally a divinity of a river of the same name in Nigeria. Today, Oshun is the Orisha of sweet waters; she symbolizes love and fertility. These divinities are also worshipped in Santería and Shango in many areas of the Western Hemisphere. In Guyana and other places, Water Mamma or Water Mumma, the female divinity of water, is an important divinity.

The use of water in many rituals is common all over Africa. As in Kemet long ago, water is the supreme agent and symbol of both physical and spiritual cleansing and purification. A major use of water in African spiritual practice is to rid a person of mystical impurities that may be contracted through breaking taboos, commitment of crime, or contamination by evil, whether magic or curse. When used in these ways, water transcends its normal utility as a quencher of thirst, a physical

cleanser, and the major and indispensable presence in respiration. It becomes transformed into a religious object, the foremost agent in many rituals in the African spiritual system.

Water is indeed the supreme agent of purification in African practice, whether it is in Libation, offerings, outdoorings or naming ceremonies, the dedication of a building, ritual baths, baptism, or the laying out of an altar or a shrine. Another example of the ritual use of water in African practice occurs in the elaborate ritual of initiation of a *babalawo* or Yoruba priest, which includes a “ceremony of purification by water.”

From the earliest known times, water has been the quintessential expression of a “pure” drink offering in the African spiritual system. That is why almost every African altar, even the simplest, invariably contains a glass of water for the divinities and the sacred ancestors to drink. That is why, too, from time immemorial, water is often sprinkled on shrines (while incense is burnt and appropriate chants made) as part of ritual cleansing and renewal rites.

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See also Tano River; Tefnut

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widely known falls found in Africa are Boyoma Falls in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Blue Nile Falls in Ethiopia, the Tinkisso Falls in Guinea, the Aughrabies Falls in South Africa, the Wli Falls in Ghana, and the Mosi-oa-Tunya Falls (Victoria Falls). Waterfalls are sacred because of their unique healing qualities, and the water is often used in rituals. Often, but not always, the guardians of waterfalls are women who are responsible for performing the rituals that ensure a good relationship between the community and the spirit(s) associated with the falls.

At Mosi-oa-Tunya Falls in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and South Africa, the Leya claim a connection to the land that dates back to the first Bantu settlement. They consider the falls a sacred site associated with water, rain, rainbows, fertility, cleansing, ancestors, and female authority. Their name for the falls is *Syuungwe na mutitima* or “the heavy mist that resounds.” It is also referred to as “the place of rainbows” (*Syuungwe*) or “the place where the rain was born.” One story says the drum of chief Sekute fell over the edge of the falls and lodged itself at the base. The sound of the falling water hitting the drum causes the thunderous sound made by the falls. The falls are associated with the memory of the ancestors. The northern aspect of the falls is known as *Syuungwe mufu* or “mist of the dead.” The foot of the falls is *katolauseka* or “make offerings cheerfully.” Here, after offerings are made, one can see a light or hear the sounds of drumming, children playing, and women stamping grain coming from ancestral communities. At this same place, Leza, the God of the Leya, can be approached. Leza is not associated with any place in the surrounding landscape except the falls.

The Leya also use the falls for healing. In a ritual called *Sambadwazi* or “cleanse disease,” afflicted people would plunge into a calm pool created by the swirling waters of the river just above the falls. They allowed their clothing to be washed away over the waterfall, taking disease and affliction with them. Another special place in the falls is *Chipusya*, where water for rituals is collected by a solitary person in the hours before daylight. The location of this place is known only by select elders.

The female authority associated with the falls is in the *Bedyango*, or “gateway to the chief.” This position is linked to the myth of an original female leader in the Leya and can only be held by a

WATERFALLS

Waterfalls are spiritually powerful because they embody the energy of a roaring sea, the power of a flowing river, the invigorating potency of a rain-fall, and the tranquility of a lake. Some of the more



Thousands of Haitian Vodou practitioners bathe, July 17, 1995, in the sacred Saut d'Eau waterfall, northeast of Port-au-Prince, to receive blessings in the coming year.

Source: AFP/Getty Images.

woman. She conducts rainmaking ceremonies, leads the infected to the waterfall for cleansing during epidemic disease, installs new chiefs, and ritually prepares warriors for battle by having them crawl through her legs. Leya culture is decentralized, so although the Bedyango was an important figure, other spiritual workers, including men, had access to the falls for rituals and healing.

Denise Martin

See also Water

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WEPWAWET

Wepwawet, *Wp-w3-wt* [*Wep-wa-wet*] (Webwawet, Apuat, Ubuaut, Ubuat, Upuaut, Upwaut, Ophois), became a funerary deity in Kemetic (Egyptian) cosmogony. Wepwawet, originally a war god whose cult center was Asyut (Lycopolis, Cynopolis, city of the wolves) in Upper Kemet, became a deity representative of the winter solstice as Anubis (Jackal-headed god who assisted Aset [Isis] in the resurrection of Asar) and was a deity representative of the summer solstice. Wepwawet's name means "opener of

the ways.” Wepwawet was the opener of the ways in the south (Upper Kemet), whereas Anubis was the opener of the ways in the north (Lower Kemet).

Wepwawet’s Mdw Ntr (hieroglyphs) have been translated as jackal, dog, and wolf. These translations have led to some of the confusion concerning Wepwawet’s image. Mainly, the confusion comes from his association with the jackal-headed god Anubis. Wepwawet functioned as a colieutenant, along with Anubis, of Asar (Osiris), God of the Dead. Wepwawet was leader of the warriors and the mourners, who guided souls through the netherworld. As a coassistant to Anubis and an officer or a lieutenant of Asar, in guiding the Dead on their way to and through the netherworld, Wepwawet was a popular deity. People of Kemet venerated Wepwawet in life and death as they sometimes faced unsafe travels in both life and death, and Wepwawet was considered a deity who would guide them in both instances.

In the role of celestial guide, Wepwawet not only co-led with Anubis, but also was sometimes shown piloting the sun’s boat during its nocturnal journeys. Further, Wepwawet is depicted towing Asar’s boat along the edge of the southern and northern skies. Some Egyptologists note, in their translation of Kemetic mythology, that, prior to his deposition by Asar, Wepwawet was venerated as the Lord of the Necropolis under the name of Kenti Amentiu (*Khentyamentiu*), “he who rules the West.” As the god of Asyut and a later addition to the Asarian legend, Wepwawet was considered one of the chief officers in Asar’s conquest of the world. Hence, both Anubis and Wepwawet sometimes appear dressed as Asar’s officers, lieutenants, or soldiers.

In some aspects of the various interpretations of the myths/legends of the Kemetic story of gods and goddesses, Wepwawet, Anubis, Djhuti (Tehuti, Thoth, Hermes), and Asar have been confused in one way or another. It is written that Asar sometimes turns into Wepwawet, that Anubis and Wepwawet are one and the same, that Wepwawet is Asar’s or Anubis’s son, that Wepwawet has sometimes functioned in the same capacity as Djhuti in that both are depicted standing at the helm of the boat destroying Asar’s enemies, that both Djhuti and Wepwawet are

openers of the ways, and that it was Wepwawet, Djhuti, and Anubis who accompanied Asar in the conquest of Asia.

Asia Austin Colter

See also Sekhmet

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WEST AFRICAN RELIGION

The earliest debate on West African Religion (WAR) bordered mainly on whether the term *religion* should be pluralized. Considering the enormity of WAR and its seeming polytheistic nature, as well as the size and multiethnic structure of the African continent, some have argued that it is better to describe WAR as WAR(s). In this entry, we hypothesize that the name WAR(s) does not adequately define the religion. An attempt is made to suggest what might be the acceptable name.

Most of the definitions of earlier writers on WAR were descriptive, explanatory, pictorial, but not definitive. Some nomenclatures employed were derogatory. These include paganism, heathenism, fetishism, idolatry, and animism. When a religion is properly named, a comprehensive theology of the religion emerges. When a religion is not properly theologized, it is difficult to fit it properly into rigorous academic discourse.

Problems of Naming

One of the fundamental concerns arising from the proper nomenclature for WAR is whether the religion should be described as traditional. In this context, *tradition* can be defined as practices and belief

systems that have been handed over orally from one generation to another. Evidently, every religion hands over teachings orally from generation to generation. However, in the case of WAR, it is conceived to mean that it is localized, not subject to change, and cannot serve any developmental relevance. But every religion is traditional because all religions and their teachings evolved out of a tradition. It is true that WAR is expressed in ritual ceremonies, festivals, sacred places, religious objects, arts, music, dance, proverbs, riddles, names of places, myths, legends, and customs, and in all aspects of life. Yet like every worthy religion, WAR is a blend of tradition with contemporary ideas. To locate WAR within a domain is to hide its universalistic tendency. This issue is pertinent in the contemporary academy because Africa is fast becoming the world market of ideas; hence, there is the need to put issues of religion in proper perspectives.

Definition and Naming

It is now known that there are substances and relics of WAR among Africans in the diaspora scattered all over the Caribbean, Brazil, America, and Europe. An analytical definition of what WAR should be viz-à-viz other world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and many others is a compelling task.

Most religions have names branded after founders, gurus, or rabbis through whom the religions were brought into being. Out of the teaching of some founders, ideologies emerged out of which names were coined. For example, there cannot be Christianity without Jesus Christ, nor would there be Islam without Mohammed. But WAR was not founded by a particular individual, although some individuals and supernatural beings have contributed to the richness of the religion. The roles of various strata of the religion are named in reverse order of superiority.

Magic and Medicine

Some charms, magical and medicinal preparations that are effectual for a long time, can be venerated. These are principally supernatural objects used during war and for security purposes. These objects are believed to be powerful, but they could be volatile and dangerous. Rituals are performed

to forestall evil occurrences in the family or society where institutionalized magic or charms are kept. Sacrifices may also be offered to activate them when they seem impotent. For example, a magical preparation meant to be used during war should be offered sacrifice even during peaceful times. Refusal to offer sacrifice to it, it is believed, may stimulate war and acrimony.

Ancestors

Also called the living dead, ancestors are called *Iserun* or *Babanla wa* (Yoruba) and *Nsamanfo* (Akan). They are believed to be the closest link between the living and the Dead, Heaven and Earth. There is the strong belief that the ancestors are benevolent spirits. They return to their human families from time to time because, symbolically, they are believed to be always present and spiritually in control of the family's affairs. Thus, in times of trouble, a client may be required to perform sacrifice for *oku orun* (his parents in Heaven) as the only panacea to the problem. Sometimes failure to connect with the ancestors through prayer and sacrifices is believed to lead to catastrophe.

Divinities

Divinities are collectively called *abosom* (Akani), *orisa* (Yoruba), and *vudu* (Ewe-Fon). Some of them are believed to be supernatural beings, forces, or nature spirits that control the affairs of the cosmos. Divinities were brought into being by Olodumare, and some participated in the work of creation and continue to intervene in the affairs of human beings. These divinities are in great number because they are in every facet of human endeavors. For example, Ogun is in charge of warfare, hunting, and modern technology; and Orunmila is in charge of wisdom, destiny of humanity, and agriculture. Asase Yaa is an Earth goddess. These divinities are held to be messengers of the Supreme Being and guardians of human beings.

Supreme Being

Nyame (Akan), *Mawu* (Ewe), *Nyonmo* (Ga), *Chukwu* (Igbo), *Ngewo* (Mende), and *Olodumare* (Yoruba) are some of the names used for the Supreme Deity in West Africa. Is the Supreme Being

over and above all categories of supernatural beings? Although divinities, in many cases, serve as mediating forces between human beings and the Supreme Being, it is God who controls the affairs of the divinities and human beings. The Supreme Being is the center and the core of WAR. All the attributes of the divinities are subsumed and, in fact, reinforced in the Supreme Being. Among the Yoruba, *Olodumare* is known as the ultimate Orisa. Among the Ewe, *Mawu* is *Togbe* (Grandfather) of all. The Ga call Nyonmo by the title *Ataa-Naa* (Grandfather and Grandmother) of all creation. If we are to go by the Yoruba cosmology and theology, which is not different from what obtains in other West African nations and ethnic groups, we can say that West African religion is Olodumareism. The uniqueness of the position of Olodumare caused Idowu to describe Yoruba religion as diffused monotheism with Olodumare as the kernel of the doctrine and theology of the religion. Olodumareism, Nyameism, Mawuism, Chukwuism, Nyonmoism, and so on, taken together, may be called WAR or, as Asante and Nwadiora say, Popular Traditional African Religion Everywhere (PTARE) or, as Lugira claims, Africism.

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See also Africism

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WHITE

Colors, in general, can have a profound effect on human emotion, state of mind, and spirit because they are visual energy radiating from spectrums of

light. Volumes of complex scientific research have been carried out for years on the subject of colors to support the fact that humans feel and react to various spectrums of light wavelengths that register on the human eye and brain's light photoreceptors. For example, reflect on the emotional effect of viewing a large arching rainbow across a brilliant blue sky after a rainstorm, gazing at a botanical garden overflowing with exotic multi-colored flowers, and looking out at a gathering of people of African descent dressed in bright-colored dashikis, robes, and dresses. The science of chromatics often attempts to find answers to the questions surrounding humans' color perception and reactions. Scientifically, the color white is the fusion of all the colors of the visible light spectrum. Technically, white is not a true color, but achromatic like black because it has no hue. However, in the art and spirituality of color interpretations, uses, and myths—white has positively affected and elevated people of African descent and humans, in general, spiritually, emotionally, and socially for thousands of years. But white can be a controversial color in some Western cultures, as can the colors red and black. For example, red is associated with uncontrollable anger, aggressive sexual energy, senseless violence, and “Native American” people. Black is aligned with bad, lowest level, ugly, and African descendants. White is linked with good, purity, beauty, and European descendants. Colors, like other aspects and elements of a society, can be politically and culturally defined or infused with a belief system.

One extremely controversial aspect of the color white is that it has been infused with a Eurocentric cultural and political belief that the group of people with pale to olive white skin have superior intelligence, culture, and religion. The politicizing of the white human body as superior to black, brown, red, or yellow skin tones has caused untold suffering of millions of people of color. Two helocausts (worst of holocausts) occurred on the soil of the Western Hemisphere; they were initiated and sustained by the malicious political, cultural, and economic thrust of white supremacy: “Native American” genocide and West African enslavement. White skin does not make a person superior, nor is the color white superior. In the final analysis, it is a person's or people's consistent deeds toward people and nature that reflect their

state of humanity—not their physical color. (Some scholars of African descent have contested that people should not be judged or named by their skin color, but by their geographical, cultural, or religion's location and conduct.) All colors have their places in nature and advantages at a particular times. However, in a significant number of African cultures and societies, the color white has a unique political place, and cultural center—and spiritual space. For example, Kemet (ancient Egypt) utilized the symbolism in the white crown and pyramid; people of Central Africa used white chalk in societal and cultural rituals; and people wear white garments and cowrie shell jewelry in traditional West African diaspora religions and wear white clothing in Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches in America during sacred church rituals.

The white crown (Hedjet) adorned the heads of the pharaohs of Upper Kemet (ancient Egypt) during high ceremonial moments in the kingdom. The choice of the white crown and its style dates back in time to the Northern Nubia civilization and possibly including the predynastic period, approximately 5500 to 3100 BC. During this early period in the history of Kemet, there were advancements in constructing permanent agriculture and farm settlements, which allowed the people's diet to consist of nutrients from domesticated animals and grains. Also, stone and metal tools were in use, and the construction of baskets, pottery, and weaving and the tanning of animal skins developed. As well, burial customs shifted to locating the Dead a distance from the area of the living, and the spiritual belief in *life after death* emerged. An innocence and new human era ushered in the continuing forward progress of humanity. The Pharaoh's white crown was one visual symbol to reflect a new state and era for humans—a unique and spiritual nation had materialized. The white crown on the head of the Pharaoh encapsulated and symbolized its innocence, its unique spiritual state, and the rising power of the nation that, in time, would have its history inscribed in thousands of books in libraries worldwide, placed in permanent and traveling world-class museum exhibits, and recorded in the memory of humanity globally.

The zenith of Kemet's spiritual ascension and human enlightenment was reflected greatly in the white monolithic structure that rose from the

Earth and could be seen for miles across the desert as white-hot sun beamed on it like no other man-made edifice on the Earth for thousands of years. In approximately 2550 BC, the masons and artisans of Kemet encased the most enduring human-made spiritual structure with brilliantly polished white granite rock. The newly constructed white Pyramid Giza reflected the ascension of a nation's engineering and spiritual development. The massive white structure for Pharaoh Khufu consisted of approximately 20 years of spiritual inspiration, extraordinary engineering and construction, exceptional artistic creativity, and a dedicated labor force. The material for the great white Pyramid Giza for the departed pharaoh consisted of approximately 2,400,000 large cut granite rocks that ascended 480 feet and weighed 6,000,000 tons. Still today, humanity is in awe of the engineering, size, and spirituality of the Great Pyramid Giza even stripped of its brilliant white polished stone casing. When the Great Pyramid Giza was adorned spiritual white, Kemet was at a spiritual apex. We can only dream of the humble, uplifting, and spiritual feeling in our hearts and souls if we could have stood 700 feet in front of the Great White Pyramid Giza as it was lit up by the white-hot sun—7 days after its completion.

A few thousand years from the pinnacle period in Kemet history (2550 BC) to the traditional people of central Africa (Lower Congo/Democratic Republic of the Congo), the color white was used as a symbolic color language, but in a different methodology and for different reasons. For example, the use of white chalk, clay or powder, and white cloth and clothing in their rituals and ceremonies act as social and spiritual catalysts to represent justice and secret societies initiation, reflect knowledge, invoke healing, and represent symbols of health, marital harmony, hunting, good luck, war, and death. White pigment powder was daubed or poured on people's black bodies to denote innocence in profane judicial disputes, altercations, and divorce processes. The whitening of bodies after the settling of internal disagreements, acts of aggression, and marriage turmoil implied *not guilty* after disputes, *being correct* after altercations, and *cause no injury* after terminated marriages. Also, the chief judge during judicial processes is marked with white chalk to reflect his ability to reason and issue

justice. White clay is smeared on the novices after they have completed some pretasks to prepare for their initiation into the secret society. After the ritual death and resurrection in the secret society, a meal of chalk is given to the new members for consumption; once all of the chalk is digested, their shaven heads are covered with chalk. New names are bestowed during a special ceremony that is public after the long training. After passing an examination, they are painted white again and finally seen as members in the *nkisi* inner circle (secret society). As the new members acquire secret, sacred, and spiritual insights, more daubs of white chalk are placed on their bodies as symbolic expressions that they have attained white knowledge.

Additionally, the traditional people of central Africa associate white chalk with health and marital harmony. White chalk adorns the body while healing songs are chanted to activate their belief system. For large numbers of traditional people of Central Africa, their time-tested experiences have taught them that there is a greater chance that healing the body, mind, and spirit can occur when layered with good medicine, needed rest, and a dynamic spiritual belief in recovery. The use of white chalk in marital harmony is just as paramount because health and healing have a direct connection to the survival of society. Often the outcomes of marital harmony are babies, and their superb health, survival, and longevity are imperative to the nation's continual development and existence. White clay is ground up to chalk and mixed with other herbs and administered to women to facilitate childbirth and to treat infant illnesses. As well, they believe that a less quarrelsome marriage is a foundation stone in attaining marital harmony that prevents negative consequences to the mother, children, and relationship. White-colored chalk is included in a medicinal herbs mixture, which is lit afire and placed on the ground to the sounds of drumming, singing, and bells ringing. During the ritual, the overly unlucky hunters place some of the white chalk mixture in their mouths and spit it on the Earth to change their hunting outcomes. The hunters' ritual with white chalk acts as a catalyst to enhance their belief that animals will be found and captured for food.

The last two white color ritual symbolisms associated with the peoples of Central Africa (Lower Congo/Democratic Republic of the Congo) are

war and death. The use of secret white chalk medicine placed in a sculpture while singing infuses the confidence of invisibility and invulnerability during war. White is believed to be a significant attribute of the inner body. The soul is white, invisible, and invulnerable. Therefore, the belief in the protection by white chalk medicine allows a Central African warrior to have assurance in his immortality. When death comes, as it always does (a transition, no end), the people of Central Africa smear their black bodies in white chalk, symbolizing mourning for the dead. White cloth mourning bands are worn on their heads to represent that no physical or spiritual wrong was done to the deceased person, and all of the appropriate obligations were done when she or he walked in this realm of existence. A white shroud is placed on the corpse, and white chalk-smear sculptures are placed on the gravesite of the deceased. The people of Central Africa believe profoundly that the use of the white shroud and chalks in the death ritual reveals that the deceased was a good person and is spiritually white in the afterlife. The world of the Dead consists of brilliant white.

The spiritual worldview of the Yorubas in Nigeria and traditional African religion in the diaspora is that the Archorisha, Obatala, always dresses in white garments to reflect his status in the pantheon of the Orisha. Obatala is the wise compassionate elder and he is spiritually white. His name is said to imply that he is a King who wears White Cloth. Obatala's white robe symbolically represents his spiritual purity, moral energy, and higher consciousness. In the mythology of Yoruba-based and Yoruba-inspired spiritual paths and religions in the Black world, Obatala is appeased and honored with sincerity and respect. The Creator in Yoruba cosmogony, Olodumare, bestowed on Obatala the honor to create the other Orishas and humanity for devotion and service to each other. People of African descent walk into West African-based ceremonies in Haiti (Vodou), Brazil (Candomble, Umbanda, and Quimbanda), Cuba (Lucumi), Puerto Rico (Santeria), Jamaica (Obeah), Trinidad (Spiritual Baptist), the United States (Vodou, Yoruba, Akan, Candomble, Umbanda, Santeria, Spiritual Baptist, and Hoodoo), and so on wearing white in the same manner as Obatala walks the road in a white robe—peacefully and spiritually. During ceremonies in traditional West

African religions in the diaspora, the sacred space is charged by polyrhythmic drumming, call-and-response singing, praising of the Orishas (or Lwas), and spirit transcending with many of the participants dressed in white outfits and wearing white cowrie shells. White candles and white flowers (also with other colors) are positioned on and around the Altar to enhance the aesthetics. Spiritually chosen people can experience flashes of white light (or blackouts) when the Spirits arrive during the gathering to occupy their heads and souls. It is in that spiritualized space that the devotees of traditional West African religions in the diaspora believe that readings of the future can occur, physical healings can happen, and spiritualized trances can take hold.

African American Holiness-Pentecostal and Spirited Baptist Christians can mistakenly be viewed as not being connected with traditional West African religions. However, in essence, their spiritual passion (long and high-energy church services, call-and-response sermons), worship methodology (sweat singing, polyrhythmic hand clapping, and playing of percussion instruments), daily devotion (a serious attempt to live a fundamentally good and righteous life every day), spirit elevation (swept up by the Holy Ghost Spirit, spirit dancing, speaking in tongues, and faith healing), and wearing white garments during sacred religious events actually mirror similar activities of Black people on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and various locations in the African diaspora. Inside the deepest places in their hearts and souls, they are actually cloaking West African Vodou, Yoruba, and Akan deep spiritual elements, although they outwardly believe and live the tenets of Western American Christianity (of course, they would fervently disagree; however, objective research would prove the position). For example, there are three religious rituals to which many African American Holiness-Pentecostal and Spirited Baptist Christians wear white clothing, and they are sacred bedrocks and cornerstones of their religious belief: Baptismal, Communion Sunday, and Washing of Feet. Baptismal is a ritualized reenactment of an event described in the Bible, when John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. Every year, millions of African American Holiness-Pentecostal and Spirited Baptist Christians are baptized in white clothing to symbolize rebirth

and purity. On Communion Sunday, they perform rituals of the last supper of Jesus on Mount Zion by eating white bread or crackers (symbolizing Jesus' body) and drinking dark grape juice or wine (symbolizing Jesus' blood) while dressed in white clothing as they recite the departure words that they believe wholeheartedly were spoken approximately 2,000 years ago. Generally, after the Communion Sunday ritual, members of the church wash one another's feet with a white towel while wearing white garments as a symbol of humility (Jesus washed the feet of his disciples). During Baptismal, Communion Sunday, and Washing of Feet rituals, there is a group of primarily women wearing white dresses who usher participants to the proper location in church services and rituals. African traditional religious experiences appear similar to these behaviors.

From the most early times in Kemet history (4000 BC) and up to the current times in the African diaspora (AD 2008), black people have chosen the color white to be placed on their spiritual and cultural buildings, and they use white chalk in their sacred social and political moments. As well, we wear white clothing and cowrie shells, and we use white cloth, candles, and flowers during spiritual ceremonies and religious rituals. Black people ascend to a higher state of a psychological, emotional, and spiritual being when they worship in white structures, adorn their bodies with white chalk, and wear white clothing during West African traditional spiritual ceremonies. Descendants of West Africans transcend to a spiritually white state of mind and soul while dressed in white clothing (at times combined with blue, gold, red, purple, and green) during the passionate participation in highly charged cultural, sacred, and religious ritual space.

Ibo Changa

See also Red

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WIND

Wind, like many other forces of nature, has a variety of distinct manifestations that African peoples have incorporated into their religious beliefs and practices. These distinct manifestations of wind are caused by the unique regional climates of Africa. In turn, people's perception of wind is influenced by how the wind impacts their daily lives. For example, the Harmattan is a wind that blows from the southern Sahara to the Gulf of Guinea from November to March; it brings with it dust, hazy skies, and short tempers because of the extreme amounts of dust it deposits over parts of West Africa. Among the Yoruba, the wind that accompanies rain, lightning, and thunder is a manifestation of the orisha Shango. Fierce wind that is not accompanied by rain is Oya. Oya is a consort of Shango and has her own stormlike characteristics. She can strike down houses and has a face so terrible that no one dares look at it. More contemporary associations with Oya are the places hit by storms or hurricanes in the Americas and the winds of change that blow strongly and frequently in the modern world. Conversely, a gentle wind is associated with the orisha Eshu.

Among the San, wind is personified in a story that informs the listener of the powerful nature of the Wind. The Wind and a young boy were rolling a ball between them. The Wind called the boy's name, but the boy did not know the Wind's name. He asked his mother to tell him the name of the Wind. She advised him to wait until she asked his father to secure the house before she said Wind's name. However, after she had done so, the boy was instructed to run away when he felt the wind because it could blow him away. After the hut was secured, the boy uttered the name of the Wind (/érriten-!kuan-!kuan; !gua- !guabu-ti), and his companion fell down. In doing so, houses vanished, dust rose, and people could not see. The mother of the Wind came out of her house and stood the boy up, at which time the wind became still. So, the San say that when the Wind is blowing hard, it has lain down, and when there is no Wind, it is standing up.

Another tale from Ethiopia casts the wind as the judge between a farmer and a snake. The farmer saves the snake. Subsequently, the snake plans to eat the farmer. The farmer protests and seeks to have his case judged. After consulting with the tree, the river, and the grass, who all side with the snake because of their mistreatment by humans, the Wind declares that it is not a matter for judgment, but that each must act in accord with its own nature. The Wind gives the snake and the farmer each a drum to play. The snake releases the farmer to hold the drum. The farmer escapes to his village.

Among the Dogon, at creation, a great wind broke from inside of the po, the tiniest element of creation. This wind, called Amma, moves in a spiral motion and provides the energy by which all things are created.

Denise Martin

See also Water

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WINTI

Winti is the expression of African religion in Suriname, a country located on the northeast coast of South America, facing the Atlantic Ocean to the north and bordering Brazil to the south. On the east side, its border with French Guyana is formed by the Marowynne River, and on the west side, its border with Guyana is formed by the Corantyn River. Suriname occupies an area of some 46,060 square miles and has a population of approximately 470,000.

Suriname is a multicultural country. The largest ethnic groups are the East Indians or Hindustanis, the Africans who are divided into maroons and nonmaroons (also called “creoles”), and the Indonesian Javanese. In addition to these, there are smaller groups, such as the indigenous South American Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, and Dutch Europeans. Although the African population is no longer the largest ethnic group, they have tended to dominate the political scene, comprising some 31% of the population, with the East Indians representing approximately 37% of the population. The Suriname forests are home to the largest maroon populations in the Americas. Suriname still has some 60,000 maroons.

Introduction to African Suriname Religion

Winti is the cultural-religious heritage and essential product of approximately four traditional African religions. Over the centuries, these have been fused into one as a result of the socialization of Africans from different ethnic groups brought to Suriname during the slave trade. The Winti religion is part of a strong African cultural heritage that has sustained itself in Suriname despite centuries of slavery and cultural oppression. The development and practice of the Winti religion has been attacked, obstructed, and inhibited over the centuries by the colonial culture, in general, and the Christian churches, in particular. Winti was declared taboo; it was associated with the occult and with the calling of demonic powers. The whole Winti faith was put in the sphere of “black magic” and became symbolic of a lower social status in the country.

Some people of the capital town and coastal area also associate it with the maroons who live in the interior forest.

Despite this, the Winti religion survived and continues to manifest itself in the people’s culture. People often practice it in secret and gather in places outside of town. This is how Winti developed a secret character. Many people in the capital practice Christianity by day and Winti in secret at night. Others attempted to forget about it altogether, but were, through cultural circumstances, made to at least respect it. Some upper- or middle-class “creoles” from the capital claim not to believe in Winti, but when they encounter a problem in life that may appear to be a “health” problem, which cannot be cured by Western medicine, their elders usually recommend that they seek resolution through Winti. These days, increasing numbers of people are openly professing their religious beliefs and more easily expressing their feelings regarding their faith in Winti.

Essential Principles and Concepts of Winti

In Winti, the supreme God, which is omnipotent, omnipresent, and all knowing, is called Anana Kedoeaman Kedoeampon, meaning “God of Heaven and Earth.” The name Anana Kedoeaman Kedoeampon originates from the Fante-Akan name for the same, Anana Tweaduaman Tweaduampon. Winti concepts and vocabulary originate and draw heavily from the Fante-Akan tradition and also combine with other West African ethnic traditions, especially Ga, Ewe, Fon, West Bantu, and some Yoruba. Depending on the geographic location in Suriname, whether coastal or interior, Winti may have more or less influence from one or the other traditional African ethnic heritage, as well as a few indigenous American Indian–originated spirits and words.

Winti cosmology consists of a complex hierarchical system of spirits, with Anana Kedoeaman Kedoeampon at the top. The pantheon of Winti spans four major categories of nature spirits, in which each has its own subdivisions of lesser gods (see Figure 1). The Winti, in this sense, can be compared to the Abosom in Akan tradition and the Orisha in the Yoruba tradition. Mbiti points out that the Yoruba have 1,700 Orisha. In Winti, in addition to the major deities and minor

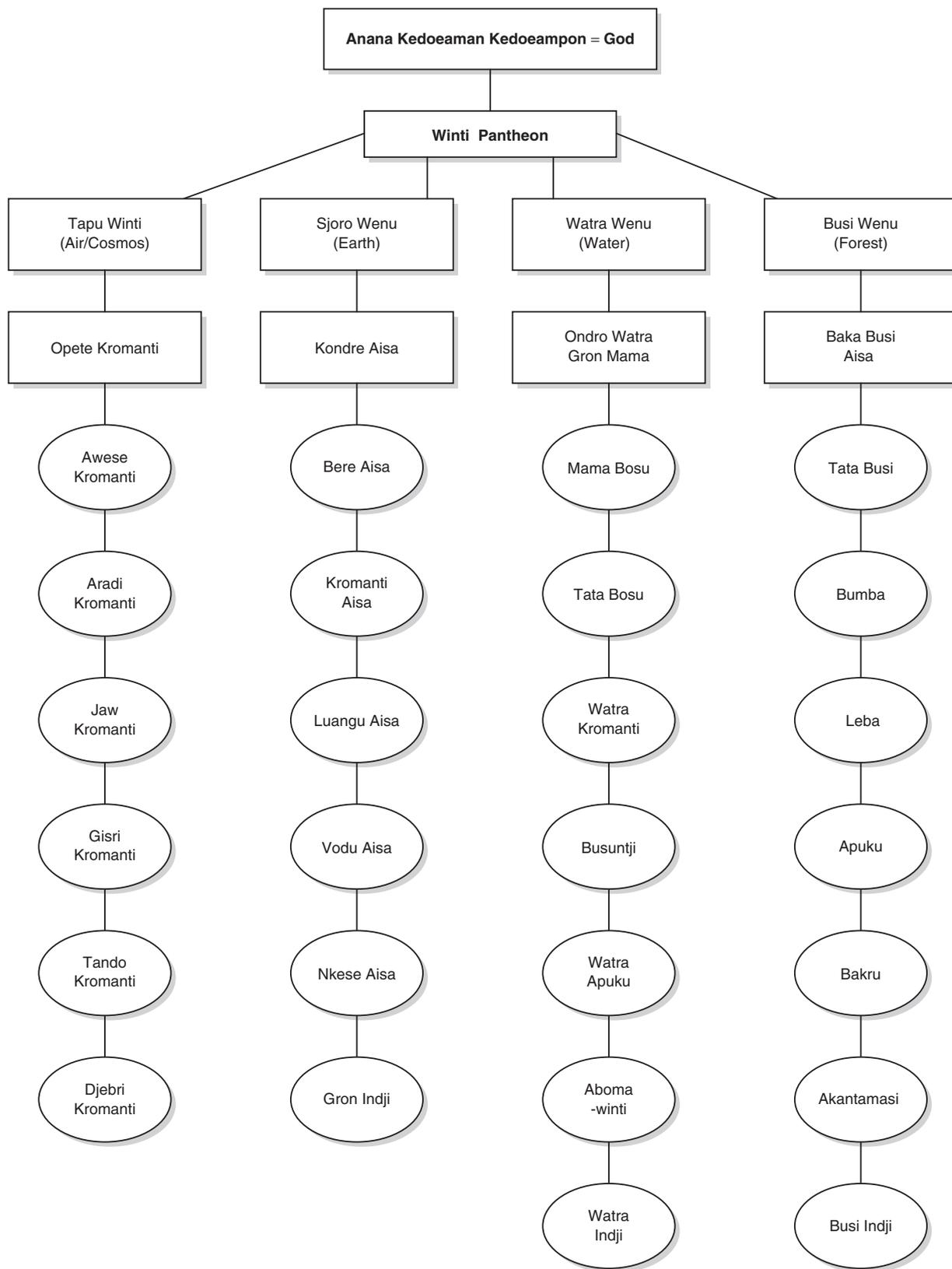


Figure 1 Winti Pantheon

subdeities in the Winti pantheon, the immortal human soul and its integration to the complex of ancestral human spirits is a central feature of Winti cosmology. This is consistent with the traditional African religious/philosophical view that the human soul is part of the divine spiritual world making every human being unique with an intrinsic dignity and value.

The Spiritual Human Soul Triad

In Winti, as in other African religions, the physical and the spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe. Further, humans are conceived as biological/material and spiritual beings. The biological/material is the body and its material contents, and the spiritual soul consists of three parts: (1) the kra or akra (from the Fante “okra”), (2) the djodjo, and (3) the jorka. When one dies, the kra is transformed into a jorka (ancestral spirit), through which human beings are integrated into the spiritual, cosmological world. Because Anana Kedoeaman Kedoeapon is all encompassing, omnipotent, and all knowing, one cannot address oneself directly to it. This is done using the “kra,” the spiritual self, which is directed to the nature spirits also known as Winti, konfo, or jeje. The kra is the spiritual cradle of a person and is accompanied by the djodjo. In Winti cosmology, it is believed that every person has “parents” in the spiritual world that are called *djodjo*; this term is derived from the Ewe “djo” and the Fon “djoto.” Every person has two djodjo, one male and one female, that could be higher or lower “Gods”; people enjoy their protection, and they can be compared to the concept of guardian angels. The Kra and the djodjo are the two basic components of the spiritual makeup of a person while alive. As a person grows from a child to an adult, his or her Kra also grows (expands) to accommodate and develop other aspects of the human spirit. This spiritual growth can be consciously facilitated. The Djodjo is an indispensable support to the Kra in the spiritual makeup of a person.

Every human being has a kra, consisting of male and female parts, which at birth separates itself from the mother’s kra and becomes independent. There are a couple of different theories as to

the stage of pregnancy, whether upon conception or after 6 months of pregnancy, the kra and the djodjo are formed in the fetus. Some believe that the djodjo is developed after birth in childhood and then comes to support the kra.

The kra is the most essential part of the total human spirit. All people have an independent spirit, but it is still dependent on a larger whole. As long as the Kra spiritually controls the body, it means spiritual well-being, stability, and will power. When someone dies, the kra and the djodjo transform into one and become a Jorka. This term comes from the Carib-Indian word *joroka* and is sometimes also called *djumbi*, meaning “ancestral spirit.” The jorka continues to live in the hereafter, known as *dede kondre* or *samandow*.

The kra goes through various Earthly human experiences and sometimes finds itself in difficult situations. The kra is also said to be related to one’s instincts and will power. When difficulties or misfortunes occur in life, it could be due to the weakening of these spiritual “senses.” This must be “diagnosed” by a luku. A luku is a consultative visit to a lukuman. A lukuman is one who does a spiritual assessment; this involves a ceremony during which the lukuman consults a particular deity on behalf of his “patient.” This deity allows the lukuman while in trance to “see” the spiritual health/problems of a person; he can then tell the person what the problem is and refer the person to a healer called a Bonuman.

A bonuman is a spiritual healer, guide, and leader in the Winti religion. Some Bonumen can also provide the service of a luku, but many cannot because these are two separate procedures/rituals that require communication with different gods. This communication always involves rituals, prayer, and a self-induced trance, which the luku or bonu must facilitate to communicate with the particular deity or spirit. When spiritual difficulties arise, the kra is said to be soiled and therefore needs washing and strengthening. Hence, the washing and feeding of the kra is a ritual that Winti practitioners undertake once or twice in their lives to strengthen their kra; this is usually done on their birthday. It is also necessary sometimes to feed the djodjo at that time, so special foods are prepared and offered in ritual ceremony.

To maintain spiritual wellness, it is sometimes recommended to wash the kra and provide food offerings to the particular Winti that corresponds to a particular person's kra and djodjo. The corresponding Winti depends partially on the day of the week one was born. Just as in the Akan tradition, the weekday of one's birth determines the name of one's kra, and there are a total of seven names for both sexes. They also correspond to personality types. In Suriname, these names are usually only used during the purification rituals of the kra, during which the male and female version of the name is called.

Three Categories of Ancestor Spirits

The spirit or soul of a deceased person is divided into three categories. As noted previously, the first is the jorka, which is the name reserved for persons who have passed recently or in the not so distant past. This corresponds to the category of the living dead who are so termed because their process of dying is not complete for up to five generations.

The next category is called kabra, which is the general name that refers to the spirit of ancestors who have been deceased for at least seven generations. The kabra is also an ancestral spirit that has been reborn at least once in one of his or her descendants. This quality in the kabra is an example of the Winti belief in the principle of reincarnation.

The last and most senior category of spirit of a deceased person is called profen, which are the ancestral spirits of our forefathers and -mothers that passed in Africa. It is believed that their spirits accompanied their descendants to the diaspora. The profen, besides being a spirit of a person who was never christened when he or she was alive, is also the spirit of the patrilineal sanguine clan called bere or lo. The profen are the spiritual founders of the patrilineal clan. Each member of the clan shares the same spiritual founder, and therefore they share major communal rituals.

Other aspects of a person's spiritual makeup are dependent on a variety of other influences; examples of these are as follows:

1. The spiritual forces (Winti) that a person is exposed to or presented with during his or her life.

2. The Winti that are tied to a family via the familial (maternal and paternal) ancestral line of spirits (the jorka, kabra, and profen).
3. The Winti that regulate all other life forms (e.g., plants, animals, life under water, and life in the air).
4. The Winti that do not expose themselves to anyone, but still ensure that life remains intact.

Winti teachings say that people must direct themselves to their spiritual possibilities. Spiritual life must be ordered by the operation of spiritual links and divine laws, and furthermore, spiritual stability and harmony are dependent on this. The absence or violation of one of these spiritual links can mean disharmony. With faith in Winti, one can nourish oneself spiritually.

The Winti Pantheon

The Winti religion recognizes four pantheons, each with its own particular theological society of gods and spirits, divided into male, female, and child gods, of which most have retained their African names and characteristics. The four pantheons of air, Earth, water, and forest consist of the following gods:

1. *The Tapu-Winti or Tapu Kromanti gods of the air, universes, and cosmos.* Wooding states that these Tapu-Winti are popular gods in the Para region of Suriname because these gods are known to have come directly from Africa along with the ancestors. The belief is that these gods selected the people from Para and protected them. They are all high gods that are particularly concerned with the spiritual cleanliness of the people. The colors with which they are associated are white, blue, and black. The word *Kromanti* in Winti indicates sacred black African nobility. It is also a sacred spiritual language only spoken by Winti spiritual leaders.

Among the pantheon of the Tapu-Winti, there are seven gods. The first is Opete. This god dominates the pantheon of the air or cosmos gods and is associated with thunder. He is endowed with knowledge and wisdom. He maintains the contact between the pantheon and God the Creator and also with Africa from whence he originates. The word *opete* means vulture in Fante-Akan, and its meaning remains the same in this area, although it

refers to the king of all vultures. There are six other associate gods in this pantheon, but they are all subordinate to the Opete Kromanti (see Figure 1).

2. *The Sjoro-weno are gods of the Earth.* The commanding gods in this category are the kondre aisa. They are notably female, they are the god of a village or a particular group of villages, and they give protection to that specific community. Mbiti points out that, in the Akan tradition, the Earth is also considered a female divinity. The lesser gods in the Earth category are particular clan gods. The word *bere* or *lo* refers to the clan. These clans trace their spiritual origins back to particular African ethnic groups, and this is usually reflected in the name of the bere. Wooding says, for example, that all of the gron Winti or kondre aisa for the Para villages are Luangu Aisa, which indicates that their origins are from the Cameroon and Congo-Angola area.

The various bere (clans) can be traced to West-Bantu, Fanti-Akan, Ewe, Fon, and Yoruba. All the aisa lesser gods manifest themselves in various types of snakes, and they are all usually female (see Figure 1). Snakes are consequently sacred in the Winti faith.

3. *The Watra weno are the gods of the water kingdom.* The commander of these water gods is Ondro Watra Gron Mama, or underwater ground mother. In the Para villages, she is also known as Mama Bosu, a soft and friendly goddess that manifests herself as a Cayman. Among the lesser gods in this society is Tata Bosu, the husband of Watra Wenu. All Kromanti water gods, which are in the service of the Watra mama, are called Busuntji. The word *Busuntji* comes from the combination of the word *busun* or *busrun*, meaning “spiritual purification bath water,” and *tji* or *dji*, meaning “supernatural being.”

It is interesting to note here that there is a striking similarity between the meanings of this word in Suriname and the name of the natural lake in Ghana called Bosumtwi, which the Asante hold sacred because they believe that when they die their souls go to the lake to say farewell to their god *twi* before going on to the hereafter.

4. *The Busi weno is the spiritual associate of the plant and forest kingdom.* The Baka Busi Aisa

or Baka Busi Mama, along with her husband and male counterpart, Tata Loko, are important forest gods, but they are also familial gods connected to a bere and a gron Winti and are therefore important. However, in the forest, there is also the Busi mama, who is a supernatural being; she is the female owner of the forest and not part of any bere. She can determine if and when people find their way out of the forest. The Baka Busi of the Para region that are bere aisa are all divided into Kromanti (Fanti-Akan), Vodou (Fon), Nkese (West Bantu), Luagu (West-Bantu), Tata Busi or Mbumba (Congo), Leba (Ewe-Fon) Kromanti Apuku or Adumankama, Bakru, and the Akantamasi (Fanti-Akan), all named after their African ethnic origins (see Figure 1).

Last, there are the Busi Indji, which are the supernatural beings of indigenous American Indian origin.

Winti Rites

In Winti, the essential customary rites and observances are directly connected to paying tribute to and satisfying the divinities and the ancestral (Kabra) spirits. If the divinities or ancestral spirits are neglected, they can cause spiritual disharmony or illness in their descendants. Belief dictates that the ancestral spirits from both the maternal and paternal sides of the family must be honored and satisfied through customary rites and observances. Winti rites are divided into four categories: (1) initiation, (2) prevention, (3) purification, and (4) healing rites.

Winti practice includes public and private rites and observances. However, unlike other African religious expressions in the Americas, such as Vodun, Santeria, and Candomble, which tend to have more public rites, Winti has mostly private rites. Another aspect of Winti that makes it unique in the Americas is that it contains little influence from Christianity, unlike like Santeria, Candomble, Vodun, and others.

The public rites in Winti are known as Winti pré, which are communal and are typically held for some of the reasons mentioned. In a Winti pré, the participants are typically dressed in colors that correspond to the particular divinity. A Winti pré ceremony consists of ritual music, singing, and dancing, and it usually lasts all

night. The instruments played in the typical Winti ceremony are the drums, which are key to calling on the divinities. The *adjida* drum, the largest, is 3 meters in length; the face of the drum is about 35 centimeters wide, and it is played with a stick and on a stand so that the drum leans on an approximately 45-degree angle. This drum, like some played in West Africa for the same reasons, is sacred and is only allowed to be played in sacred rites. Before this drum is played, it must be washed with beer or some alcoholic beverage, sprinkled with white clay powder (*pemba doti*), and covered with a cloth of the corresponding colors.

Other drums include the *mandron* drum, which is about the same length as the *adjida*, but more slender; and the *apinti* drum, which is a smaller stout-looking drum and is the same as the *mpintin* of the Asante. There are also a few other small drum types and percussion instruments, but the instrument with the most dominant distinctive sound is the *kwakwa*, which is a small wooden bench that is played with two thick sticks. This instrument provides the musical landscape for the other instruments and vocal chorus. The *kwakwa* is a product of Congo heritage; the same instrument is also called *kwa-kwa* in Congo, and the sticks, called *kula* or *nkula*, also have the same name in Congo.

Aside from the instrumentation, there is group singing in the typical call-and-response style. Dancing is done typically in single file, forming a moving circle of men and women. At some point during the group dancing, the divinity answers the call and possesses one of the participants. In this case, possession is a welcome aspect of the rite and is usually immediately apparent, as the person moves in a manner that identifies with a particular animal, which corresponds to that particular divinity (i.e., snake, bird, etc.). Possession is often intense and may not last more than a minute or two, after which the person faints in exhaustion. However, while in trance, the body dances and moves in ways one would normally not think possible.

Conclusion

The Winti tradition and practice is one in which rituals play a prominent role. To achieve a particular

spiritual objective, one must often perform a series of rituals that are dependent on each other in a specified time frame. In the Winti religion, the *bonu* Winti stands for life and harmony corresponding to the name *bonuman*, and its opposite, *wisi*, which stands for destruction. The *wisi* man, who is a spiritualist who conducts socially destructive work through spiritual means, through the manipulation of supernatural forces usually directed at a particular person or family, also facilitates *wisi* or destruction. When *wisi* work is executed, it can result in sickness or even death of the target person unless a *bonu* or other positive spiritual force successfully counters it. This dichotomy is reflective of the dialectics of human life and the forces of nature.

Wisi is often the reason that people fear Winti—first because of general ignorance of the religion and, second, because accounts of *wisi* are highlighted more in society rather than the *bonu* and other aspects of the religion. A *bonuman* is the spiritual guide or priest/leader in the Winti religion. Through his spiritual abilities, he fulfills his tasks and helps guide one to an enriched and healthy spiritual future. Through a combination of the elements of nature (i.e., plant life, water, certain types of animals, and air or life breath) with singing, dancing, and drumming, one can achieve internal spiritual satisfaction.

In all Winti rituals and ceremonies, prayer is indispensable. Without prayer, no ritual is possible. Winti, like other religions, provides a strong moral guide that is closely connected to communal and family life. Research shows that there is an intimate connection among the physical, mental, and spiritual health of a person; when this relationship is evaluated for the Surinamese, belief in Winti must be considered. Winti religious culture demonstrates that the fundamental aspects of various traditional African religions have been retained in the proud African Surinamese religious heritage. This cultural heritage deserves to be respected, and its essential principles should be studied, understood, and regarded without the prejudice and stigma inherent in the colonial cultural paradigm. The fundamental aspects of Winti, like other African-based religions, should be studied by present generations so as not to fall prey to some of the age-old colonial misunderstandings

and prejudices while taking a critical look with a view at possibly eliminating any dysfunctional aspects of the tradition.

Djibo Sobukwe

See also Candomblé; Vodou in Haiti; Yoruba

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WOLOF

Traditionally, the Wolof language and people are considered to have derived from Mali after the fall of ancient Ghana. They were considered a wide socially organized group referred to as the Djolof Empire, which historically dwelled in the northwestern part of Senegal in the 14th century. A strong linguistic case has been made to show that the western African Wolof people derive from ancient Kemet.

The kinship between Wolof and Medu Neter (ancient Egyptian language) is critical in pointing out Wolof's language heritage that is not solely restricted to a 13th- or 14th-century blank slate appearance. Languages are never isolated systems, and there is always change.

More than 3 million people speak the Wolof language, and they primarily dwell in the Senegal and Gambia regions. The language could be

considered one of Africa's most bonding languages. Wolof is a national language that is commonly spoken by many citizens of Senegal.

The Wolof people are family oriented. They are intelligent, and many work as peanut and cotton farmers and merchant traders of various other products. The Wolof people predominately practice Islam, which was brought to Senegal from Mauretania as early as the 11th century, but they are not adverse to the use of the Wolof ritualist referred to as *jabarkat*, for example, who makes use of various religious devices to protect a person specifically against evil spirits. Under Islam, there is the use of brotherhoods led by khalifs who have instituted a strong system of discipline and discipleship.

As for the populated urban areas of Wolof people, there is the capital city named Dakar where a high concentration of Wolof people reside. Dakar, Senegal, is geographically the most western part of Africa. There are Wolof-speaking people in Mali and Mauritania, as well as Gambia and Guinea, but most Wolof are located in Senegal.

Jorge Serrano

See also Bamana

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WOMEN

Women occupy a paradoxical status in traditional African communities. They possess power and authority in their own right, but also live in some societies that have been reluctant to value the role of women equally alongside that of men. Africa may have started with matriarchal societies, but these were replaced with the intervention of both

Arab and European religions and customs. Now the overwhelming majority of African societies are patriarchal. As in all patriarchal societies, women are generally viewed as being second to men. However, they are not considered inferior. In myths, legends, proverbs, and day-to-day life, women are portrayed as partners with God in the creation of human life and, at the same time, the cause of the estrangement between humanity and God; as powerful and weak at the same time; and as helpful companions to men, yet possible wreckers of men's lives.

African traditional religious thought and belief generally recognizes females and males as ontologically similar. A number of creation stories told among many African peoples show that the two genders were created by the same God with the same substance. A myth among the Tutsi of Rwanda, for instance, indicates that the original man and woman were created and kept in paradise. Other myths such as those of the Akamba, Luo, Turkana, and Luhya people of Kenya; the Baganda and Banyoro people of Uganda; and the Yoruba and Ibo of Nigeria indicate that the original humans were male and female and were lowered by God unto the Earth.

Some myths also illustrate the fact that it was through a woman that God created the rest of humanity. The Akposso people of Togo, for instance, have a myth that suggests that the first human being was a woman, who brought forth other humans. The same is true of the Ijaw of Nigeria, who believe that the female Woyengi is the Great Creator.

Despite the fact that these myths portray the original woman as the direct link between humanity and God, other myths portray women as the cause of human separation from God. The Akans of Ghana, for instance, have a myth that attributes the retreat of Onyame (God) far into the heavens to a woman's notoriety at pounding fufu (Ghanaian food) at the wrong time and always hitting God with the pestle in the process.

Many African proverbs portray women as valuable and indispensable in society largely due to their procreative and nurturing abilities. Yet women are also presented as potential trouble causers who disrupt the peace of family and community life through jealousy, gossip, hatred, and so on. A Ghanaian proverb says, "A wife is like a woolen blanket: If

you cover yourself with it, it irritates you; and yet if you take it away, you feel cold."

The paradoxical status of women is reflected in the roles they play and the attitudes toward them in both religious circles and the larger society. Their power is manifested in their roles as priestesses, queen mothers, and ritual specialists. Yet they are also considered to be susceptible to witchcraft and other bad spirits with which they can harm others. They are often extolled for their roles as mothers and wives, but they are also to be feared for their ability to ruin men and sometimes their own children.

Moses Ohene Biney

See also Family

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WORDS

In much of Africa, words do far more than carry a message or meaning. Words are believed to have power when spoken. For example, the Dogon people of Mali believe the African concept of Nommo, which states that the power of the spoken word carries a life force that produces all life and influences everything. By human utterance or through the spoken word, human beings can invoke a kind of spiritual power. Even the ancient Egyptians believed that power emanated from words. This belief is linked to their ethical principle, Maat (meaning truth, harmony, balance, and reciprocity).

The power of words is different from one individual to the next. The word power of the Creator is more powerful than that of any other being. In African philosophy, individuals have, by the

power of their words, dominion over things, which they can change and make work for their purposes and command them. The Dogon believe that to command things with words is to practice magic. The power of the speaker determines how fascinated the audience will be.

The African's preference for words spoken over the written language speaks to words being viewed as a life force. Written words do not have the transformative powers of spoken words. Only words that are spoken can engage the human being, putting him or her on the path of harmony. Furthermore, written words cannot facilitate human interaction and are therefore lifeless. Words that are spoken permit us to experience life in the most significant of ways.

Naming in African culture is also an area in which the power of words is ever present. Naming is an essential characteristic of African philosophy and religion. Naming is a creative act. What we cannot conceive does not exist because every human thought expressed becomes reality. In other words, it is spoken into being. Once we name it, it moves into existence. The power of Nommo through naming creates life. Additionally, without naming, life would be static; there would be no possibility of social development or growth and no integration into human society. Naming, for Africans, is significant because it identifies whom they are and where they hope to ascend. African naming ceremonies are sacred. Each time parents name a child, they are commenting on the life path of that child, how that child will see him- or herself, and the hope of what the future of African people will be. The name goes with the child as a symbol as he or she navigates through life.

Adisa A. Alkebulan

See also Maat; Nommo

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WOYENGI

The Ijaw people of the West African country of Nigeria who practice traditional religion indigenous to their culture believe that the Earth was created by a female deity named Woyengi, the "Great Mother." The creation story of Woyengi testifies to her standing fiercely on the edge of the universe and observing an Earth filled with animals and vegetation, but nothing else. In the void, Woyengi descended to the Earth on a ray of lightning. At the end of her journey, the goddess stood before a table, chair, and flat stone and, with the mud of the Earth, created human dolls that were neither male nor female. She then filled their lungs with the breath of life. The dolls represented the souls of humanity and went before Woyengi to find their purpose. They were asked to choose whether they wanted to be male or female, the kind of blessings they wanted to receive (such as money, talents, or children), and their selected occupation. Depending on the destiny they chose for themselves, some dolls were sent down a stream with clear, calm waters and others down one with torrent waves. However, once the dolls were sent down a specific path, there was no turning back, and Woyengi became known as the goddess of destiny. This fixed fate proved disturbing to one of those souls.

There were two women created by Woyengi on that day. Both women are believed by some Ijaw to be the daughters of Woyengi. The first woman chose to give birth to many children, and the other chose to wield magic over the world. These two women grew up as sisters, and when they came of age and married, they both fulfilled the destiny set before them at creation. The first woman gave birth to many children, and the other woman, named Ogboinba, performed her magic. Yet Ogboinba became discouraged with her choice because, although she could heal and prophesy, she could not enjoy the love of a child like her sister. Her jealousy and sadness overcame her to the extent that she journeyed back to the Great Mother to see whether she could choose again and be reborn as something else. Along the way, Ogboinba met animals, humans, and other gods whom she destroyed and whose powers she assimilated into her own. Unfortunately, these powers

weighed her down and, ultimately, Woyengi vehemently denied Ogboinba's request, angrily reminding her that the choice she made was hers alone. In her fear, Ogboinba retreated into the eyes of the pregnant woman, where the Ijaw believe she remains today.

The Ijaw have many variations to this creation story, with each one varying in small details, but all are consistent in the concept of a maternal creator permitting the free will of the creation. As a people living along the Niger delta, the story of Woyengi as a creator falls in line with the traditional human characterization of spirits and gods in traditional Ijaw religion. Above and beyond their sheer dominance and power as gods, Ijaw deities often took on human qualities, both

strengths and limitations. Woyengi's emotional response to Ogboinba's request is just one example of such personification.

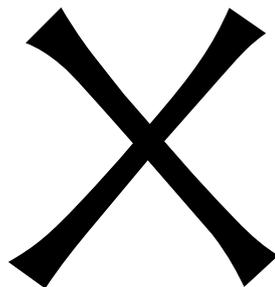
Tracey Michael Lewis

See also Nkulunkulu; Oludumare

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XHOSA

The Xhosa are one of the great people of South Africa. They are concentrated in the southeast part of the country, but are found everywhere in South Africa. A highly mobile people, the Xhosa have a history that dates back to antiquity in the upper reaches of the Great Lakes of Africa. However, over the past 700 years, they have lived in the southern part of Africa, being one of the African people, alongside the San, who have ventured the farthest to the south from the Great North.

Like many other African groups, the Xhosa have several clans that speak the same language and trace their origins to the legendary uXhosa. The main clans are Thembu, Xesibe, Bomvana, Bhaca, Mfengu, Mpondo, and Mpondomise. It is believed that the name Xhosa can be translated into the language of the Khoi-Khoi or San to mean “fierce.” This is probably derived from the fact that the Xhosa met those earlier people in warfare when they arrived in the south. However, they soon learned to live in proximity with each other, but the name Xhosa, with its meaning of anger or fierce, stuck in the Khoi and San’s lexicon.

The nearly 10 million Xhosa people speak the second most popular language in the country after Zulu, a closely related language. Both the Xhosa and the Zulu are part of the Great Nguni Migration that moved south over a period of 300 to 400 years beginning in the 14th century. Because the people had made the great trek southward, they had brought with them many of the

values they had learned in the north, as well as the ones they had gained in their migration. There are certain values and customs that assisted the Xhosa in their social interactions that must be attributed to their ideas about ethics and morality.

The Xhosa society learned from all of their neighbors, and also gave their neighbors information and practices of organization and warfare. In the first instance, the Xhosa borrowed words and terminology from the San people, intermarried with them, and also borrowed the click consonants so characteristic of the San. The whites who later invaded the country in the 1700s sought to subdue both the San and Xhosa and were met with intermittent battles that lasted for decades.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Xhosa felt the pressure of the Mfecane, the scattering of people that had been caused by wars among the Nguni and other groups to the north and east. They experienced the millennialist response to the endangering of their cattle by a widespread lung disease blamed on the whites in 1856. There was also pressure on the Xhosa created by the loss of their territory to white farmers and the further loss of their independence as a people.

One of the common features of the Xhosa culture is its language that has 15 click sounds borrowed from the Khoisan languages. The basic clicks of *isiXhosa*, the term for the language, are a dental click, written with a “c”; an alveolar click, written with “q”; and a lateral click, written with “x,” as in Xhosa.

To understand Xhosa religion, it is important to view the sangoma as the core of the priestly

class among the people. The sangoma in her or his function as healer, diviner, mediator, herbalist, philosopher, and prophet maintains the society's customs and traditions. Among the Xhosa, many of the sangoma are females who must study for at least 5 to 10 years to become "certified" as a sangoma. It is not an easy profession to acquire, and one must be devoted and dedicated to every aspect of the history of the people to be successful. Therefore, it is expected that the sangoma will understand the history of the people, psychological problems, environmental issues, relationship challenges, the cycles of nature, and the origin of the universe.

The Xhosa people believe that their history is replete with many heroes. They have had a long history of engagement with other ethnic groups, the land, animals, and spiritualists, and out of these experiences have come grand narratives of victory and consciousness of unity. They say that the original human, named Tshawe, was the father of all Xhosa, although their name is derived from uXhosa.

Because the people have such a powerful history of heroes, it is understandable that they have a great sense of oral praises delivered on many occasions by a praise singer. The Imbongi, or praise singer, is one of the central components of community solidarity. The limbongi, praise singers, usually live near the king's house. They are always found at events that are historically, politically, or socially important. Whenever Nelson Mandela traveled to a place or gave an important speech, the imbongi was there to speak. The poetry of the imbongi is called *isibongo*, which are praises for the masterful actions of the military leaders, hunters, political leaders, kings, and ancestors. Thus, the *isibongo* are used to instill the values that are a part of the community.

The Xhosa believe that the Supreme Deity is uThixo, who may also be called uQamata. But the supreme deity does not act alone. Ancestors

are a mainstay in all Xhosa gatherings, and the understanding of the people is that, without rituals to honor and revere the ancestors, the lives of the living would be terrible because of sickness, disaster, and chaos. Therefore, to ward off evil, it is important to hold ceremonies, rituals, initiations, and festivals in honor of the ancestors.

One of the stories told by Nelson Mandela is that, when he was a boy, he went through the ceremony and ritual of manhood. It is a secret ritual that marks the time the boy becomes a man. One goes from Umkwetha to Ulwakuko, from boy to man. There is a ritual circumcision that is carried out on boys of the same age set. The boys are taken to the hills to live in isolation for several weeks as abakwetha (initiates), and when they return, they smear white clay over their bodies until they heal from the circumcision.

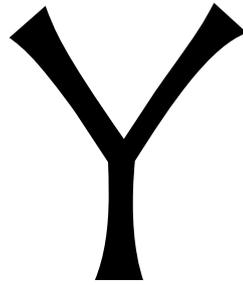
Girls also go through the rites of intonjane (womanhood). They are taken away as well, but they are not gone for several weeks. They are not circumcised because that is not a practice of the Xhosa. The Xhosa believe that mothers who have children should be secluded for 10 days after giving birth. They bury the afterbirth and the umbilical cord near the village. The traditional greeting is *Inkaba yakho iphi?* which means, "Where is your navel?" When you answer, you are literally telling people where you live.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Sotho; Zulu

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YAM

The yam is a large root vegetable that resembles a tube. The vegetable is sometimes called a *tuber*. It is widespread in West Africa, and because it usually develops after the rainy season, it is the first vegetable to be harvested by the West African people. This gives the yam its special significance among African people. The yam is not to be confused with the sweet potato, which has origins in Asia. The yam is indigenous to Africa.

Almost all the people of Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, the Cameroons, Benin, Togo, Guinea, and Sierra Leone know the importance of the yam. Nothing is more sacred as a vegetable than the appearance of the new yam. It portends a good season, productive activities in the villages, and even good childbirths.

Yam festivals are common in West African villages. The appearance of the first yam is occasion for celebration. There could be, as among the Akyem people of Ghana, a coordination between celebrations and ceremonies of origin and the first appearance of the yam. Festivals that celebrate the yam are ceremonies dedicated to friendship, family, and the welcoming of strangers, especially those who have no or limited food. By the festival, the people are declaring that there is enough food for everyone and that all are welcomed to partake of the feast.

Great yam festivals in Africa are the places for thanksgiving and reverence for overcoming hunger. The Homowo Festival of the Ga in Ghana

is really a celebration of the victory over hunger. The Iriji festival in Nigeria is also such a celebration. Although the method of the celebration may be different from one region of West Africa to another, the style is similar and the purpose is the same. The people will have dancing and drumming calling forth the powers of the yam. They will have skits and performances that hark back to the days when the ancestors lived on the Earth, and they will eat, drink, and be happy that the yam has appeared.

When the festival is about to begin, the women in Ghana would go and dig up the yams and carry them home. People come out to see who is carrying the largest yam because it is considered honorable to have the biggest yam on your farm. The women are responsible for preparing the feast, and they choose a young man to carry the biggest yams to the festival. Other young men are asked to play on the drums announcing the coming of the yam. There is great joy and anticipation about the taste of the yam. A long procession of important dignitaries follows the young men who are leading with the yam. The crowds gather to watch the procession as men and women in their beautiful kente clothes participate in the sacred procession. This is the way the yam is celebrated in many parts of West Africa.

There are variations as in the case of Nigeria, where among the people the families often make an ancestral altar on the first morning of the yam festival. The good Earth, Ala, and the yam god, Ihejioku, must be respected by this altar of the ancestors, and thus they are asked to attend the



Ewe farmers carrying yams on their heads emerge from the forest to offer thanks to the ancestral gods for a successful harvest.
Source: Carol Beckwith/Angela Fisher.

festival. Among the Ibo, the men go to the farms and dig up the new yams and bring them back for the women to cook. They must dig carefully so as not to bruise the yams, and then they make thanks in the village square so all can see what is being produced around the village. They offer the ancestors the yam, white chalk, and a chicken. The chalk symbolizes well-being, and the chicken is for slaughter. A feast then ensues that includes many people. The yam is the king of thanksgiving; it is the ultimate vegetable for friendship and the maintenance of the society for another year.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Ceremonies

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YANVALOU

Yanvalou is a rhythm and dance of Haitian Vodou. Named after its associated movements, *yanvalou* may be interpreted to mean *supplication*. There are a number of variations of the dance based on the position of the body during the dance's characteristic undulations: *yanvalou debout*, *yanvalou z'épaules*, and *yanvalou dos bas* or, respectively, "upright," "isolated shoulders," and "crouching."

Yanvalou is primarily reserved for rituals and ceremonies. Performed for the Haitian lwa, or deities, Aida Wedo, Erzulie, and Ogou, and sometimes for the Gede, the dance is used to reinforce community and solidarity, as well as to induce a trance-like state in which the dancers may be possessed by these lwa. The movements of yanvalou have been described as fluid and are performed by creating undulating circular movements through the dancer's spine, chest, and solar plexus. The dancer's body leans forward with knees bent while it undulates. While the upper

body is undulating, the dancer's feet slide sideways with a pause on the fourth beat of the rhythm. Leaning forward even farther in the position of yanvalou dos bas, the dance appears even more serpentine. The serpentine movement is said to imitate the movement of Damballah (the lwa associated with the snake) through the undulating experience of the dancer.

The dance is not for performance or entertainment, but is a communicative tool between the physical and spiritual realms. Specific rhythms and associated dances, during Haitian Vodou rites, communicate directly with specific individual lwa or groups of them. In the case of yanvalou, the rhythm and dance are used to open ceremonies and are usually the first performed. Not only does the dance serve the purpose of preparing the body for other strenuous dances to follow; it is also said to result in a state of ecstasy that may release participants from emotional conflict and therefore place them in a state of total relaxation.

Some have linked yanvalou to the purpose of female empowerment. It has been called the "dance of the embryo," and it is said to represent the birthing process as evidenced by its focus on the belly and pelvis of the dancer. The dance is also to be particularly empowering sexually, especially for women, because it celebrates the power of the feminine as well as the beauty of women. The fact that the dance is performed for Damballah's wife, Ayida Wedo, and for Erzulie, the lwa of love and of women, seems to support this supposition. Interestingly, Erzulie is also said to be a wife of Damballah.

Yanvalou is most commonly associated with the Rada lwa of Haiti. Because this particular nanchon, or nation, of lwa is said to have come to Haiti from Dahomey, it is no surprise that the movements of yanvalou are similar to dances currently performed in this area of West Africa. Additionally, the lwa of Rada are known for their gentle nature, and the dance is indeed more fluid than some of the other dances of Haitian Vodou associated with the Petwo nanchon.

The high season for yanvalou is Carnival, although it may be danced whenever humans need to communicate with the group of lwa associated with the dance. The dance is supported by the rhythm of the same name that is played by three

drums, the *petit*, *seconde*, and *maman*, which are accompanied by the *ogan*, or a piece of iron that is beaten during the rhythm.

Tiffany D. Pogue

See also Vodou in Benin

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YAO

The Yao are a major African people in the south-eastern part of the continent. Their population spans southern Malawi, portions of Mozambique, and parts of Tanzania and Zambia. According to their oral traditions, the Yao are descended from people who left an area around a mountain that was called Yao, located east of Lake Malawi, in the 9th century because of famine and moved westward to the shores of Lake Malawi. By 2008, there were nearly 3 million Yao living in southern Africa.

The Yao's philosophy and culture have become intertwined with the extremely bountiful area in which they live. Lake Malawi is in the Great Rift Valley, and in some places it is one of the deepest lakes in Africa. The lake is the third largest lake in the continent and has more species of fish than any inland body of water anywhere in the world. More than 500 types of fish live in Lake Malawi. Given the fact that the Shire River flows from the lake and joins the mighty Zambezi River, the Yao people are often said to be the heartbeat of Africa. The magnificent landscape surrounding the lake creates rich proverbs, poetry, and rituals.

Although the Yao are mainly farmers, many are also fishermen, and some are called *negociantes*, that is, traveling salespersons, by the Mozambicans. This is because historically the Yao also traveled to

the Indian Ocean coast to negotiate with Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, and Arab traders.

Years of interaction with the outside world have influenced the culture of the Yao to some extent, yet they retain the core values of their ancestors. For example, although many Yao are now Muslims, the Yao tradition tends to be matrilineal as opposed to patrilineal. Thus, a group of sisters and their families may live with an elder brother or uncle and consider him their leader. Loyalty to the matrilineal family is greater in these cases than any loyalty to the "nuclear" family. It follows, therefore, that marriage would also be matrilineal, that is, a husband must live in the wife's town. This means that the husbands are considered strangers until their children grow to maturity and the people accept them as a part of the new family. Of course, due to the practice of Islam, many of the Yao men have more than one wife. This obviously makes life quite complex.

A leader serves over the matrilineal group. Sometimes a leader might exercise power over many matrilineages. Of course, someone who exercises authority over a number of leaders is a king. The king is the traditional authority over a limited area identified with the matrilineages he serves.

The Yao celebrate two important holidays. The first is called *Unyago*, which involves children ages 7 to 12, where the boys are circumcised, and the boys and girls are taught by gender what it means to be Yao. During the entire ceremony, where people are dressed up to enjoy themselves, the initiated children are not to smile. Their family members may sing, dance, laugh, and enjoy drinks and food, but the initiated must remain in control of their wants and desires. Although the initiated children remain unsmiling and somber, other children and adults bring them money and gifts.

A second important celebration among the Yao is called the *Siala* and relates to the birthday of Mohammed. According to the oral historians, this holiday came into existence during the Arab Slave Trade in Mozambique and Malawi and gained its greatest adherents during the 19th century. As negociantes, the Yao had traded with the Arabs in ivory, gunpowder, tobacco, and even human beings. When there was a backlash against these practices by Yao traditionalists and some Christians, the Yao elite who had profited from the trade with the Arabs converted to Islam in an

effort to maintain their powerful role as traders. Thus, the celebration of Siala is often commemorated by warlike dances. The Yao often mix their traditional beliefs with Islam and now even Christianity. Yet the ancestral beliefs, linking them to ancestors and to the continuity of their community, are central facts of ordinary life.

Among the Yao, one finds the contradictions that often appear when a people have been dominated commercially, physically, or intellectually by another people; yet remarkably one finds the kind of resilience among the Yao today that their leader, King Machemba, discovered in 1890, when he issued a declaration to the German Commander von Wissman which stated that the Yao were willing to trade, but not willing to submit to the Germans. After many years of struggle on physical and political levels, the people of this area of Malawi and southern Africa gained their independence.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Shona

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YẸMỌṂJA

Within the Yorùbá spiritual pantheon, Yẹmọṅja is celebrated as the giver of life and as the metaphysical “Mother of Òrisá.”

Yẹmọṅja’s name is derived from the Yorùbá words *Yeye* or *Iyá* (“mother”), *ọmọ* (“child/children”), and *ẹja* (“fish”) and thus literally means “Mother whose children are the fish.” According to the *itàns* (stories) of the Yorùbá, the Òrisá Yẹmọṅja was a primordial spiritual entity who was charged by *Olófi/Olódùmarè* (God) to assist the Òrisá Ọbàtálá with the formation of humans in Olófi’s creation of the Earth. She descended to the Earth on a rope with 16 other Òrisá from Ọrun, the abode of Olófi, and traveled

throughout the world engaging with other Òrisá in preparing the world for humankind. She is the owner of the Ọ̀gùn River, the largest river within the territory of Yorùbáland, and is the counterpart of Olòòkun, who represents the unknowable bottom of the sea.

In Yorùbáland, each town maintained its own deity based on the myths of its founders. Tapa (Iganna) in the Oke Ogun area is where Yẹmọṅja originated. However, the worship of Yẹmọṅja began in Shaki. Among her “roads” or different personae are Aganna, Ako, and Banyarinor, who are from Tapa/Iganna, and Asaba, Àkútè, Ayaba, Asesu, Mojelewi, Okoto, Ogunte, Opa Lado, and Afodo. Abeokuta, the current capital of Ogun state, is the site of her principle shrine, where she is especially celebrated in the Ibara quarter of that city.

Yẹmọṅja is frequently portrayed as the wife of various male personified Òrisá, such as ọbàtálá, ọkèrè, Òrisá Oko, and Erinlé. She is also said to be the mother of Ọ̀gún, Sàngó, Ọya, Ọsun, Ọbà, Òrisá Oko, Babalúaiye, and Ọsọ̀ṣi. Many other *itàns* describe her as having never given birth, but as having raised many children, in particular, Sango, Dada, and the Ìbẹ̀jì (twins). The *itàns* also describe her as having long breasts as a result of the many children she nursed. Her sensitivity and embarrassment about her long breasts are consistent throughout the stories, and several tell of her turning herself into a river in response to insults about this by other Òrisá.

Although also attributed to the Òrisá Ọsun, stories refer to Yẹmọṅja as having been given (or as having stolen) the ability to interpret the oral scripture verses of the 16 Odù Ifá through the divination process called *merindilogun*. It is said that Yẹmọṅja taught other Òrisá this alternative method of accessing the Odù through the “throwing” of dilogun cowry shells, thereby granting every initiated priest the ability to divine. Yẹmọṅja speaks in many of the verses of the Odù, but she is substantially represented in the Odù Ọ̀dí, the elements of which include tradition, the maintenance of civilization, protection, and nationalism (who is inside and who is outside).

Yẹmọṅja has been likened to amniotic fluid because this water base protects her children against a predatory world. She is temperamental and can be soothing or unpredictably violent. She is the Òrisá of fertility and has under her protection



Wooden sculpture of the female Yoruba Orisha Yemọ́nja.

Source: Pamela Reed.

dockworkers, boatwrights, fishermen and -women, sailors, swimmers, and others who work, live, or travel around water. She is the patron of the Gèlèdè Society (“Society of Mothers”), and her road of Àkútè is the Mother of the Ọgbõni Society of elders. She is associated with the fish gill facial markings worn by the Iyáwo (initiate into the priesthood) and is said to have assisted Sango in ending the practice of twin infanticide in Nigeria. Her animal totems are duck, vulture, snake, and small snail; her sacrificial animals are ram, lamb, duck, rooster, goat, fish, and pigeons. She is represented in her various shrines in Africa by sacred stones (*ota*) placed in river water in a calabash.

The statures of Yẹmọnja and Olóòkun increased in prominence in the Americas and the Caribbean as the enslaved survivors of the Middle Passage propitiated Olóòkun to bless their lost kinsmen and petitioned Yẹmọnja for an alleviation of their suffering. Yẹmọnja’s omnipresence surrounding the islands and coastal areas of Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil served as a continuous reminder of her ability to comfort and nurture hope. Attempts to annihilate African traditional cultural practices were resisted through the establishment of ethnic social organizations in Brazil and Cuba, as well as through the masquerading of the Ọrisá with the saints of Catholicism.

In Cuba, Yẹmọnja was creolized as Yemayà. Enslaved and free Africans who spoke Yorùbá became identified as Lucumi, and their religious practice became known as Regla Lucumí.

In Brazilian Candomblé, Xêmanjá has been celebrated since the 1930s on New Year’s Eve, as followers of Candomblé and the Amerindian Umbanda systems construct miniature altars on the beaches and send small paper boats into the sea with inscribed prayers.

In New York City, Yẹmọnja is venerated annually by a beachfront celebration (*bembe*), held on or close to her feast day of September 7. At this event, hundreds of olúwo, olórisà (priests), and álejòs (guests) pay homage to her. Yẹmọnja’s dance mimics the roll of the ocean; initially soft and measured, it increases in intensity to tumultuous waves, as the circles become more expansive and devotees are touched and mounted by spirit.

In Cuban, Brazilian, Trinidadian, Puerto Rican, and U.S. homes, Yẹmọnja’s altars are often decorated with fountains and other symbols of the sea,

such as fish nets, miniature boats, shells, live fish, peacock feathers, fans, and a blue or blue and white crockery vessel that houses her sacred stones in ocean or river water. The number 7 belongs to her, representing the seven seas; her devotees wear 7 silver bracelets, and she is often seen wearing full skirts with 7 blue and white layers. Her necklace (*ilèkè*) is made of crystal or crystal and blue beads, sometimes with red coral. She is summoned with a gourd rattle.

Patricia E. Canson

See also Shango

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YORKA

Yorka appears to be derived from a combination of Native American words, possibly from Surinen, Arawak, or Carib, and it is used by Africans who were brought to Suriname as enslaved people to refer to ancestors. The word may have come from an old Native American word, *Yoroka*, meaning “ghosts.”

The Dutch traders imported many Africans into the area to work on the plantations; however, because the Africans were unaccustomed to slavery, many of them ran away to the forest and became maroons. Others had to succumb to the violent and

brutal authority of the slavemasters. The runaways created their own African communities. The Dutch referred to these Africans as “Bosnegers” or Bush Negroes because they refused to submit to the authority of any whites in Suriname. They organized themselves into communities and identified several large families that might be considered clans. They were the Saramaka, Aukan, Paramaka, Kwinti, Aluku, and Matawai. All of these clans used the word *yorka* to refer to their ancestors. Thus, *yorka* became a commonly used term throughout Suriname.

Suriname, with a population that is nearly 65% of African descent, is quite African in many cultural forms. When the maroon population developed, there were still other Africans in the territory who were not free. The descendants of those Africans form a large part of the society. However, all of the people refer to the *yorka* and believe in some aspect of the cultural form.

Thus, *yorka* is literally one’s ancestor. There is the belief that if you are not paying attention to the needs of the *yorka*, you will have misfortune. Consequently, people seek to honor their ancestors so as to ensure their good fortune. *Yorka* may create havoc, chaos in one’s home, poverty, and personal distress. It is also possible that a person’s relationships with others could be affected by not respecting the *yorka* of the family. Thus, there are elaborate ways that people seek to ritualize the *yorka*, honor their name, and create a community of kindness toward them. Remembering is far more important than forgetting in the Surinamese sense of ritual and ceremony surrounding respect for the *yorka*.

There are numerous African ethnic groups who exercise similar attitudes toward the Dead of the community. Inasmuch as this practice of appeasing *yorka* is deeply embedded in the culture of the Surinamese people, it has correspondences with the same practices that are found in Africa. Of course, the idea of spirits, ghosts, *yorka*, is ancient in Africa and goes back to the ancient Egyptian concept of the *ka* and the *ba* and the ability of the *ka* to move from place to place through false doors.

Molefi Kete Asante

See also Obeah

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YORUBA

The Yoruba are among the largest ethnolinguistic groups in Africa, numbering between 25 million and 40 million. The Yoruba are a nationality. Today, they are to be found mainly in southwestern Nigeria, West Africa. They constitute the majority ethnic group in about a third of Nigeria’s federal republic of 36 states. Their current homeland is also known among the Yoruba people as Ile Yooba, or Yorubaland. The Yoruba at home share borders and are culturally contiguous with other Nigerian ethnic groups such as the Nupe, Ibariba, Igbirra, and Igala in Kwara State (northeast of Yorubaland); and the Itsekiri, Esan, and Edo in the Niger Delta area. To the northwest of Yorubaland are related groups such as the Egun, Fon, Mahi (Benin Republic), and Ewe, as well as other Gbe-speaking people in Togo and Benin, and the Ga in Ghana.

Outside of Yorubaland, there are sizable communities that collectively form a Yoruba diaspora. Historically, the European slave trade has been the main contributor to the emergence of that diaspora because a great percentage of Africans taken into slavery from the western coast of Africa were of Yoruba stock. It is estimated by scholars that more than 50% of captured Africans came from or through southwestern Nigeria, home of the Yoruba. This area formed part of the region known as the “Slave Coast,” from the early 16th century to the 19th century. It used to be and still is one of the most densely populated parts of the African continent. It became a major export center of African men, women, and children. For example, a third of Africans enslaved in Cuba were reported to be Yoruba. Also, in the precolonial period, towns such as Porto Novo, Badagry, and Lagos were important ports for this infamous trade, and control of the trade routes into the interior was a major issue in

Yoruba kingdoms' politics. Today, Brazil has the largest number of Yoruba and Yoruba-descended people outside of Africa (with an estimated population of about 5 million), Cuba has about 1 million, and Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and the rest of the Caribbean have about half a million. In the United States and Canada, there are an estimated 3 million Yoruba, while there are equal numbers in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. In Asia, it is estimated that there are several hundreds of thousands of Yoruba residing in various parts of the region. The Yoruba are reputed travelers: There is virtually no country in the world without a Yoruba community, no matter how small.

The origins of the Yoruba people are shrouded in mystery. However, three clear narratives are discernible from several contending versions. The first is from the Yoruba oral tradition and creation myth. God (*Olorun*, or Sky God) let down a chain at Ilé-Ifè, by which Oduduwa the progenitor of the Yoruba people, and indeed, of all men, descended, carrying a rooster, some earth, and a palm kernel. Oduduwa threw the earth into the waters and the rooster scratched it to become land, out of which grew the palm tree with 16 branches, representing the 16 original kingdoms. There are several versions of this myth. Also, every Yoruba town, lineage, and deity has its own myth of origin. Yet in all of them, Ilé-Ifè is regarded as the spiritual center from which all Yoruba dispersed to their present abodes. The second narrative of origin has it that the Yoruba are descended from the offspring of Lamurudu, or Nimrod of Biblical and Near Eastern legend, who had been banished and finally settled in present-day Yorubaland. Thus, some trace the origins of the Yoruba all the way back to ancient Mesopotamian Uruk or Babylon (modern-day Iraq). A final narrative of origin has the Yoruba present in their modern homeland from as early as 10,000 BC. According to Robert S. Smith in his *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*, archaeological digs have confirmed the existence of a human population in the Idanre area of Yorubaland since prehistoric times.

In the African diaspora, Yoruba culture seems to have been better preserved than other African traditions. Almost all the African Caribbean and African Brazilian religions derive their essential features, rituals, and practices from the Yoruba religious tradition, which is centered on *orisha* worship and ancestral veneration.

The Yoruba, like all Africans, are deeply religious people. For them, everything is imbued with the sacred. Their pantheon of deities rivals any of the world's great civilizations. Indeed, comparisons have been made between Yoruba traditional religion and that of pharaonic Egypt. Two parts are discernible in Yoruba traditional religion, both rooted in Ifa sacred poetry—which is available in a transcription of 256 *odus*, or chapters. The first is right action through ritual and sacrifice as sanctioned by the Ifa oracular and divinatory corpus. The Yoruba are encouraged to consult Ifa before any of life's major undertakings. Ifa, through the *babalawo*, or shaman, then prescribes the appropriate rituals and sacrifices to the appropriate deities for the achievement of the right results.

The second part of Yoruba spirituality is also guided by Ifa sacred poetry. It is ethical conduct for a purposeful existence. For example, chapter 219 of the Ifa corpus stresses the power of Truth. This *odu* counsels the necessity of living truthfully and doing justice as the only way to live well among the Yoruba people.

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See also Ilé-Ifè; Olorun

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Z

ZARMA

Regarding African religions, the Zarma represent the complex intersect between the retentions of traditional African spiritual systems and the (forced) adoption of one or another of the major orthodox religions. In the case of the Zarma, the adopted religion is Islam. Understanding the complexity of this intersect is further exacerbated by the hegemonic technique of either omitting any detailed and respectful discussion of the traditional African spiritual beliefs or, in the discussion, codifying the traditional beliefs in denigrating or demonic terms and interpretations.

It is believed that the Zarma originated from the country of Mali. (Zarma is also spelled Djerma, Dyerma, Zaberma, and Zerma.) The Zarma people are descended from the great Songhai Kingdom that flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries. Since that time, they have migrated from Mali to live in the southwestern parts of Niger and Nigeria along the Niger River. The language of the Zarma is a dialect of the Nilo-Saharan language family. Traditionally, the Zarma and Songhai people view themselves as one family. The Zarma should more accurately be called the Zarma–Songhai. They have, in general, a less strict attachment to Islam and have in many ways resisted the full and complete conversion experience.

Although it is estimated that 75% to 80% of the Zarma profess to be Muslim and 1% to 2% to be Christian, traditional African spiritual systems serve as the unrecognized grounding belief for all

Zarma–Songhai. In general, the Islamic beliefs of the Zarma–Songhai have been by way of syncretism blended with traditional spiritual beliefs.

Among the Zarma, the Islamic rituals and ceremonies are centered on the observance of Ramadan, which involves fasting and the paying of alms for the poor, Tabaski, which is also called the Festival of Sacrifice, and the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. The syncretism is obvious in the ritual of the naming day ceremony of children that is prevalent throughout much of Africa, where prayers are bestowed on the newborn after 7 days of life. This ritual seems to be an ongoing traditional African ritual without regard to Islam or Christianity. The practice of taking more than one wife also preceded the advent of Islam. Although the Zarma practice of polygamy, as in the past, is mostly associated with older and wealthy men, its pre-Islamic root meaning remains associated with spiritual evolution, cultural maturation, and family enhancement.

The Zarma–Songhai believe, as is true with most African peoples, that all living things have a knowable and knowing spirit and that as human spirits people can directly and deeply communicate with the spirit realm. Spirit work and reunions (often misunderstood as spirit possession) are common practices that are believed to have healing powers. The Zarma, like other African peoples, know that humans live among the diverse forces of the environment and the energy of the earth completes human society. In effect, the traditional beliefs of the Zarma utilize and channel the collective life force to recognize

that these “forces and waves” are God in motion. The Zarma–Songhai believe that the different concentrations of spiritual energy have different purposes and effects. There are, for instance, “cold” spirits that control the forces of nature and there are spirits that control illness.

The Zarma are a people who are proud of their heritage and resist the changes that are occurring around them. Their choice to follow the religion of their ancestors is not respected as the efforts to proselytize them are being stepped up by the Christian missionaries. The Zarma–Songhai are literally under attack by Christian evangelists. It is assumed by the evangelists that the Zarma are a Godless people. Although the Niger government allows freedom of worship, the Zarma have been earmarked for conversion to Christianity. The freedom of Christian missionaries to preach the word of God overrides the freedom of religious expression on the part of the Zarma people. Not more than 2% of the Zarma people have embraced Christianity. Of these, many are embracing Christianity after feeling the effects of famine. The Zarma are willing to hear the message of Jesus in response to the Christians, who in their “conditional” generosity have delivered famine relief to them in exchange for Bible worship.

Vera DeMoultrie Nobles

See also Bamana

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ZIN

Zin are generally known as Niger River deities, which are part of the Songhai mythology, as well

as the myths of other peoples on the Niger River banks like the Djerma, Hauka, Sorko, and Hole, who are mainly connected to fishing populations in small towns and villages.

Songhai culture as well as other Western African cultures has been greatly influenced by the Islamic religion, which means that traditional religions have incorporated some of these Islamic influences. Several influences concur in the religious manifestations of the Niger River peoples, so it is often not clear what exactly is traditionally African. For example, it is clear that there are Islamic influences in the Songhai people. Apparently many of the current religious manifestations of the Songhai and other peoples of the Niger valley are Islamized. Allegedly, the African zin are often considered interchangeable with the Islamic djinn. Among those of the Islamic tradition, the djinn are more than human: A djinn represents a genius that never leaves the place it masters. The djinn are much more powerful than normal humans, in that they can fly and choose to become completely invisible or change into the shape of an animal, as well as have a great command of magical arts and power to create illusions, an ability learned originally from being part of the desert. In this sense, they used to be worshiped as gods or demigods. Of course, these ideas seem to correspond to certain mystical ideas among traditional African cultures.

Oral tradition narratives, however, tell us about an extremely rich mythological influence of the Mandingo religion built around the traditional and original concept of an all-governing sun. According to the Songhai system of beliefs, the sun was the central force of creation, and everything on Earth was influenced by deities that governed natural resources. Some of these deities mastered different places or natural elements. They were masters of the rivers, trees, and valleys, and they were called Zin. According to the Songhai people, everything on Earth is governed by a particular Zin, the deity of one particularly remarkable place or natural resource. They are invisible, but their essences live in special places.

Although we must undoubtedly realize that there is an extremely intricate pattern of religious fusions of African and Arab traditions by virtue of Islam's influence on the Songhai people, it is possible to acknowledge that the Songhai tradition is

anchored in a common African spiritual heritage that can be traced back to the Kemetic religious and philosophical thought. Indeed, the idea of Ra, the almighty deity that was represented by the power of the sun, is an old, ancestral idea among Africans. Ancestral spirits who watch over daily activities, promote social harmony, and create a sense of accountability among a community's members to preserve a balanced and harmonious order of creation where spirit and matter are inseparable are anterior to any other influences among West Africans.

Therefore, human beings must pay tribute to these deities, honor them with rituals, and feed them with various symbols of veneration. Furthermore, humans cannot make use of any place protected by a Zin without asking permission by means of rituals performed by the local peoples. For a Zin will die for lack of honor, and praise is to a Zin is very much as it is to every human being.

Although they live much longer than people, they do not live forever; they get old and die. They have human names like Ibrahima, Zin of the Hombori mountains, or Ka, Zin of the Hombori fields. They get married, they have children, and sometimes they leave their place of origin either to raise a family somewhere else or by being defeated in a local war among rivals. Ibrahima, for instance, is said to have entered the Hombori mountains through the great western canyon, where he settled with his wife and children after being chased from Gao.

Zin may take many different shapes, but they are commonly described as serpents, and their power may even take over further regions if they make alliances among themselves. For instance, the Zin of Tondi Tyirey mountain in Anzourou may well ask the Zin of the wind to blow away the rain from the Anzourou people if they fail to perform the proper rituals.

There are many different traditions concerning these deities, many different narratives varying with the places and the peoples who must respect them, about their struggle with more powerful deities like the Holey or their alliances with Yumban, the master of the Yumban sea near Yatakala in Niger, or Farka Bera, the master of the forest in Ossolo.

Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

See also Divinities

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ZOSER

King Zoser was the founder of the Old Kingdom that started with the 3rd dynasty, better known as the Pyramid Age. His name was mentioned on the Palermo Stone the same way as other founders of dynasties, in red ink. The number of years he actually ruled was never confirmed; some say that it was 19 years while others suggest that it was close to 29 years. He was the son of the last ruler of the 2nd dynasty, Khasekhemwy, whose identity has sparked a sort of debate among scholars due to the existence of two similar names from the same period: The first was Khasekhem (the shining power) and the other Khasekhemwy (the two shining powers). Most scholars have suggested that these were two names for the same person, but before and after the unification of Egypt. King Zoser was the hereditary heir to the throne, much influenced by the policies of his father as well as the new innovation in architecture, which was the use of stone instead of mud brick. The reign of Zoser is characterized by two major themes; the first was the famine, and the second was the construction of the first huge stone building in the history of the world around 2700 BC. During his reign, a striking famine took place in Egypt as a result of the low flow of the Nile for 7 years. The details of this critical period in the history of Egypt are recorded on a stela, known as "the famine stela" erected at Aswan during the Ptolemaic period. It narrates the story and the advice given by Zoser's wise architect and vizier, Imhotep, who suggested that the king should go to Upper Egypt, to the first cataract, the residence of the god Khnum, to pray to him and give offerings so the god would start the annual inundation. King Zoser followed the advice, and directly afterward the Nile flooded and Egypt was saved after a long period of suffering. People remained faithful and

loyal to both Zoser and Imhotep for saving their lives and their land. The second major event of this period was the building of Zoser's funerary complex at Sakkara, designed by his architect Imhotep. The funerary complex comprises all the funerary monuments, including the tomb of the king in the form of a step pyramid, which was the first introduction to a complete pyramid; an open court; the serdab (a small closed building with a life-size statue of king Zoser seated in his throne currently exhibited in the Cairo Museum and replaced by a replica); and the house of the north and the house of the south, which acted as residences for visitors from all over Egypt coming to the capital (Memphis) during the celebration of the renewal of the king's royal power, Heb Sed, supposed to be celebrated every 39 years to ensure that the king was still capable to rule the country for another 30 years. This event was to be witnessed by delegations from all over Egypt.

Imhotep was not only an architect and vizier but also a wise man with well-known proverbs and an engineer. Later on he was identified with Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine.

Shaza Gamal Ismail

See also Akhenaten

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province, with smaller numbers in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique. They form the largest South African ethnic population, estimated at 9 million. They have close cultural, ethnic-linguistic affinities with the Xhosa, Swazi, Basotho, and Matabele. Their language, *isiZulu*, belongs to the Bantu language stock. In the early 19th century, Chief Shaka (c. 1787–1828) united various Nguni peoples through new techniques of warfare and expansive conquest, thus forming a powerful Zulu nation. The Zulu kingdom has played a significant role in forming and shaping South African history. Today, the Zulu are one of the major players in South African politics.

The Zulu religious worldview is complex; it is tied to social, cultural, political, and economic life. Ritual is central to Zulu religious life and helps to maintain relationships to the powers of life. Three elements that are capable of exerting *amandla* (power) are the God of the Sky, the ancestors, and medicine. The Zulu trace their ancestry to an act of creation by *inkosi yezulu* (Sky God), who lives up above along with *inkosazana yezulu* (Sky Goddess). The Zulu have a relationship to the sky as well as to the Earth, the abode of the ancestors. The ancestors live down below; hence, they are often referred to as *abaphansi*. The God of the Sky is a male father figure while that of the Earth is a female mother. Both are believed to have brought Abantu (the "people") into being. In Zulu tradition, myths connect the human and natural cosmos. The creation myth, for example, relates the gods to the birth of the first humans. The first human who existed was *uNkulunkulu*; he was believed to have creative power.

The world below is divided into three levels: the level of the unborn spirits, the recently deceased spirits, and the ancestors. The *amalozilamakhosilamathonga* (ancestors) are of central significance for the Zulu. Their religious life, which revolves around ancestral veneration, attracts extensive ritual obligations. The relationship between the living and the Dead is one of mutuality that excludes non-kin and reflects the major emphases of Zulu kinship. Zulu society is patrilineal; authority and inheritance proceed through the male line from father to son. Although Zulu society is patrilineal, women nevertheless occupy a significant space for religious

ZULU

The Zulu (*amaZulu*) are a Nguni people who live mainly in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal

action. The ritual role of women is further exemplified in the relationship between women and *inkosazana yezulu*, whose features contribute to the overall complexity of the Zulu religious system. She is associated with virginity and fertility of all creatures. Apart from acting as a mediator between the people and the God of the Sky, she is also capable of instituting rules of behavior and ritual actions that are distinct from those of both the God of the Sky and the ancestors. The location for the revelation and veneration of the Sky God and Goddess are specific hills or mountains.

Some significant roles in Zulu religious praxis are those of the headman/priest, diviner, medicine man, heaven herd, sorcerers, and witches. Political, social, and religious functions overlap and interact with each other. The headman of each Zulu *kraal* is the chief custodian and leads communal rites, especially those connected with ancestors. Divination is an important activity, and the role of the *isangoma* (diviners) is widespread. The *isangoma* represents a pivotal force for order and rapprochement between humans and the spirit world. This vocation is most often assumed by women and involves special training under an experienced diviner. Diviners are consulted whenever illness, misfortune, or unusual events occur. They diagnose the problem and recommend paths of reparation in the case of ancestral anger and, in the event of sorcery, may point out *abathakathi* (the sorcerer) or suggest countermeasures. The herbalists or medicine men also play a similar role by diagnosing illnesses, prescribing cures, and providing protective medicines. Specialists in medicine with a wide range of medical knowledge are known as *izinyanga zemithi* (a specialist in medicine) or *izinyanga zokwelapha* (a specialist in healing). The diviners are mostly women, whereas the herbalists are men. They are approached with much awe and respect.

The Zulu make distinctions between three aspects of being, which are important for their religious thinking. They distinguish among *inyamalumzimba* (the physical body that decomposes after death),

umoyalumphfumulo (the vital force that keeps humans alive), and *isithunzi* (literally "a shadow," personality). Once the *umoya* leaves the *inyama*, the person is dead and the body is buried and rots. The *isithunzi* lives on as an ancestral spirit; it goes to *uya kwabaphansi* (those underneath), the ancestors who live in the netherworld. The importance of the *isithunzi* in Zulu thought and in human affairs is that it can be removed by means of medicine and kept captive. *Umoya* is also human instinct. A human can have a good and bad spirit. This spirit, which is a vital force, also gives strength. The pursuit of health, fertility, and a balance between humans and with nature constitute some of the basic concerns of traditional Zulu religion. Rites of passage are a common feature of Zulu religious life. All cycles of life, including birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, and death, are celebrated with rituals. The *Kraal* (homestead) is the primary locus for ritual action, although hills or mountains also play an important role. It is in these religious spaces that crucial religious performances occur. Each *rondavel* in the village is characterized by the *umsamo*, a special space set aside for various objects with ritual significance. It is a ritual space for communing with family ancestors.

Afe Adogame

See also Xhosa

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Appendix

Names of God in Africa

The following list of the names of God in Africa was compiled by the scholar and author Dr. Emeka Nwadiora of Temple University. These names are collected from personal knowledge, literary references, and oral narratives. While quite extensive, this list is not exhaustive since there are names for the supreme deity in every African ethnic or linguistic community and there are more than 2,000 such groups on the continent. The reader should find this list impressive in its reach across the continent of Africa from north to south, east to west.

Names of God Among Some Nigerian Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name/Names of God</i>
IGBO	Chi, Chiukwu, Chineke, Olisa
IDOMA	Owoico
IGBTRRA	Ihinegba
IBIBIO	Abasii
GWARI	Shekwo
BASSA	Agwatana
BIRNAWA	Kashiri
DUNGI	Kashiri
EDO	Osanobua
EGEDE	Ohei
ITSEKIRI	Oritse
KADARA	Onum
UROBO	Oghene
TIV	Aoundo
YORUBA	Oluwa, Olodumare, Oloun

KANGORO	Gwaza
INDEM	Osoowo
JAW	Egbesii
JUKUM	Chido
KATAB	Gwaza
IYALA	Oowo

Names of God Among Some Ghanaian Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
BIRIFOR	Nawe
EWE	Mawu
FANTI	Nyame
GA	Zemawon
GRUNSHI	We
KOKOMBA	Ombo
AKAN	Oyame
ASANTE	Onyankopon
TWI	Onyankopon

Names of God Among Some Kenyan Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
POKOT	Toronit
DIGO	Mulungu
DURUMA	Mulungu
EMBU	Ngai
GLKUYU	Murungu
GIRYAMA	Mulungu

GUSI	Erioba
KAMASIA	Asees
KIPSIGI	Ngolo
KONI	Asiis
AKAMBA	Mutuangi
MERU	Murungu
LUO	Nyakolaga
MASAI	Ngai
NANDI	Chebonamuni
POKOMO	Muungu
VUGUSU	Wele
TEITA	Mulungu

**Names of God Among Some
Ugandan Ethnicities**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
BAKENE	Gasani
AMBA	Nyakara
ACHOLI	Jok
ALUR	Jok
ANKORE	Ruhanga
GANDA	Katonda
GWERE	Kipumba
BASOGA	Lubanga
JIE	Akuj
KARAMOJA	Akuj
KIGA	Sebahanga
LANGO	Jok
KONJO	Nyamahanga
MADI	Rabanga
TEUSO	Didikwari
TORO	Nyamuhanga

**Names of God Among Some
Cameroonian Ethnicities**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
BAMILEKE	Si
BAMUN	Njinyi
BANEM	Kolo
BULU	Mebee
DUALA	Loba
EKOI	Nsi
FANG	Nzeme

KPE	Loba
NSO	Nyuy
TIKAR	Nyuy

**Names of God Among Some
Ethiopian Ethnicities**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
BORAN	Waka
BURJI	Bambele
GELABA	Yer
GOFA	Tsuosa
GUMUZ	Roboka
HADIA	Waa
INGASANA	Tel
KAFA	Yaro
KEMANT	Sanbat
KOMA	Waal
KONSO	Adota
KUKA	Tosso
MALE	Sosi
MAO	Yeretsi
MASONGO	Wakwayio
MEKAN	Tuma
MURLE	Tummu
OROMO	Wakwa
SIDAMO	Magano
SURISUMA	Tumma
UDUK	Arumgimis
WALAMO	Tosa
ZALA	Taoso

**Names of God Among Some
Sudanese Ethnicities**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
ANUAK	Juuok
AZANDE	Mboli
BARI	Ngun
BEER	Tuumu
BONGO	Loma
DIDINGA	Tamukujeen
DILIN	Abradi
DINKA	Achek

FAJULU	Ngun
DOOALA	Owasi
JUMJUM	Dyon
KAKWA	Nguleso
KUKU	Nguletet
LOKOIYA	Oichok
LOTUKO	Naijok
MARAKA	Mboli
MEBAN	Juong
MONDARI	Ngun
MORU	Lu
NDONGO	Mviri
NUBA	Masala
NUER	Kwoth
SHILUK	Juok
TOPOSA	Nakwuge

Names of God Among Some South African Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
VENDA	Nawli
XAM	Huwwe
XHOSA	Kwamata
ZULU	Unkulunkulu
TEMBU	Uticzo
TONGS	Hosi
TSWANA	Modibo
PONDO	Udali
LUVEDU	Kuzwane
FINGO	Kwamata
BAVENDA	Raluvimba

Names of God Among Some Congo Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
BACHWA	Jakomba
BALESE	Londi
BALUBA	Lesawaba
RAMBUTI	Arebati
KONJO	Nyamahanga
KUBA	Njambe
LELE	Njambi
LENDU	Gindiri
LOGO	Juka
LUGBARA	Adro
NGOMBE	Ebangala
NKUNDO	Jakomba
SUNATA	Nja
VILI	Zambiupungu

Names of God Among Some Tanzanian Ethnicities

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Name of God</i>
ZINZA	Isewahanga
TURU	Matunda
SUKUMA	Mulungu
SONJO	Mugwe
SAFWA	Nguruvi
PARE	Kiumbi
NYAKIUSA	Mperi
LUGURU	Mulungu
HEHE	Nguluvi
HAYA	Ishwanga
GOGO	Mulungu
CHAGA	Ruwa
BONDET	Mulungu
ARUSHA	Engai

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See also Alafin of Oyo; Babalawo; Eleda; Epa Society; Fa (Ifa); Ifa; Ikin; Iwa; Iwa pele; Nana Buluku; Obatala; Oduduwa; *Odu Ifa*; Ogboni Society; Olodumare; Olokun; Olorun; Orisha (orisa); Orisha Nla (Orisa-Nla); Orunmila; Santeria
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