

Chapter 26

Indigenous Religions and Philosophies

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This chapter explores African indigenous religions and philosophies in contemporary times, considering major beliefs, practices, and institutions that enabled them to survive the efforts of competing religions to destroy them. We present an analysis of the transformative features that allow these religions to protect the anachronisms of ancestor veneration and patriarchy modeled after mythic images while encountering modernity. Finally, we consider the loyalty of adherents to indigenous religions and the religions' continuing impact on traditional cultures and competing faiths.

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Beliefs and Practices

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, approximately 800 million people worldwide celebrate life through the practice of African indigenous religions and culture, much as the ancestors did centuries ago. African indigenous cultures and religions are so intertwined that one cannot be understood without reference to the other. The African cultures evolved out of a sacred worldview that derived from primal people's thinking about and interacting with the physical environment and each other. The basic integrity of the sacred worldview continues to inspire the ways that adherents of African indigenous religions live their lives.

A great extent of the adherents' way of life consists of paying homage to the gods and goddesses (deities/divinities), who best are understood as personifications of the Life Force that permeates the universe. They have located shrines and altars to the deities throughout the landscape, including rivers, streams, hills, mountains, and forests. Some shrines and altars are at a distance, but many are a few steps away, inside lineage communes, private family quarters, and corporate settings. Based on the belief that supernatural power is everywhere, deities and shrines are transportable, spawning the expansion of cults and variations in rituals and practices.

Forested areas are associated closely with cultic worship. These areas are sacred and sometimes secret places, fertile with plants, herbs, and teeming with ser-

pents and other mysterious creatures and sounds—the necessary ingredients for contacting the spirit worlds of deities and ancestors. With the shrinking of forests, many of the products essential to ritualistic activities are purchased in marketplaces, the significance of which is marked by the divinations that are performed when they open and close. The proprietors of marketplaces—some of whom may be priests or priestesses—are keenly knowledgeable about products needed by diviners, healers, and other priests. These products range from kola nuts, palm oil, special soaps, cloth, and herbs to snails, goats, and fowl. Today marketplaces stock these products essential to the ritualistic activity of indigenous communities. Acquiring products for the spiritual activities of a family or the work of a priest requires a visit to the marketplace in the absence of a nearby forest.¹

Although they may no longer be adhered to by an entire ethnic group or incorporated town, the rites and ceremonies of cultic groups are held at sites revealed through divination and designated out of the experiences of the people. These sites are associated with supernatural powers and may be tied to historical events such as ethnic beginnings. The Zulu ancestral rituals, for example, traditionally occur in and around residential dwellings of first settlements. Among these hallowed places are the *umsamo*, a spot within the dwelling that contains sacred family objects, and the *kraal*, the enclosure for cattle. Zulu divinities can be invoked from hills, mountains, streams, and forests.² The Yoruba have lineage altars that are situated in or around individual homes and communal grounds. In both settings the eldest male (or female in the absence of a senior male) in the family lineage serves as its diviner and ritual leader. This is likely to be the person who rises to beckon the dawning of each day with a libation and prayer to the deities and ancestors.

Cults centering on deities consist of professional priests, devotees, and the mass of adherents. They exist all over traditional Africa but are less developed in eastern and southern regions than in the West. The cultic powers are approachable through rituals either at the sites of their shrines or by remote contact. They are understood to emanate from the Supreme Being, an idea common to most African religions. The concept of a Supreme Being is so palpable among the Akan that they pour libations and call on God before approaching the deities. They occasionally offer sacrifices to the Supreme Being in order to call “attention to human needs”³ and strengthen the power of communication with the deities.

The medium for communication between people and the deities is divination. This ritual plays a pivotal role in indigenous religions. Divination is a time-honored and “trusted means of decision making”⁴ centered in the sacred worldview.

1. Field observations in Ouidah, Republic of Benin (1998–2001) and Ile-Ife, Nigeria (1990–1993, 2000).

2. E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 17–20. In “Ancestor As Elders,” Internet <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/Fdtl/Ancestors/kopytoff.html> (2001), Igor Kopytoff argues that among some peoples, the Suku of the southwest Congo for example, emphasis is placed on eldership without distinction between living and dead; instead of ancestor cults, we should refer to the “eldership complex,” he reasons.

3. Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 31.

4. Philip M. Peek, ed., *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 2.



Figure 26.1. Children carrying divining implements during the *Ifa* festival in Ile-Ife.

It is the means by which a priest or other devotee determines if forces between nature and humans are balanced so that harmony in the universe is maintained. The destiny that each individual has at birth is discerned by divination, and the remainder of an individual's life is calibrated and nurtured by this ritual. Prior to incursions of Christianity and Western education, it was respectable for Africans to openly seek divinations for nurturing their destinies and acquiring solutions to their problems, whereas today they tend to approach diviners in secrecy. The general public is likely to encounter divinations only during festivals and other public events except when they incur serious illnesses, face death, or need to make decisions that threaten family and community lifestyles such as divorce, marriage, and travel.

Festivals are community-wide events that are valued for their power to bring people together around ritual. The general public may attend out of curiosity and for excitement, but at these times adherents reaffirm the religion as a central and vital institution in their lives and hope to promote spiritual and physical well-being for all. Any individual in attendance may be invited to receive anointing with compounds mixed for that occasion, as for example during the *Ifa* Festival at Ile-Ife. Many different festivals are held throughout the year. The most universal is that of the first harvest, which often is celebrated as part of the traditional New Year festivities. Festivals are presided over by priests who reiterate the importance of the Supreme Being and powerful supernatural forces (deities) in individual lives and in the affairs of the corporate body. Animal sacrificing, divining, pouring libations, dancing, singing, and narrating sacred orature are common activities. Praying is central to these festivals, for it is a time when the priests offer thanksgiving to the pertinent deities (and to the Supreme Being as appropriate) for the yield in foodstuffs—yams, rice, palm oil—basic to life and procreation.

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Figure 26.2. Drummers and dancer. Dakar, Senegal, 1992.

New Year festivals herald the cycles of death, resurrection, and renewal of life. Youth look forward to festivals and make musical instruments and playfully practice the event before it occurs. At the actual festival, youngsters participate mostly in supportive roles with drummers, dancers, and masqueraders. They sometimes incorporate hip-hop dance steps acquired from television and commercial movies into performances at the *Ifa* Festival, for example. Their involvement as more than observers is a signal that the elders are preparing the younger generations to continue the traditions with occasional transformations.

Indigenous people look at the world and experience life through the lenses of their ancient religions, handing them down to successive generations of children. Alongside their studies in public and private schools, children living in traditional settings have opportunities to study with and assist priests during rites and ceremonies. Children may use the acquired information for play, or they may use it as study guides if selected (or called) as an apprentice in preparation to be a priest or priestess. Studies for the priesthood encompass the mythohistory and worldviews of the indigenous group, its protocol, festivals, and rites and ceremonies, as well as how to react to competing religions. Like their elders, the priests and priestesses in training may acquire specialties in rituals for ancestors, witchcraft and/or sorcery, divination, healing, sacrifices, preparation and burial of the dead, and childnaming rites.⁵ Even today, naming is key to identifying and establishing an infant's destiny.

5. See Joel E. Tishken, "Indigenous Religions," in *AFRICA: vol. 2, African Cultures and Societies before 1885*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 73–94.

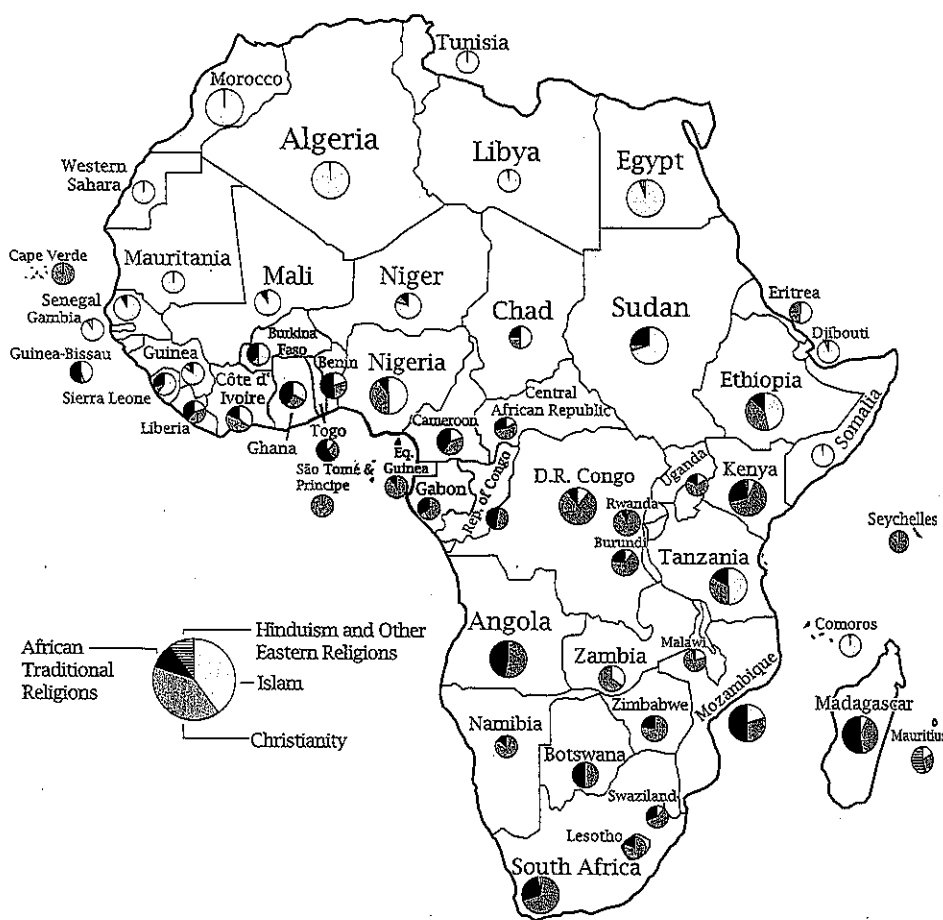
Responding to Christian and Muslim Incursions

When Christianity and Islam invaded the strongholds of indigenous religions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they brought two devices that would stand as concrete symbols of their faiths in contradistinction to the indigenous people—sacred books (the Bible/Koran) and the “house” of worship (the church/mosque). These gave them visibility and accessibility. According to their respective representatives, one could locate the basic precepts of Christianity and Islam in the sacred books and not have to rely on memory and recitation. Indigene and stranger could know that at assigned times dozens of adherents would assemble for worship inside one of the buildings. They could easily determine which place was Christian or Islamic by the faith-specific architectural styles and could choose between the two. The books and buildings became magnets for the two faiths and gave them astonishing presence.

During this period of their underdevelopment, Christians and Muslims opened mission and koranic schools to teach children the basic precepts of their respective faiths and to prepare them to read about them. They made reading a major part of the curriculum. By the mid-twentieth century, literacy, which was vital for handing down the printed messages of the Bible and the Koran, was the prize of generations of children privileged to attend those schools. The teachers read and taught from the books, exhibiting them as concrete evidence that God/Allah wanted the Africans to accept a new religion. The proselytizers implied that the spirit of God/Allah resided in the buildings, where people came to worship them. The power of literacy along with the conflation of the religious symbols (Bible/Church or Koran/Mosque) was a powerful contrast to the myriad divinities, symbols, shrines, and oral traditions of the indigenous religions.

To the casual eye of a visitor in an African urban center or along a tour route, the ubiquity of indigenous religions is obscured by the patina of modernity and imposing Christian and Islamic edifices. Because indigenous people do not operate behind obvious signs or architecture, the uninitiated would not be likely to find them or their shrines and altars without the assistance of someone who is amenable to giving such direction. As might reasonably be expected, towns have divisions that generally separate the settlements along ethnic and/or religious lines, showing movement away from indigenous communities toward the less traditional. After centuries of persecution, the priests and other adherents are careful to practice within their own communities and not to be obtrusive in the less friendly quarters of towns and cities. If not primarily by public display, books, or a house of worship, by what markers can one identify African indigenous religions? Whereas Christians have churches and the Bible and Muslims have mosques and the Koran, African religions are everywhere, in all aspects of the lives of Africans.⁶ It is within the common activities of folk living in the traditional areas that the indigenous religions systematically are practiced, although there usually are no marked buildings or written signs to distinguish them for outsiders.

6. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), 20–30.



Religion in modern Africa.

Nevertheless, today the sacred precepts of some indigenous religions can be found in books. Knowledge once limited to memory and oral recitation among the members of the priestly classes now is printed. The Yoruba and Fon (now a people in the Republic of Benin) sacred oratures, including divination scriptures and the coordinate deific myths and songs are in print, for example. Manuscript and published copies of these written materials are studied and consulted as textbooks by men and women aspiring to become devotees of the gods of divination, *Ifa* and *Fa*.⁷ The first collection of verses and interpretations of *Ifa/Fa* orature (1904) seems to have been assembled for printing by *babalawo* repatriates from

7. The Yoruba collections are charted by Conrad E. Maugé, *The Yoruba World of Good and Evil* (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: House of Providence, 1994), 62–63. He lists the first as being printed about 1904 by the Reverend Onadele Epega and followed by Beyioku in the 1930s with subsequent additions in the 1950s and 1960s by William Bascom and Wande Abimbola; the collections expanded in the 1980s and 1990s.

Christianity and Islam; they were eager to have textbooks and study guides for themselves and literate aspirants. Modern technology has made the recitation of verses, deific and ancestral images, rituals, dances, and rhythms from a range of indigenous religions accessible to adherents in the West via audiovisuals, television, and on the Internet.⁸

At the end of the nineteenth century, the onslaught against indigenous religions begun by Muslims and Christians centuries earlier took a serious turn with repercussions into the present. All across the continent these proselytizers denigrated indigenous religions—the foundation of communalism and its social and political organization. They offered carrots and sticks to Traditionalists: access to jobs, schooling, and influence to those who at least publicly rejected their ancestral practices and cults. Those who remained loyal to indigenous religions faced virtual poverty, persecution, and ostracism. The destroyers had the support of a few traditional rulers and converted Africans who equated Christianity and Islam with progress, modernity, and civilization. They accepted the new gods and cultures. Their reactions were not exceptional, for a characteristic of the indigenous religions was the propensity of the people to abandon deities who proved less powerful than conquering forces during the mid-twentieth century.

A number of traditional cults and deities were diminished or destroyed. On the Gold Coast, the cult of Katawere was suppressed by the European administrators in 1907. Prior to this, agents of the German government destroyed the shrines of Denteh in the 1880s, and the priest of Denteh was imprisoned and executed by the colonial government. The British colonial administration forced the Krobo to abandon their settlements on the Krobo Mountain and suppressed the cult of Kotoklo and Nadu. From the Gold Coast to Central and East Africa there were movements to eradicate witchcraft. The Egbema-Ijo cult of the goddess of Creation and Destiny (Woyengi) is one of those with a decimated priesthood in 1950, the year of the death of her last priestess. Women no longer would serve as priestesses for fear that their husbands would lose employment, which was supported by the Christian Church. The “Myth of the Woman Who Tried to Change Her Fate”⁹ is a narration that reflects the decline of this cult through the experiences of Ogboinba, a mythic characterization of its chief priestesses. Some of the ways in which the indigenous people retaliated is discussed below under “Loyalty.”

European Christians were suspicious of the African Muslims initially, but once they were able to dissuade them from pan-Islamic goals, the Christians tolerated Islam largely because of its one-God (Allah) doctrine. At times these two factions conspired to undermine indigenous religions, criticizing nearly every aspect of their philosophies and practices. Principally, the Christian mission and koranic schools endeavored to introduce modern education, with reading as a lure, to indigenous Africa. Their goal was to establish competing social and religious orders

8. See for example the Internet site <http://mamiwata.com/sunsum.html> created by an African American priestess on Mammi Wata.

9. K. Asare Opoku, “Religion in Africa during the Colonial Era,” in *General History of Africa*, vol. 7, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Berkeley: UC Press, 1985), 513–17. Philip E. Leis, *Enculturation and Socialization in An Ijaw Village* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 24–25; Ulli Beier, ed., *Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1970), 23–41.

after dismantling what they called the pagan systems. They attacked every aspect of them, from pouring libations to divining and from invoking power of deities to venerating ancestors. Priestly initiations, puberty rites (including circumcision and cliterodectomy), and some indigenous forms of education were dealt a heavy blow. Many students impressed with the Christian and Muslim ways of life refused to undergo the conventional rites, rejecting them as pagan and uncivilized.¹⁰ At present overwhelming numbers of Africans with Christian and Muslim educations do not identify with or practice indigenous religions.

Almost simultaneously with the independence movements in Africa fervor for traditionalism came from African American communities in the United States. From the period of their Black Nationalist Cultural movement of the 1970s, African Americans began to recover their lost heritages by learning and practicing indigenous religions. Black Nationalists in New York City were in the vanguard of this movement, out of which emerged the Oyotunji African Village, which is headquartered in South Carolina. This group has joined Traditionalists from the other Americas and other Traditionalists in the United States in going to Africa to learn about indigenous religions and to be initiated into priesthoods of the many African cults. Yoruba *babalawo*, Fon *hounnongan*, Zulu healers, and priests of several other indigenous religions travel regularly to the United States to consult with American practitioners. Despite competing faiths and political and social instability, African indigenous religions are clinging to their rightful place in post-independence Africa and other parts of the world.

Far from being eradicated, Traditionalists are finding supportive and unexpected allies. Drawn to Benin by the tradition of Catholicism there and recognizing the dominance of *Vodun* during his visit in 1992, Pope John Paul II apologized for the centuries of ridicule western Christendom had heaped on *Vodun* and other African indigenous religions. Three years later President Nicephore Soglo said his government was trying to correct the past history of injustice to indigenous religions in Benin by declaring January 10th an annual national, paid holiday. That day is set aside to celebrate *Vodun* as well as the nation's other indigenous religions, for, according to Soglo, they deserved to have the same recognition as Christianity and Islam. Whatever his motives, this decree showed that this candidate recognized the numbers and political potential of the *Vodun* worshipers.¹¹

Vodun received a boost from these positive actions. When the Marxists were empowered in 1972, nearly 60 percent of Beninois were *Vodun* loyalists, but the *Vodun* religion experienced a decline because that regime discouraged it. In 1990-1991, Marxism was peacefully overthrown, a democratic government was instituted, and the country became the Democratic Republic of Benin. The Pope's apology and the nation's establishment of a paid holiday for the celebration of *Vodun* boosted the number of adherents to 70 percent in 2000. Togo, Burkina Faso, and other nearby countries may have experienced a similar bounce in Traditionalism as a result. Approximately 37 percent of Beninois are members of Protestant and Catholic churches; 13 percent are Muslims, and a few are members of the syncretic, African Christian Celeste Church. Tourist booklets claim

10. Adu Kwabena-Essem, "A New Look at 'Juju': The Pope's Apology to Africans," *Djembe Magazine*, no. 13, July 1995; also "Benin-Voodoo," Associated Press Release, January 10, 1996.

11. Ibid.

that "Vodunism" is the dominant religion, with as many as half of all Beninois being practitioners.¹²

The 1992 International *Vodun* Conference in Cotonou gets a large part of the credit for establishing the annual *Vodun* holiday. The purpose behind the conference was to heighten awareness of *Vodun*. Two precedents were set by that conference: (1) Representations of the *Vodun* were created and erected in the sacred forest outside Ouidah, and (2) the forested area, bordering the quarters for people studying to become *vodunsi* (initiates to *Vodun* cults), was opened to the public so that it can view the representations. An international group of scholars, the UNESCO Slave Trade Route Project, has among its interests Benin and the transatlantic slave trade. This group undoubtedly contributed toward inspiring the display of representations of the *Vodun* in Benin. Freshly-painted icons of *Vodun* now line the road leading to the area approximated to be Benin's slave trade route. The route and the icons have helped boost tourism in the Republic of Benin in recent years. Lacking visibility for these images on the continent, African devotees could say as recently as the 1990s, "the gods are in the Americas." Now the most popular *Vodun* are attractively displayed in areas accessible to the touring public.

Tour guides relate interesting narratives about the transatlantic slave trade, as curious tourists and students crowd around the Tree of Hope, to dramatize the religious thought of Dahomean kings and people. According to one of these narratives:

The kings believed that they could make human sacrifices of foreign captives who would take messages to the ancestors to persuade them to wipe out the memories of their participation in slave trading among those transported to the Americas. King Agadja (1708–1732) had a better thought; he would have a Dahomean woman and man sacrificed by burying them in the hole in which he would plant the Tree of Hope [that they would return but not do harm to him]. They would serve the same purpose as the foreigners but to better advantage. The Dahomeans would know and be recognized by the ancestors and thus *would* be more empowered to be the conduit for the king's message to the otherside.¹³

The establishment of the slave trade route and the accompanying displays of icons and narratives recounting indigenous beliefs indicate the government's recognition of *Vodun* as a resource for the tourist trade. This is one of several ways in which government leaders, a number of whom are likely to have been reared in or near indigenous communities, encourage the practicing of *Vodun*. Officials sometimes attend events sponsored by these groups. Government departments make monetary and in-kind contributions toward the success of their events. They provide loudspeakers, sheds, and platforms for guests and offer official welcomes on behalf of the government. Priests or other indigenous leaders are

12. 12. Colette Tchaou Hodonou, *Visage du Benin: Le guide du tourisme et des affaires*, with Preface from the Minister of Commerce and Tourism (Cotonou, 1995), 22, 17; later statistics are from Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 33.

13. Summarized from a video-taped lecture in the sacred forest by Professor Joseph Adande, Head of the Department of History and Archaeology, National University of Benin. The quoted passage is told by Martine de Souza (Ouidah, Republic of Benin, 2001).

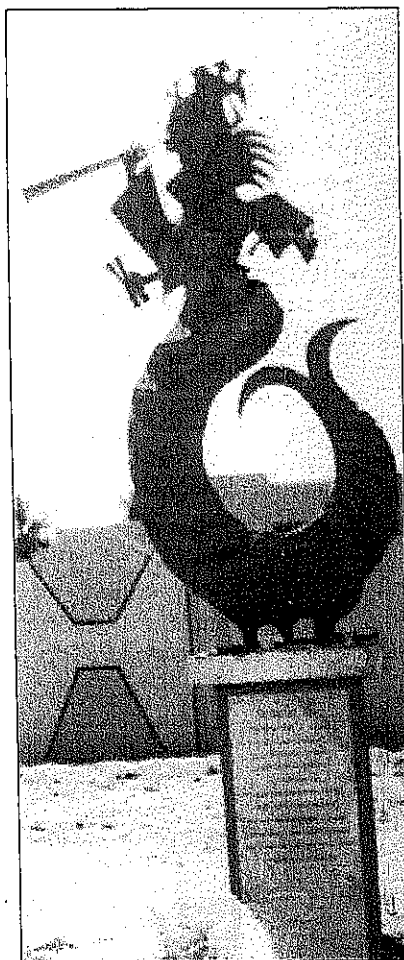


Figure 26.3. A representation of Osun along the slave trade route, Ouidah.

invited to participate in state functions, where they pour libations and perform other rites to mark the opening of government projects and ensure their successes.

Veneration of the Ancestors

What makes the African indigenous religions tenacious and colorful is the element of giving due reverence to the ancestors. This is a nearly universal element. Indigenous Africans believe dead ancestors have the power to intervene in the daily lives of their descendants. A group of Zimbabwean Christians say they were reminded once of the neglected ancestors' power to punish the living for failing to keep the traditions of honoring them. Their memory had a good jarring when several accidents occurred on a straight, easy-to-negotiate road where ancestors of

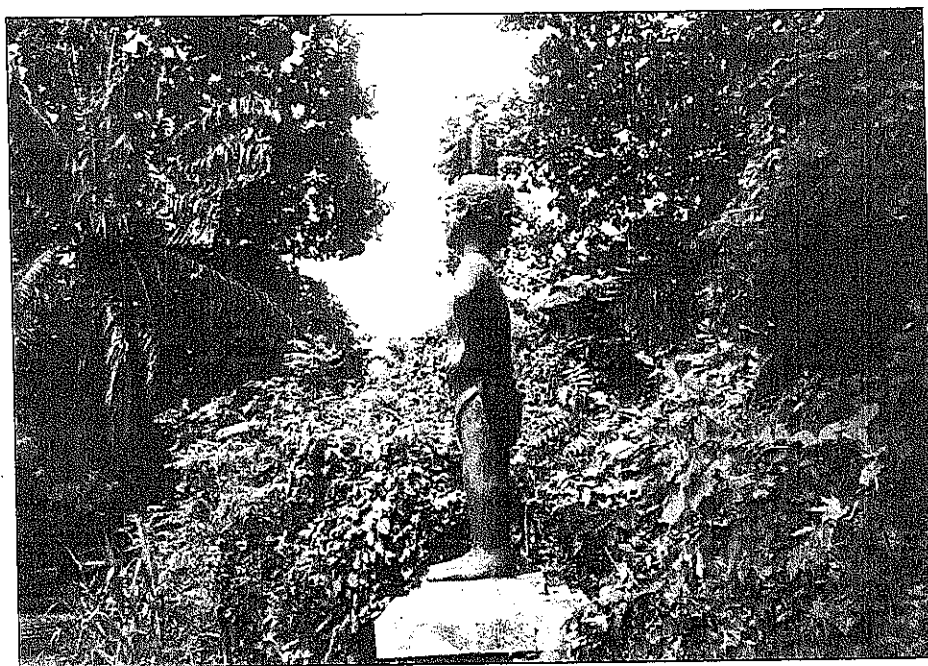


Figure 26.4. An icon of the king's spy as represented in the sacred forest outside Ouidah.

Christian converts once resided. The Christians called for the elders of the churches to come to talk to the agitated spirits and to cleanse the road of evil.¹⁴

In order to preserve a right relationship with the departed, nearly every ethnic group has societies or other knowledgeable persons who are prepared to conduct the rites and ceremonies of exorcism.

There are corporate and family ancestors. Some of the deceased, though remembered in family gatherings, are excluded from honors at the corporate level. These are reserved for the deceased who have distinguished themselves as cultural icons. Minimal characteristics of a person who would be venerated by an entire community are that they lived to a ripe old age and fulfilled their destinies. Of course, these also are the qualifications of most revered ancestors. They would have had the good fortune of being well-placed as a member of the royal family, an indispensable priest, or a warrior of distinguished bravery. Ancestors honored at the corporate level exemplified the highest values of the society and were models whose lives the living would do well to emulate. Though not necessarily deified as some ancestors have been, these honored dead are highly respected for their contributions. One of these widely known deified, corporate-level ancestors is the Yoruba *orisa*, *Sango*. Every family regularly pays homage to its own remembered dead, offering them libations and prayer at the beginning of each day, for example. These are efforts put forth to insure that the family members receive

14. A. Moyo, "Religion and Political Thought in Independent Zimbabwe," in C. Hal-lencreutz and A. Moyo, *Church and State in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1988).

positive vibrations and that they be given whatever help they need in order to effectively achieve their various pursuits.

Known by different appellations and various physical representations across the continent, the spirits of ancestors periodically are invoked to visit and communicate with the people. In order to maintain harmony in society, since it is made up of the living and the dead, the living are obliged to be vigilant in their efforts to relate to the deceased. Constantly aware that the ancestors play an important role in their lives, Africans take seriously the responsibility of honoring and keeping them appeased. Death is understood to be the transition from the physical to the spiritual world, with seniority at the time of death, titles, and functions continuing to be operative. It is this connection between the two worlds that is dramatized in special festivals and rituals by male, masked figures. The Yoruba call them *egungun*, who represent the spirits of ancestors. Among the Igbo, these male, masked figures are called the *Ekpo-Mmuo* (meaning spirits of the dead). In some ethnic groups, masqueraders appear at initiation ceremonies, as do the Makishie dancers in Zambia.¹⁵ Family and communal festivals of the honored dead are likely to bring out several masked dancers every year—often from June to July and from December to January. Yoruba *egungun* now are in the United States and can be viewed in all of their colorful, swirling glory at the Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina, and other places that are part of the Oyotunji Movement, whenever there are festivals, weddings, deaths, and other special occasions.¹⁶

When masqueraded dancers—not ghosts as referred to by one Westernized, Porto Novo (Republic of Benin) tour guide—representing spirits of ancestors make an appearance, gifts of appeasement or thanks for prosperity and peace are presented at their shrines. Instead of greetings and dancing, some ancestors bring whips and other instruments of retribution when a community or individuals have veered from the traditions and deserve to be chastised. Many come to interact with the family or community, to turn away evil, misfortune, fear, or to enhance fertility in women thought to be barren. Some people think the ancestors returned can help to prevent death in infants and toddlers who were born *abiku*; among the Yoruba, these are children who are expected to die in childhood. The *abiku* and still-born are not honored as ancestors. When they die in infancy, these deceased have not developed fully and are classified as the “not yet born.”¹⁷

The Yoruba *egungun* may be the most widely known for their diverse styles. The more traditional ones come as masqueraders who are colorfully attired to dance, spin, gesticulate, and speak at rhythmic cues in a manner that portrays the personality of the deceased. Some are covered from head to toe with a camouflage so that no facial features show. Others have facial features and make their entry at or around the time of a person's death and burial. There are satirical *egungun* with wooden heads and facial features that are designed to ridicule Europeans

15. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 48–49. See also Opoku, “Religion in Africa during the colonial era,” 510.

16. Djisovi Ikukomi Eason, “A Time of Destiny”: *Ifa Culture and Festivals in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997), 162–76.

17. Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton, III, with Rowland Abiodun, *YORUBA: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art with Harry N. Abrams Inc.), 175.

and their cultures, but there also are animal and serpent-headed, totemic *egungun* portraying mythic history. In addition to their own colorful, Yoruba-like *egungun*, the Fon Traditionalists have an *egungun* that is called Zangbéto; these representations may have faces and look like huge, swirling haystacks.¹⁸ The Fon refer to them as the night watchmen who come to punish thieves and robbers and to emphasize the moral and ethical dimensions of *Vodun*.

There are ancestral rituals in the Republic of Benin that are appropriately described as exhumation and reburial ceremonies. These rites are centered on pots into which the dead are called from waterways. Residing in the South at the edge of the Gulf of Benin, the Fon believe that their ancestors live in or near streams and so perform their rites in these vicinities annually in May or June. Priests who are well-versed leaders of these rites invite the ancestors to leave the water and enter pots set aside for that purpose. The pots are carried to homes by the priests who shake them vigorously to indicate the presence of the ancestor. These pots are placed on altars in the temple, and gifts for the deceased periodically are set before them. The Egun people of Benin practice a skull ritual, in which they exhumate skulls of those who have been buried seven (females) to nine (males) months. After libating and repairing any that are damaged, the skulls are placed in pots and ceremonially buried near the ocean, and gifts are made on that spot annually.¹⁹ These rites remind us of the reburial ceremonies among the peoples of Madagascar who bury their dead and after a period of years, disinter and wash their skeletons, and arrange them for final burial.

People in the south of Benin remain concerned about the Dahomean role in the slave trade. Consequently, they have established the ancestral *Vodun* Kplessin who represents the Dahomean ancestors—royals and commoners—transported to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. During the annual *Vodun* Festival, Kplessin is viewed by the public and offered gifts. This deity is in continuity with the Fon practice of deifying ancestors of distinction.

There are African critics who think that the emphasis on ancestors is problematic. Those with this notion hold that these traditions should not be continued without appropriate critical reflection as to how and whether they play effective roles in the goals toward modernization and enhancement of the lives of the people. They hold up nations like the Zulu as proper models, for they still revere ancestors but also have embraced modern medical practices and have genuine respect for scientific progress.²⁰

Diviners and Other Priests

Custody of the religious traditions is in the hands of the members of the priesthood. There are a number of officiating personnel in African indigenous re-

18. "Aujourd'hui le masque Zangbéto" in *Afrique: le Bénin et ses mystères*, a videotape, n.d. Acquired from museum in Abomey, Republic of Benin.

19. Summary from Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 50–51.

20. Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), especially the chapter titled, "The Place of Traditional African Cultural Values in Modern Africa."

ligions, but among the most significant of them are the priests and priestesses. So who are these spiritual guides? Some are sons, fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles. Many are astute observers of nature, people, and society. All subscribe to traditional methods for preparing themselves for their profession but also find value in the formal educational systems. In order to acquire the vast body of knowledge and skills required for their professions, priestly studies and apprenticeships extend over decades. They are prepared to be caretakers of those who seek their services and realize that clients with a modern thought are not likely to long indulge backward, provincial-minded diviners and other priests. Some have the intellectual and spiritual resources required to confront the challenges of modernity as they maintain indigenous systems.

Priests and priestesses provide a bridge to other worlds for adherents while "accommodating precepts of the indigenous religions."²¹ They mediate several systems of thought, i.e., modern versus the traditional, indigenous versus the outside. They need to "have continuing and complex relationships with the indigenous adherents around them, but they also...[need] continuing and complex relationships with the worlds of Christianity [,]...Islam [and western thought]."²² Priests and priestesses know that the world is in a state of perpetual change, and they enjoy the autonomy and flexibility of mind that enable them to respond to change in a creative and responsible manner.

There is a savvy about contemporary priests that derives from contacts with peoples and cultures outside their indigenous worlds. Wherever there is a major tourist attraction or a university (such as the museum in Ouidah, Republic of Benin, and the Institute of African Studies at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria) that promotes the local culture, traditional priests are apt to have contact with adherents and researchers from abroad. Such places are well known among practitioners of African indigenous religions in North America, South America, the Caribbean, and Europe, and they seek them out for research, divinations, initiations, and healing.

In nearly every community, at least one of the African priests has traveled abroad and so is sensitive to interests of clients from overseas. Several of them are repatriates to indigenous religions, having been educated in Christian and Islamic schools and/or having been active members in Christian churches as youth and young adults. As the masters of a large store of knowledge and intuition, the priests and healers are sensitive to the ways and interests of their clients from overseas. For example, if someone has a divination that requires them to acquire a religious object, the sensitive priest will gift-wrap the object and make sure that it is odorless and appropriate for packing inside a suitcase or other shipping container. When extending the traditional welcome to guests stopping briefly in their homes, thoughtful priests are likely to offer clients overseas bottled water. The request that clients acquire items necessary for gifts that will appease a deity or supernatural force according to terms of a divination may be limited to local people. Diviners understand that clients from abroad usually have limitations on their time and on their familiarity with the town; therefore, diviners generally oblige

21. E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 49.

22. *Ibid.*, 98.



Figure 26.5. Aseda Awo (Babatunji Adeyefa, Ile-Ife) consulting in an American home.

these clients by purchasing or having an assistant purchase the required items for sacrifices and personal cleansings.

It would be naive to think of priests, diviners, and healers as discrete practitioners insulated by their native locales. The cultural unity that exists across the African continent belies such false notions. They are organized and have interchanges with each other within and across ethnic, national, and continental borders. They attend festivals or visit peers in their own and other indigenous religions in nearby countries as consultants. They bring expertise and flair to each others' rituals, form alliances, learn from each other, and solicit financial support and attendance for projects and organizations. Priests may be employed in unrelated work for a salary or they may be self-employed, thereby having contact with fairly large cross-sections of peoples of other faiths. For their services to indigenous clients, remuneration may range from kola nuts and in-kind services to money and goods.

Intercontinental organizations, such as the International *Orisa* Conference, help African priests keep useful contacts across the Atlantic and the continent. As a result of interregional migrations and modern communications and travel, today indigenous religions are practiced by people beyond the ethnic groups which created them. No longer religions confined to the indigenous communities