

THE FORGOTTEN SOUTH: AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THEIR GLOBAL  
IMPACT

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## “The Forgotten South: African Religious Traditions and Their Global Impact”

As we approach the end of the first decade of the Twenty-first Century, it continues to surprise me how many Religious Studies Departments, dedicated to the comparative study of religions, fail to include within the canon of specialties that their departments offer, the study of indigenous African religions: those religious traditions created by African peoples that are closely linked to their sense of ethnic identity and provide a spiritual connection to the land, to the supreme being, to lesser spirits and to their ancestors. To the extent that this field exists at all within the Western university, it is usually relegated to departments of anthropology, that have their roots in Western expansion into the Forgotten South of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. It is indeed curious that our students learn about theoretical approaches to the study of religions by examining the work of anthropologists and historians of religion who studied African religions, but they seldom have the opportunity to study African religions on their own terms, in order to understand some of the oldest and still dynamic and vital religious traditions in human history. Indeed, if physical anthropologists are correct and human beings first came into being on the African continent, then it stands to reason that religions themselves began in Africa, as well.

If that is the case, then why this profound neglect? Why the forgotten South? What I will try to do today is address the origins of this neglect, the stereotypes of African religions, and some sense of the rich diversity of African religious traditions. I will conclude with some brief remarks about their encounter with Christianity and Islam, as well as the future of indigenous African traditions.

The distinguished philosopher and novelist, Valentin Mudimbe has demonstrated the remarkable persistence of two fundamental assertions about Africa in the Western imaginings of the continent. These have had a profound impact on the place of African Studies within our

universities. Since the time of Herodotus, he notes, Western travelers and scholars have imagined Africa as a place without history and without religion. Herodotus described Africa as populated by a host of bestial creatures, most notably the Troglodytes, none of whom possessed a sense of history or a religious system. This distinguished Africans from the Greeks and Egyptians, and eventually, the Romans, with their emphases on civil religions and civic histories.<sup>1</sup> This discourse of disparity, persisted into the modern era, most influentially in Georg Friedrich Hegel's, Philosophy of History:

Africa proper... the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night....But even Herodotus called the Negroes sorcerers: now, in sorcery we have not the idea of God, of a moral faith.... At this point we leave Africa... For it is no historical part of the world: it has no movement or development to exhibit... What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.<sup>2</sup>

These images find their way into accounts by travelers and slave merchants during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, conveniently echoing these ideas of non-historical peoples without religion, as a way of describing Africans as people who ought, by their very natures, be enslaved. Had not Plato once described peoples without history or religions as brutes for whom enslavement

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1 Valentin Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 70.

2 G.W.F. Hegel, The Philosophy of History, New York: Dover, 1956, pp. 91, 93, 99.

could be justified?<sup>3</sup> These images found their way into the travelogues of intrepid explorers like Sir Samuel Baker: who, despite the fact that he spoke no African language and was continually on the move in his quest for the source of the Nile, wrote confidently about his encounters with various peoples without religion. Less than a century later, British anthropologists wrote some of the finest analyses of African religions based on field research among Baker's peoples without religion.<sup>4</sup> If, however, the slave traders and explorers of the sixteenth through the nineteenth century were correct, than I would find myself as both a historian of Africa and a student of African religions, as a person who has spent his entire professional career studying the history of peoples without history and the history of religions of people without religions. So I can stop now. It is only a short trip back to Columbia. But, alas, I will not have met my task.

Where did these images that dominate Western imaginings of Africa come from? I think they are rooted primarily in four phenomena. First, is the long-standing continuity of the nature of interaction between peoples of the Mediterranean and European worlds with Africa. Since the time of the pharaohs, people from the North have purchased the lives and labor of African peoples from south of the Sahara. Their legitimation of such practices and their eventual sale of African slaves to other peoples helped created these images of barbarians without history and religion. Such images persisted in the Islamic world where non-Abrahamic religions were seen as simply forms of "unbelief" and whose adherents could be subject to enslavement. As the Portuguese explored the African coasts seeking sea routes to Asia, they discovered the utility of employing unfree African labor on sugar cane plantations off the coasts of North Africa and

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3 David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966, pp. 66-67.

4 Samuel Baker, cited in Benjamin Ray, African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976, p. 3. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Nuer Religion, New York: Oxford University Press, 1956 (1974). Godfrey Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience

Iberia. The idea of bringing religion to people without religion and putting Africans into history became a justification of the Atlantic slave trade endorsed by French, British, Portuguese, Spanish, Danish, Dutch, and Baltic slave traders. A second reason for this idea that Africans had no religions, apart from Islam and Christianity, was that Europeans associated “religion” with houses of worship. They looked for church-like dwellings, mosque-like dwellings, and temples and, not finding many, this reinforced their image of Africa as a place without religion.

Similarly, they thought of religions having some kind of scriptural foundation, a practice common not only to the Abrahamic religious communities, but to most of the Asian religious traditions that, since the eighteenth century, they were beginning to study. African religious traditions relied primarily on oral traditions handed down from teacher to student, from father to son, and mother to daughter. These traditions were inaccessible to European travelers not only because they did not understand African languages, but because of the fourth reason for European unawareness of African religions, the only one that came from African traditions themselves. The focus on oral transmission of knowledge, the idea that knowledge is power, and that one must demonstrate one’s ability to handle the power being offered through education, has served to reinforce the esoteric nature of African religious education. Only people with the right to know, who had demonstrated their ability to handle the power of religious knowledge would be taught. Travelers for short periods of time, missionaries who sought to revolutionize African societies through the introduction of Western forms of Christianity, colonial administrators, and even eager graduate students funded for a year of the field research experience did not qualify. In many cases, they were told what village elders wanted them to know, the kinds of stories they told their children, stories devoid of the central paradoxes of their religious traditions. And dutifully in accordance with the intent of their informants, missionaries, travelers and

anthropologists wrote about child-like beliefs, practices, and superstitions, never suspecting that they were being kept at arm-length and were being told the equivalent of Bible Stories for Children.

Although there were occasional vivid and accurate descriptions of African religious practices during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, it was only with the arrival of missionaries, primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with their vocational focus on religious phenomena and the work of conversion, that we began to get reports on African concepts of the supreme being, of lesser gods or spirits, and the rituals they performed to worship them. They wrote reports back to their missionary and/or geographical societies, to popular magazines and newspapers, and what became known as “arm-chair” anthropologists wove them together into encyclopedic studies of the non-Western world, arranged according to the dominant paradigms of the time, evolutionary schema that saw Africa and other “primitive” parts of the world as living laboratories for the study of the origins of religions. Various theorists came up with different ideas about the origin of religions, ranging from Sir Edward Burnett Tylor’s animism (the belief in souls in everything), Charles de Brosses and James Frazer’s concept of fetishism (the worship of powerful objects), polytheism (the worship of many gods), etc. African religions were always placed at the bottom of the evolutionary schema and either monotheism or atheism, both most influential in the West, were placed at the apex. Evans-Pritchard describes a standard “recipe” for these types of descriptions of African religions:

a reference to cannibalism, a description of Pygmies (by preference with a passing reference to Herodotus), a denunciation of the inequities of the slave trade, the need for the civilizing influence of commerce, something about rain-makers and

other superstitions, some sex (suggestive though discreet), add snakes and elephants to taste; bring slowly to the boil and serve.<sup>5</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, only Father Wilhelm Schmidt suggested the possibility of an initial monotheism, suggesting that all religions can be traced back to Adam and Eve and their primal revelations in the Garden of Eden.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that when Christian missionaries began to proselytize in earnest in the mid nineteenth century, each African religion they encountered had a word for a supreme being that missionaries saw as roughly equivalent to the Christian concept of God. Now, they occasionally had problems with interpreters and translation. Okot P'Bitek described an early encounter of missionaries with the Acholi of Uganda in which they asked some elders about who created them. The interpreter, however, chose a term for create that meant "mold" with the implication of "deform." The elders replied that Rubanga was that deity. The missionaries said that this was their god. The Acholi elders thought that this was strange, that they usually try to keep Rubanga out of their lives, but perhaps the Europeans knew something that they did not. Nevertheless, the missionaries had few converts in the years before they discovered the error of their translation and switched to the term that was used by the Acholi to describe the supreme being.<sup>7</sup>

Systematic anthropological research on the subject of African religions began in the 1920s and original research by historians of religions on African religions had to await the conclusion of the Second World War. Not surprisingly, many of the early religious studies, ie. Geoffrey Parrinder and Placide Tempels, were written by former missionaries with many years

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5 Edward Evans-Pritchard, cited in Benjamin Ray, African Religions, p. 3.

6 Father Wilhelm Schmidt cited in Ray, African, pp. 6-7.

7 Okot P'Bitek, African Religions in Western Scholarship, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1970.

experience in African societies.<sup>8</sup> By the 1950s a number of African scholars, largely Christian in religious practice, began to write on their own communities' religious systems, often attempting to demonstrate strong parallels between Christianity and African religions.<sup>9</sup> From the late 1960s, scholars like Charles and Jerome Long, Benjamin Ray began to study African religions within the framework of the history of religions.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1980s, African religions scholarship had created a small, but critical mass, which led Rosalind Hackett and Robert Baum to create an African Religions Group at the American Academy of Religion.<sup>11</sup>

So based on this gradual expansion of research on African religious traditions, what do they entail? First, I would suggest two strong cautionary statements: there are over one thousand different African cultures, each of which have their own distinct religious practices. Their differences reflect different linguistic groups, ecological zones, political systems, interaction with other cultures, including those of Muslims and Christians, the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, and the influence of disease. Thus, there are significant differences between African religions of the Sudanic and Sahelian regions of West Africa in comparison with traditions of Upper Guinea and with Lower Guinea. Both are significantly different from the religions of Bantu-speaking Equatorial, East, and Southern Africa, as well as from the Nilotic

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8 Geoffrey Parrinder, West African Religion, Second Edition, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970. Father Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1946.

9 J. B. Danquah, Akan Concepts of God, London: Franck Cass, 1968. E. Bolaji Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition, London: SCM Press, 1973. John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970. Okot P;Bitek is a major exception. He emphatically rejected the imposition of Christian categories on African traditional religions, preferring to use African categories to describe African religions. See African Religions in Western Scholarship.

10 Charles Long, Alpha. Benjamin Ray, Myth, Ritual and Kingship in Buganda, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. \_\_\_\_\_, African Religions, op, cit.

11 For a discussion of the history of the study of African Religions in Britain, see James Cox, From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions, Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007.

religious traditions of East Africa. Second, the term “religion” has a distinct meaning within Western religious discourse; terms associated with “religion” in African languages may not convey an exact parallel. As Jonathan Z. Smith challenged historians of religion to do, we must stipulate what we mean by “religion” in the societies in which we work. Thus, in my own work on Diola “religion,” I associate four terms with the English term: *makanaye* “what we do” or tradition;

*boutine*, a path; *kainoe*, thought; and *huasene* or ritual. Thus, Diola think about what Westerners identify as “religion” in terms of tradition, following a path, thought, and ritual.<sup>12</sup>

Next, I would suggest that in every case in which I am familiar, African religions have at their center, a concept of a supreme being, who is seen as eternal and the source of all power in the universe. Many have suggested that the supreme being is relatively remote and inactive, what has often been called a *deus otiosus*, the source of all life power, but relatively inaccessible to ritual supplication. In fact, the importance of the supreme being differs dramatically, from one religious tradition to another. As we turn to specific religious traditions, one should keep in mind, that these supreme beings are not all-knowing; they make mistakes and they allow emotions to cloud their judgement.<sup>13</sup> Among the Dogon, for example, the supreme being, Amma, rapes mother earth, because of his profound loneliness as the sole being in the universe. These supreme beings are considered to be male in some religious traditions, female in others, and androgynous in some. When I asked Diola elders about whether their supreme being, Emitai (Of the Sky) was male or female, the response I got was “You are from America. They have sent

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12 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. xi. Robert M. Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 34-35.

13 This is not unique to Africa. Witness the “failure” of God’s initial creation in Genesis and Its decision to repopulate the world after the flood.

someone up to Emitai (to the moon). You tell us if God has male parts or female parts.” In short, they thought it was an inane and prurient question about the anatomy of the supreme being. One could consider my asking of this question as a reflection of an American culture where the gender of God was a matter of considerable contestation in the 1970s and 1980s.

In every case, this supreme being begins the process of creation and is seen as the source of life. In the ecological zones where adequate rainfall can make the difference between feast or famine, the supreme being is often identified as the source of rain. Finally, the supreme being judges the behavior of people when they die and determines their initial destination in the afterlife. Only those people who have lived in ways that helped their families and communities become ancestors. Those who violated community norms through violence, sexual improprieties, theft, or witchcraft are sent to various kinds of punishments, but they, along with the ancestors, are eventually reborn. As one Diola Catholic said, even though he had learned in catechism that people stay in Heaven or Hell for all eternity, “The priest was a white man. He could not see the spirits of the dead, returning to the living. We do not believe that God could hate anyone so much as to condemn them to Hell forever.” In many African religions, the supreme being is neither remote, nor inactive, but controls the creation of life, the distribution of rain, and determines one’s fate in the afterlife. In describing African religions, I avoid the sterile debate about whether African religions are monotheistic or polytheistic, a debate that Okot P’Bitek accurately suggests has far more to do with polemical debates about the founding of Christianity in the ancient world than the religious realities of African farmers and herders.<sup>14</sup> I prefer to describe African religions as monocentric; there is a supreme being, of varying degrees of importance, at the center of each African religious system.

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14 Okot P’Bitek, African Religions in Western Scholarship, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1969.

In most African religions, there are also lesser deities or lesser spirits. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, they are known as *orisha* and there are 401 of them, many of whom were, at one time or another, incarnate among human beings. They have rich theographies or bodies of myth which describe their different powers and their interactions with other gods and humans. In other cases, like that of the Diola of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau, these spirits are not described in very specific personal terms, but more in terms of their specific functions on behalf of Diola communities. The lesser spirits or lesser gods control many aspects of daily life. Among the Yoruba, there are *orishas* associated with women's fertility, the fertility of the land, kingship, various forces of nature, iron and war (recently expanded to include chauffeurs, factory workers, etc) and disease (the smallpox god, *Shopona* has become associated with a new disease, AIDS, since the elimination of smallpox from the human disease-scape). Among the Diola, lesser spirits, known as *ukine*, govern many aspects of life from male and female initiation and fertility, to rain rituals, blacksmithing, and even the decisions of the town council as they set wages, prices, and collective labor obligations - all of which must be enforced with the authority of a specific spirit cult, called *Hutendookai*.

Some would say that the existence of such lesser spirits represent a kind of arrogance, in which people create gods or spirits and associate them with the supreme being. As the distinguished novelist, Chinua Achebe, has noted, however, the Igbo have a proverb: "God is like a rich man, you approach him through his servants." Rather than arrogance, it is a sign of humility. Nuer liken the distance between the supreme being and humans as like that of humans and ants. Diola suggest that it would be blasphemous to pester the supreme being about things of minor importance like winning a ball game or a wrestling match. There are lesser spirits for that.

In many cases, these spirits or lesser deities represent distinctly gendered forms of

spiritual power. In the case of the Igbo goddess of wealth, Idemili, male devotees wear women's clothes and hairstyles as a way of showing their devotion to this goddess and women priests are common.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Diola, there was a priestess of a woman's fertility shrine, with whom I continually sought to conduct interviews. This is not something that men and women would normally discuss, however. Participation in the rituals at the shrine is strictly limited to women who have given birth to children. Exasperated by my continued attempts to interview her about this, she would point to my lack of knowledge of women as the cause of my inappropriate behavior. One day, she told me that the day I give birth to a child, she would explain everything to me. That night, I dreamt that I was pregnant -dreams are very important in Diola traditions - and I told her about it the very next day. She smiled and said, No, that was not good enough. I never did get an interview with that powerful priestess, though I eventually came to know what men are allowed to know about this powerful women's fertility shrine.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to lesser deities or lesser gods, ancestors play an important role in African religious systems. This is particularly true in Equatorial, Eastern, and Southern Africa, though ancestors play an important role as intermediaries between the realm of spirits and deities and the human world on behalf of specific individuals and families. Ancestors appear to their living descendants in dreams and visions, giving them advice, providing them with warnings about foolhardy actions or the neglect of familial obligations. They represent the most personalized form of spiritual power. In some cases, the royal ancestors, ie. in Buganda, represent the spiritual authority of the kingdom. In some cases, like that of the Diola, the ancestors settle in a

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15 Ife Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society, London: Zed Books, 1987.

16 For a discussion of my experience conducting ethnographic research on women, see: Robert M. Baum, "From a Boy Not Seeking a Wife to a Man Discussing Prophetic Women: A Male Fieldworker among Diola Women in Senegal, 1974-2005," Men and Masculinities, Vol. 11, #2, December, 2008, pp. 154-163.

spiritual dimension right within the township, near special trees or in sacred forests. On a calm night, it is said that you can feel the warmth of their cooking fires along footpaths throughout the township. I have felt such warm spots on a calm evening. As the West African poet, Birago Diop, noted:

Those who are dead are never gone,  
they are in the breast of the woman,  
they are in the child who is wailing  
and in the firebrand that flames  
The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the fire that is dying,  
they are in the grasses that weep,  
they are in the whimpering rocks,  
they are in the forest, they are in the house,  
the dead are not dead.<sup>17</sup>

These various types of spiritual beings make their presence known in a number of ways. In the case of the supreme being, most African religious traditions include a description of an ancient time when the supreme being was in regular contact with humans. For various reasons, ranging from human disobedience and ingratitude to the spiritual pranks of trickster deities, the supreme being withdrew into the heavens, leaving the task of communicating with the supreme being far more difficult. Still, some individuals received instructions from the supreme being

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17 Birago Diop, cited in Albert Rabouteau, Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 3.

through dreams, visions, or spiritual journeys. This is the basis of a Diola prophetic tradition, about which I am currently writing a book, in which over sixty different men and women claim authoritative communications from the supreme being accompanied by a commandment to teach. Some of them are active today. Others, usually women, became possessed by the supreme being, spoke in Its voice, which was then interpreted by shrine priests, usually male, as a way of indicating the wishes of the supreme being. This was particularly important in the case of the Igbo's Aro Chukwu oracle and the Mwari shrine of the Shona of Zimbabwe.

Lesser deities and spirits, as well as ancestors also appeared to humans through dreams and visions and they possessed human hosts in order to communicate with their devotees. Both the Hausa and the Yoruba describe spirits as riding their human hosts like horsemen ride their horses. Still others, claim to have powers of the head or of the eyes that allow them to see in the realm of the spirit and actually see and communicate with lesser deities, lesser spirits, and ancestors. These communications from the realm of the spirit, from supreme beings and lesser deities, from lesser spirits and ancestors, provide the basis for the creation of specific spirit cults, the style of ritual, and the ethical imperative imposed both on the devotees and the community at large.

This brings me to what many think they are most familiar with about African religions, the concept of witchcraft. African forms of witchcraft have very little to do with the Western imaginings of witchcraft in their own cultures or with the neo-Pagan revival of self-identified "witches." The term was applied to Africa by anthropologists, based largely on the stereotypes of witches that permeate Western popular traditions. In an African context, witches are often described as people whose souls leave their bodies at night and attack the spiritual essence of other people, their souls or a portion of their bodies, or they attack the spiritual essence of

property including livestock, grain, fruit, etc. In society's with chronic shortages of protein, witches are said to "eat" other people in the night, but it is not their flesh that they eat, but their spiritual essences. In the case of the Diola, the supreme being was said to have given witches the power to consume the spiritual essence of other people when their times had come for them to pass into the land of the dead. Some men and women, however, abused this power for personal gain or out of gluttony. They wanted to consume other people or seize property that would give them for than their fair share in a society with limited resources. They were also said to be organized in strictly hierarchical societies, in sharp contrast to the extremely egalitarian nature of ordinary Diola society. In contrast to a certain Diola reticence about showing affection in public, witches were said to hold orgies, often involving sex with lepers, and other unattractive partners. Among the BaKongo, witches are said to have the same powers as healers and chiefs; the primary difference is that they wield their power on behalf of individual, selfish interests rather than the family or the community as a whole. In BaKongo society, people whose souls had been eaten by witches could be kept alive, as zombies (a KiKongo term), to work as slaves on plantations in Africa, or in the Haitian tradition of Vaudou, in the New World. Among the Yoruba, where only women possessed the power of witchcraft, the power of "the Mothers" could be turned on men who abused women and it could result in what has recently been labeled as "genital theft," in which the spiritual essence of male genitalia, their animating force, was stolen and consumed by women who were witches.

As this brief description shows, witchcraft represents the inversion, the nightmare of many African religious systems, occupying a position more akin to Satanism in the Western imaginings of nefarious forces. Witches are selfish, gluttonous, jealous and vindictive. They sell the lives of their relatives to the society of witches in order to continue to participate. They

hoard wealth. In Diola society, where there is strong emphasis on the sharing of wealth, one of the terms for a wealthy person (ousanome) means “give me some” in the imperative, the West is seen as a place that is rife with witchcraft. Indeed, Westerners are said to attend Diola meetings of witches in the salt water marshes near the Diola townships, riding special witch cars in the night and carrying all the goods associated with a Western consumer culture. Among the Yoruba, witches represent the uncontrolled power of women.

African religious traditions used to be labeled as “primitive,” which originally meant “unschooled.” This would be an inaccurate description of African religions, where not only do young people seek out their elders to learn about their religious traditions, but they participate in initiation schools that often for several months of rigorous religious instruction before they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Other periods of intensive religious training may occur when men and women become parents for the first time or when they are initiated into various ritual societies, or when they take on priestly roles in a particular spirit cult. Since independence, several schools have been created for formal training in African religious traditions, especially in relation to healing cults.

Africa is not just a home for African religious traditions. Some claim that Judaism has existed in Africa since the days of Solomon and Sheba, and while that claim is vigorously debated, there is clear evidence for the presence of Bet Israel, Ethiopian Jews, since the time of the conversion of the Ethiopian kings to Monophysite Christianity, in the fourth century of the Common Era. A Christian presence has been celebrated in Egypt since the days when Joseph and Mary fled with the infant Jesus from the persecutions of the Roman appointed King Herod. Their route through Egypt was carefully marked in 2000, when I visited there, as part of the celebration of the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jesus’s flight to Egypt. Similarly, Islam has existed in

Ethiopia for seven years longer than it existed in Medina.

Both Islam and Christianity are missionizing religions. Christianity was an important force in North Africa in the ancient world and remains important in modern Egypt and is the majority tradition in Ethiopia. For the rest of Africa, however, Christianity did not enjoy rapid growth until the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the European partition of Africa. Islam had more initial success, becoming the dominant religion of North Africa by the Eighth Century and beginning a slow penetration of West Africa, south of the Sahara, and the Indian Ocean littoral, by the Ninth. Today, approximately half of Africa's 800 million people identify themselves as Muslims. Approximately 250-300 million identify as Christian. Indigenous religions account for the remainder, though these are not mutually exclusive categories. As someone said about the Yoruba, "They are 40% Muslim, 40% Christian, and 100% practitioners of Indigenous Religions."

The idea that there is only one correct path to God, while common within the Abrahamic religions, is rare within an African context, where the supreme being is seen as creating many religious paths, each of which is particularly appropriate in certain contexts. Although many Christian and Muslim groups worked hard to convert me to their specific interpretative path, Diola traditionalists just assumed that, since I was living in their community, I would follow the rules and obligations of Diola religion. The reasons why Christianity and Islam have enjoyed significant success - indeed this is the area of the world where both are expanding at the most rapid rate- are too complex to go into today - but African Muslims and Christians are making these traditions their own, creating new Islamic orders like the Muridiyya in Senegal and several thousand new African Initiated Churches, throughout the continent. The largest of these Independent Churches, the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth as Revealed by Simon Kimbangu,

now commands several million adherents in both Congos, Angola, and in Europe. Several years ago, I attended a seven hour long service of the Kimbanguist Church on the outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal.

This brings me to another issue which has largely eluded the attention of practitioners of religious studies in the academy, that is the globalization of African religions. This had its origins in the slave trade, across the Sahara and across the Indian Ocean, but has been better documented for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, a process that endured for nearly half a millennium and resulted in the largest forced migration of people in the history of the world. Africans who were enslaved, however, crossed the Atlantic with some knowledge of their religious traditions, with memories of dreams and visions that provided direct experience of the spiritual beings that inhabited their religious universes. Lesser deities and spirits who possessed people in Africa, continued to possess people in a strange land. They drew on these traditions, creating new religious traditions that relied heavily on the diversity of African traditions brought by a variety of Africans, that also drew on European Christianities and a wide range of Native American traditions. This successful transplantation of African religions to American soil, demonstrates that African religions are not limited to specific local areas.

From these sustained interactions and considerable innovation on their part, uprooted Africans created new religious traditions, a second wave of African religions moving beyond Mother Africa, creating traditions like Vaudou in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba Candomblé and Macumba in Brazil, and Conjure and Hoodoo in the United States. These new religious traditions successfully explained the horrors of slavery and provided their adherents with a sense of self worth that allowed them to sustain themselves in slavery. A third wave of African globalization occurred primarily since the Second World War as the capitals of the soon-to-be

former empires, developed significant African communities, of immigrants who brought with them African spirit cults of the Diola and Manjaco in Paris, of BaKongo and Papel in Lisbon, of Yoruba and Shona in London, and many of them reached American urban centers as well. So, here at the end of the first decade of the new millenium, African religions are now practiced on four continents, yet they are still not regarded as “world religions.”

Let me close with a sense of concern about the future of African religions, religions that emphasize a sense of community in ways that I have never encountered elsewhere; that are profoundly instrumental in orientation, seeking practical solutions to human problems; and this-worldly in focus, where even the concept of a blessed after-life is to be involved with your living descendants, as ancestors. These religions are under siege. Christianity and Islam are both active proselytizing religions, seeking converts as part of their basic religious obligations and out of a profound concern for the spiritual welfare of others. They are backed by powerful international communities with the economic resources to build schools and health clinics, to provide money for development projects and scholarships for advanced study at expensive overseas institutions. Adherents of indigenous African religions have little overseas support that could finance schools or clinics, scholarships or development projects. They are on their own and they are finding it difficult to compete. It is startling that since African states began to achieve their independence after the Second World War, not a single African head of state has been an adherent of an indigenous African religion. The vast majority have been Christians or Muslims. Now, in many parts of Africa, most tragically in Sudan and Nigeria, people are mobilizing in competing factions of Muslims and Christians. International groups in both the Christian and Muslim communities are funding this competition for political and religious dominance. Indigenous religionists are being squeezed out of the halls of power. Moreover,

given the deeply rooted stereotypes of African religions among Muslims and Christians, much of the world does not regret the marginalization of African religions within Africa. Oddly enough, they are thriving within small communities in Europe and the Americas, where African religious leaders have successfully transplanted African religions from Brooklyn to Buenos Aires. And, they are reaching out successfully to people who have no historic link to Africa. Perhaps, these religious diasporas, regardless of their ethnic origins, will help to revitalize these African religious paths, that point to unique ways of knowing and acting out what it means to be human.

## RESOURCES ON AFRICAN RELIGIONS

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OLUPONA: Indigenous African religions refer to the indigenous or native religious beliefs of the African people before the Christian and Islamic colonization of Africa. Indigenous African religions are by nature plural, varied, and usually informed by one's ethnic identity, where one's family came from in Africa. Christianity is more dominant in the south, while Islam is more dominant in the north. Indigenous African practices tend to be strongest in the central states of Africa, but some form of their practices and beliefs can be found almost anywhere in Africa. Some African diasporans are returning to the continent to reconnect with their ancestral traditions, and they are encouraging and organizing the local African communities to reclaim this heritage.