

Chapter 3
African Religions Traditions
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Chapter Summary

African and many other oral religious traditions are sometimes called “traditional” or “primal” religions. These religions are often very different from each other in detail, yet African religious traditions share many common features that can be considered a worldview and may be identified as a “primal vision.” The same is true of Native American religions and many new religious movements in the West.

Primal Religions:

1. have shamans or similar ritual figures who communicate between this world and the next, often with the goal of placating ancestors.
2. are based on primal experiences that are intense yet defy rational explanation.
3. may entail unexpected vivid encounters so unusual they can be explained only by reference to a religious mythology.
4. often involve dreams, visions, hallucinations, voices, spiritual healings, a sense of presence or awe, notions of destiny, sightings of the dead, and other inexplicable spiritual phenomena.

To understand traditional religions, especially those in Africa, it is necessary to suspend judgment regarding which view of the universe, secular or Christian, is true and accept the perspective of those living in traditional societies where all phenomena are an expression of mysterious power. As well, to properly study and better understand African religions in a meaningful way, we must move beyond the mere analysis of written texts to comprehend the real-life experiences of living peoples.

To state that traditional Africans do not recognize the Western distinction between the secular and the sacred is not to deny the reality of a hierarchy of power in African thought. This source of power may be God or lesser spirits, ancestral ghosts, chiefs, witches, sorcerers, ordinary people, animals, plants, and inanimate things. Sometimes power is personalized by taking on the form of a river, tree, animal, or other thing, or it is inherent and punishes people or brings what we might call “bad luck.”

Considering electricity as a metaphor helps us understand the relation between the “natural” and the “supernatural” as assumed in many African traditional religions. In everyday life, we normally disregard the electrical basis of matter until electrical force becomes uncontrolled and threatens our safety. This analogy illustrates the way traditional Africans and others understand the power which operates through their ancestors, ghosts, and the spirits. Such power underlies all life, but “common sense” normally disregards it.

At their core, some of the religious practices of the Bible are very similar to the everyday practices found in numerous African traditional religions (e.g. story of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:6-9). To recognize these similarities, we must strip away many of our exclusively Western, particularly Enlightenment, methods of interpretation.