

African Indigenous Spirituality: A Closer Look

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Originally Published in The Paper: Medium for People of African Descent at the City College of New York, October 2008

There was a lot of positive response to the article *African Indigenous Spirituality: It's Not a Thing of the Past!*, which appeared in the last issue of *The Paper*. As many readers raised questions about precisely what African Indigenous Spiritual traditions entail and what the beliefs therein are, let's take a closer look.

The first noteworthy point is that most of the world's religious and spiritual traditions are more similar than they are different. Most every one includes teachings on the importance of honesty, charity, and other positive and honorable characteristics. African Indigenous Spiritual traditions do this also, focusing heavily on the ideas of good character, humility and the importance of family and community. The way in which these ideas are introduced, however, points to one of the differences between the African Indigenous Spiritual worldview and the worldviews presented by some other religious traditions.

It is said that the "revealed" religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, so called because of their reliance on texts revealed by God to revered prophets – "come from up and look down," whereas indigenous traditions of all kinds "come from down and look up." What this means is that while the revealed texts, the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an, tell practitioners of those faiths about who and what God is based on information revealed to them from above, practitioners of indigenous traditions have traditionally ascertained who and what God is and drawn conclusions about the nature of God from their experiences on earth and sent them upwards towards God. Of course, there is overlap between these categories, as those who practice the revealed religions may also experience God and make inferences, but their main source of information is the texts and it is the information given in these texts that tell practitioners of these faiths who God is, what to call Him and how they should relate to Him.

African Indigenous Spiritual traditions have corpuses of knowledge as well, but many of them have not been written down until recent years as they were mainly passed orally from generation to generation. Focusing on the Yoruba tradition as an example, the corpus of knowledge is called the *odù Ifá* and is more similar in concept to the Artharvaveda corpus of the Hindu faith than to any of the revealed texts mentioned above. The *odùs* contain verses (*ese*), related stories, medicines and other information that practitioners of the Yoruba tradition use in their every day lives; there are a total of 256 *odùs* that are said to reference any situation or circumstance that a human being could find him or herself in. In order to find out which *odùs* specifically relate to them and their lives, practitioners – and sometimes people who are not necessarily practitioners but believe in the wisdom purported by the *odùs* – will visit a high priest, known as a *Babalawo*, in order to receive *Ifá* divination. During a divination session, particular *odùs* will be revealed and the *Babalawo* will recite some of the *ese* and stories associated with the *odùs*, interpret them and help the person receiving the divination to understand how those *odùs* relate to his or her life. The *Babalawo* will give the person advice

based on this information, which may include the prescription of a ritual of some sort that the person has to perform.

The practice of divination – defined as attempting to discover hidden knowledge, which may include knowledge of future events – is one of the major points of departure between African Indigenous Spiritual traditions and the revealed religions. While divination is an integral part of most all African Indigenous Spiritual traditions, and indeed many indigenous traditions the world over, it is explicitly prohibited in the Jewish and Christian faiths by verses in the books of Leviticus (19:26) and Deuteronomy (18:10), among other verses. Whereas practitioners of African Indigenous Spiritual traditions feel it imperative to use divination at various points in their lives – particularly after birth and at other major life turning points – the revealed religions consider the use of divination to be an “abomination.” Despite the seeming contradiction, many Africans, both on the continent and in the Diaspora who have adopted Christianity or Islam will still seek out the traditional priests at certain times in their lives and many see no issue with this despite the condemnation of the practice in the revealed texts. This fact indicates the retention of some traditional practices even amongst those who no longer consider themselves traditional practitioners.

Another key divergence between African Indigenous Spiritual practices and the revealed religions, and perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of traditional religion, is the concept of sacrifice. The only thing that some people know about African Indigenous traditions is that they involve the sacrifice of animals, and this is because animal sacrifice is an aspect of traditional religion that is generally misconstrued and sensationalized by the media. The first thing that must be understood with regard to traditional religion is that not all sacrifices involve animals: a sacrifice could be cooking a certain food, giving up a certain vice or performing a good deed for someone, among other actions. Another, and perhaps the more important, point is that any time an animal gives its life for someone to eat – that’s a sacrifice. Judaism and Islam adhere to this principle, which is why there are certain prescriptions on how animals must be slaughtered – including certain prayers said over them – in order for their meat to be considered kosher or *halal* and, thus, fit to eat. Animals are killed en masse for human consumption – and arbitrarily for things like leather and fur which aren’t explicitly necessary – every day, so why is the concept of an animal sacrifice for a religious purpose so foreign and intimidating?

One factor, at least with regard to Christianity, is that Christians believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ made animal sacrifices unnecessary, as he being the “lamb of God” was sacrificed for the salvation of all those who believe. While this may be a part of the issue for some, it seems that for many, much of the discomfort around the idea of animal sacrifice has to do with the fact that people are generally quite removed from the death of the animals they use or consume. A package of meat in a store is unrecognizable as a goat or a pig, a pair of boots is unrecognizable as a cow and a fur coat is unrecognizable as a group of minks or rabbits. People are comfortable with this lack of recognition and are quite uncomfortable with being up close and personal with death, feeling the energy of an animal vacate its body and understanding and being thankful for the cycle of life. By contrast, these feelings and understandings are sacred and integral concepts in African Indigenous Spiritual practices.

Another central concept in African Indigenous Spiritual traditions, and one that indicates a significant dissimilarity with the revealed religions, is that of direct contact with and access to spirits, sometimes taking the form of spirit possession. This is another oft-sensationalized and misunderstood aspect of traditional religious practice. Practitioners of African Indigenous Spiritual traditions are taught to see God in all things and have a reverence and respect for the forces of nature and the environment. Spirits, who are known as the *Oriṣa* in the Yoruba tradition, the *Lwa* in Vodou and other names in other traditions, inhabit the waters, the wind, the trees, animals and everything that exists in nature and at times, they possess the bodies of the human beings who worship them. As there are prohibitions in the Torah and the Bible against cavorting with “familiar spirits,” possession is generally seen as a negative thing and mention of possession brings thoughts of “evil spirits” that need to be exorcised and conjures images of films like *The Exorcist*. For those inside the African Indigenous Spiritual community, however, spirit possession is generally seen as a beautiful and effective means of communicating with the spirit world and it is an integral aspect of certain traditional ceremonies.

Like the revealed religions and other spiritual traditions of the world, African Indigenous Spiritual traditions are rich, complex and diverse – one could not hope to exhaust the many aspects of worship and belief in several volumes, let alone an article. If this brief introduction to some of the basic concepts and beliefs sparks interest, readers are urged to seek literature about the traditions and – of even more vital importance – practitioners with whom to discuss the traditions and gain further insight. People often have fear and disdain for those things that they don’t understand; in order to combat this reality, all are encouraged to, as the adage goes, *seek first to understand* so that any negative sentiments might be replaced with the positive postures of respect and appreciation.