 CHAPTER THREE: AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction: The Importance of Avoiding Stereotypes

A. The Vast Complexity of Africa
   1. 700 Million People
   2. 3,000 Ethnic and Linguistic Groups
   3. Social Organization Ranging from Small Tribe to Vast Empires
   4. Centuries of European Colonialism Altered the Content and Structure of Many Traditional African Religions

B. Western Stereotypes Threaten to Distort Reality of African Religions
   1. Africa as Dark Land of Savagery and Superstition
   2. African Religion as a Coherent Unified Whole
      a. There is No Single Religion, Theology, Worldview, or Ritual System Uniting all African Religions
      b. Lack of Written Records from Pre-Modern Native Africans Limits Range and Depth of Our Studies
      c. Modern Western Interpreters of African Religion

II. Native Religions

A. The High God
   1. Belief in a Creator High God in Most African Religions
   2. The High Creator God is Distant, Retired, Uninvolved
      a. The Yoruba Story of Olorun the Creator and the Sub-deities (orisha) Who Govern Nature
      b. The Mozambique Legend of Nyambi
      c. An Exception to the Rule: Sudanese Creator God Kwoth Nhail Remains Involved in His Creation
B. The Lesser Spirits

1. Most African Religions are Animistic, Believing the World is Densely Populated with Numerous Types of Lesser Spirits

2. Lesser Spirits Rule Creation and Can be Helpful or Harmful to Humans, and are Subject to Prayer, Flattery, and Sacrifice
   a. Plants, Animals, Weather Patterns, Water, the Earth—All Things are Spirits or Life Forces
   b. Lesser Spirits Often Personified in Gods / Goddesses
   c. Forms of Worship of Lesser Spirits Vary Widely, but Most Common is Offering of Food and Drink
   d. Example: Yoruba Worship of the Matriarchal Fertility goddess (orisha) Osun

C. Ancestors

1. Ancestors are Most Commonly Recognized Spiritual Forces
   a. The Dead Enter into a Spirit World, Remain Active in the Lives of the Living
   b. The Dead as “Cloud of Witnesses”

2. The Living Consult, Pray to the Dead to Receive Benefits and Avoid Harm
   a. Fear of gods / goddesses Unimportant in Comparison with Fear of and Respect for Ancestors
   b. Ancestors Enforce Social and Moral Codes; Worst Punishment is Inflicting Infertility on Couples
   c. Ancestor Spirits Know and Can Control Future
   d. Efforts at Placation and Appeasement Include Offering Gifts, Sacrifices, Rituals, Consultation
   e. Ancestors Contact Living Often in Dreams
   f. Diviners Have Ability to Contact Ancestors

D. Sacrifice

1. Most Common Form of Sacrifice to the gods / goddesses and Ancestors is Daily Offering of Food and Drink

2. Animal Sacrifice Practiced on Serious Occasions
3. Human Sacrifice Rarely Present in African Religion

E. Rites of Passage

1. Birth of Child: The Blessing Bestowed by the Spirit World

2. Puberty: Initiation into Norms of Social Behavior
   a. Initiation Rituals for Boys and Girls Differ, and Often are Long and Severe
   b. Ritual Circumcision for Boys: Test of Courage and Bodily Sign of Religious / Cultural Identity
   c. Ritual Circumcision for Girls: No Clear Rationale; Less and Less Common in Modern Africa

   a. Chastity in Marriage Highly Valued
   b. Polygamy Practiced by Elites of Many Societies

4. Death Rituals: Making the Dead Comfortable in their New Existence to Prevent Hauntings
   a. Rapid Burial the Most Common Practice
   b. Death Seen as Having Been Caused by Someone; Dead Point Out those Who Caused their Demise
   c. African Religions Generally Lack System of Belief in Post-Death Judgment and Retribution
   d. Exception to Norm: LoDagaa People of Ghana

F. Religious Leaders

1. Generally Minimal Need for Priests Because Rituals Performed by Individuals

2. Some Western African Religions Have Priests / Priestesses Responsible for Maintaining Temples and Altars

3. Spiritual Curer is Common Form of Religious Leadership
   a. Illnesses Have Religious and Natural Causes
   b. Curers Use Divination to Discern Cause of Disease
   c. Curers Combine Herbs, Offerings, Spiritual Power
   d. Curers Cleanse Houses of Spells, Witches, Curses
   e. Diviners, Healers, Exorcists Closely Related
4. Prophets
   a. Speak the Words of Gods in Times of Crisis
   b. Example: The Prophet Ngundeng of the Nuer People in Sudan Opposed Slave Trade

5. The Chief-King
   a. Most African Societies Lack Monarchy
   b. Societies with Monarchies Revere King / Queen as Representatives of Ancestors, or Even as Gods
   c. Sickness, Death, Succession Customs for Monarchs

III. Non-native African Religions
   A. Ancient Greek Religion Influenced North Africa, Egypt
   B. Christian and Judaism Present in Africa Since 1st Century
   C. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Baha’i Brought to Africa by Immigrants

IV. African Religions Today
   A. Colonialism, Rise of Artificial Nation States, Urbanization, and Population Growth Upset Traditional Social Orders at Basis of Traditional Religion
   B. Traditional African Religious Practice Diminished but Not Eliminated
   C. Rise of Christianity and Islam Challenge Traditional African Religion
      1. Traditional Belief in High God Makes Conversion to Universal World Religions Possible
      2. Many Africans Leaders in Orthodox Christianity and Islam
      3. Christianity and Islam in Africa Assimilate Many Elements of African Religion
         a. Lesser Deities and Ancestors Become Christian Saints or Muslim jinn
         b. Syncretistic Movements Combining African Christian, and/or Islamic Beliefs and Rituals Increasingly Present
### Key Names, Concepts, and Terms

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<th>High God</th>
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