

## AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS



*A male fetichist carrying gourd on his back at a Vodun ritual in Benin in western Africa. © DANIEL LAINE/CORBIS.*

The interaction between Western and traditional African religious traditions has influenced religious innovations in Africa, such as African Initiated Churches and Islamic mystical traditions (Sufism). As a result, Islam and Christianity have become Africanized on the continent, significantly changing the practice of the two traditions and leading to a distinct African expression of them.

**CENTRAL DOCTRINES** Unlike other world faiths, African traditional religions have no predominant doctrinal teachings. Rather, they have certain vital elements that function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination. African cosmology (explanation of the nature of the universe) tends to assert that there is a Supreme God who is helped by a number of lesser deities. Spirits are the connection between the living and the invisible worlds. Anyone can communicate with the spirits, but priests, priestesses, prophets, and diviners have more direct access to invisible arenas of the world.

In African traditional religions the sense of time is often described in cyclical rather than linear imagery. In

the cosmology of the Dagara (an ethnic group in the Niger region of West Africa), for instance, the wheel or circle represents the cyclical nature of life as well as of the Earth. The wheel contains everything found on Earth. According to the Yoruba (an ethnic group from Nigeria), the life force that pervades all phenomena exists in an eternal cycle of complex interactions between cosmic domains; these interactions should always remain in balance. In African traditional religions the cosmogony (theory of the origin of the universe) usually describes humans appearing near the end of creation. In many creation stories God is likened to a potter who creates humans out of clay and then pours the breath of life into them.

African religions rely on the memory of oral stories. Thus, doctrine tends to be more flexible than it is in text-based religions, and it changes according to the immediate needs of religious followers. African traditional religions are a communal endeavor, and it is not required that an individual believe in every element. As in any democratic system, individuals may participate in ways that benefit their interests, their community roles, or their status as religious leaders. Because religion per-

# The Individual And Community In African Traditional Religions Beitrhage Zur Mibionswibenschaft Und Interkulturellen Theo

**B Lingard**



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