

Women and World Religions



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Women and African Religions



Overview

In this chapter, we will examine African women in religion from a variety of different perspectives. The main focus will be on women's religiosity in traditional societies in sub-Saharan Africa, since much of Northern Africa came to be dominated by Islam several centuries ago. However, this introduction and some of the selections which follow also touch upon how Christianity and Islam have influenced African women's religious lives (Islam is the fastest growing religion on the African continent). Rosalind Hackett's essay "Women in African Religions" provides an overview of the depth and breadth of African women's religious perspectives as well as some of the problems encountered in trying to study this subject. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's essay from *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* discusses African religion from the perspective of a Christian African woman.

In addition, we will note how African women's religious practices and rituals have had an impact outside of Africa, especially in the Caribbean countries and Brazil. Karen McCarthy Brown's essay describes the experiences of an Afro-Caribbean woman from Haiti who becomes a Vodou spirit priestess after she has immigrated to Brooklyn and experiences a series of life-threatening illnesses. This variety will enable us to gain a broader perspective on the varieties of women's experience with African religions than we would obtain by looking at only one of these dimensions. As we will see, gender—and the differentiation of men and women—is central to African religions, as it is to African society more generally.

As Rosiland Hackett tells us, it is extremely difficult to generalize about women and African religion because the diversity of cultures and traditions is so vast. In addition to the wide variety of indigenous African traditions, African women's religious experience also includes the religions transplanted into Africa by (mainly) Christian and Islamic missionaries and colonialists and the "new religions" which combine elements of these different traditions..

In addition to their tremendous diversity and variety, another problem with studying African religions is the ethnocentrism of traditional scholarship on this subject. Most studies in the past have been written from a Western, Judeo-Christian perspective which considers religions to be text-based. Because traditional African religions are based more in oral than written traditions and emphasize ritual rather than scripture, they have been portrayed to be "primitive" and unsophisticated. This problem has been addressed in more contemporary scholarship on African religions. In fact, Hackett argues (not in her essay included here) that the whole idea of "Traditional African Religion" (TAR) as a monolithic, homogeneous phenomenon is an erroneous Western invention that bears little relation to the multiplicity and diversity of religions in traditional Africa. She points to the ironic twist that it is now primarily *African* educational institutions, universities, and secondary schools that are perpetuating this myth of TAR (Hackett 1990). Another misimpression that many Western viewers have of Africa is that religion is separate and distinct from culture (as it generally is in their Western religious traditions) when, in reality, religion is intertwined with and inseparable from other aspects of African society and culture (as is the case in Native American and many other indigenous religious traditions around the world).

Beyond the African continent, indigenous religions of African peoples have had a significant impact for over 500 years in shaping the religiosity of Africans and others outside of the continent. African slaves coming to the Americas brought their religious traditions with them. Although many of them were forced to convert to Christianity, they incorporated elements of their traditional religious practices into their new lives. Significant aspects of those religious traditions are present today in African-American, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Cuban, and other African-centered religious practices, be they superficially Christian or otherwise (in fact, many initiates into New World African religions are members of Roman Catholic churches). Some of these elements have been transmitted down through the generations, and others have been self-consciously adopted or appropriated as part of an effort by African women living in diaspora to retrieve their cultural background.

The reading by Karen McCarthy Brown on "Alourdes," for example, explains that the Haitian Vodou spirit Ogou has origins in the Goun of the Yoruba, a god connected to occupations connected with metal, including hunting and warfare. In addition to Vodou, other African-derived or influ-

enced religious traditions in the Western hemisphere include Santeria ("the way of the Saints") in Cuba, Espiritualismo in Puerto Rico, and Candomble and Umbanda in Brazil.¹ Many African-based or derived religions throughout the Caribbean and North America have Christian, usually Catholic, dimensions as well, often the result of slavery and missionizing during the colonial period. It is estimated that there are approximately 50 million members of Afro-Atlantic religions, 25 million of them in Brazil alone (Fandrich 1999, 12).

Despite these many difficulties in gaining an accurate understanding of African religions, it is possible to make a few generalizations. Perhaps the most significant similarity among African religions is the belief in the imperfection of human life, and the possibility of using ritual means to alleviate sickness, conflict, and other forms of suffering. In contrast to the Western monotheistic and Asian world religions, the focus of African religions is on relationships within this world, not on attaining salvation in an afterlife. Thus, ritual practice is often directed, implicitly or explicitly, to healing fractured social relations and renewing community bonds. Sacred knowledge and ritual practice are transmitted through initiation.

African religions also generally share a "spiritual hierarchy," that is, a belief in one supreme creator god, as well as numerous lesser gods, who, along with spirits and ancestors, have some but lesser spiritual power (such as the relation between the Nigerian Yoruba people's supreme god Olodumare and the Orisha, or secondary divinities). These supreme deities are often of ambiguous or dual gender, such as Chukwu, the supreme being for the Nigerian Igbo, or Mawu-Lisa, the dual-gendered supreme being of the Fon people of Benin. The cosmos is commonly characterized in African myth and ritual as an anthropomorphic entity, and the human body as a microcosm of the cosmos.

The secondary divinities are present in every aspect of life and are more often involved in the fate of human affairs than are the creator gods (Grillo 1999, 12). Thus, careful devotion to them through prayer, ritual, and sacrifice is required (see Fandrich 1999, 14). Ritual is yet another element of commonality across African religious traditions. Ritual plays a variety of significant roles in the life of African peoples, especially in reestablishing harmonious relations between individuals, among members of the community, or with ancestors, spirits, the gods, or the natural forces in the universe. Contact with divinities may take place directly through spirit possession, or through intermediaries such as diviners, who are ritual specialists.

Because belief in fate and predestination is ubiquitous throughout the African diaspora religions, the role of diviners in conducting "readings," and contacting the spirits through possession to forecast the future, and to recommend the best ritual and other means to prepare for it, is in high demand. The popularity of Alourdes, the subject of Brown's essay, illustrates the significance of diviners in the lives of practitioners of African-based religions.

As mentioned above, Christianity and Islam have also become significant religious forces on the African continent. These traditions have been woven together with indigenous tribal religions to form syncretic mixes of traditional and "imported" religious beliefs and practices. For example, Islamic practices of veiling and female seclusion have been adopted in very different ways by different African Muslim communities (see Clancy-Smith 1999, 501).

Relationship of Female-Gendered and Feminine Images and Symbols to "Real" Women

It is perhaps not surprising that many religious images of females and the feminine in African societies relate to women's procreative powers. Thus, women are often linked to the creativity of nature and are viewed as essential to the maintenance and continuity of the community, which is the highest value in most African cultures. Associated with nature, women are frequently viewed in African religions as both a source of generation and of destruction. They are often regarded ambivalently—their powers are respected as awesome, yet also as mysterious and uncontrolled, polluting, and a potential threat to be controlled, especially in order to prevent disorder or misfortune. Thus, women are often linked to witchcraft, especially in relation to infertility and adultery, and regulated by menstrual and pregnancy taboos. These associations are used to justify male control. Because women's power is both revered and feared, rituals involving it are often veiled in secrecy and mystery, making it difficult for the researcher to obtain access. As with stereotypes of women in many other cultures, women are considered to be more emotional than men, and thus as more susceptible to spirit possession (Hackett 1994, 65).

There are some interesting surprises about women's place in traditional African religions, however. One of these is the existence of female-gendered gods or goddesses in several of these religions. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, are Orisanla, or Oduduwa, "creator" deities; Aje, the female deity of wealth and fertility; Odu, the deity who controls all others; and Yemoja ("Mother of Fishes"), who is the progenitor of all water deities (Paper 1997, 193). The Ewe people of the Republic of Benin worship a bisexual supreme deity called Mawu-Lisa (Hackett 1994, 68). As Hackett notes, however, "the existence of a strong female deity is no guarantee of female ritual authority" (Hackett 1994, 76). Thus, while the existence of female gods may signify a respect for women, this is not necessarily the case. Understanding the relationship between female deities and "real" women is also complicated by the androcentric character of most of the scholarship on African religions that has been produced to date.²

Many of the secondary divinities in African religions are of androgynous sexuality or dual-gendered, in keeping with a looser relationship of sex to gender in African societies generally. Thus, the divinities may shift from one gender to another within the same setting. This understanding of gender as shifting and amorphous rather than fixed and unchanging helps explain why gender-role shifts and cross-gender impersonations sometimes occur during rituals.

Women's Relationship to African Religions

As Hackett observes, one of the challenging aspects of studying women in African religions is the ambiguity, complexity, and shifting nature of women's place in relation to religion. Aspects of African religious traditions that may appear to the outside (Western) perspective to show women's subordination may in fact function to empower the women who participate in these traditions.

Even when African women's religiosity has been the subject of study, it has generally been from a distanced perspective of an "outside" (usually Western, white, Christian male) researcher rather than from African women's own perspective. The reading by Mercy Amba Oduyoye is included here as an attempt to respond to this problem. Oduyoye writes not only as an African woman, but also an African *religious* woman, which gives her an insider perspective on at least some of the traditional African religious traditions she writes about. As a Christian woman educated in the West, however, Oduyoye also brings something of an "outsider" perspective to her research, which enables us to observe perhaps more of the negative aspects of traditional African religion for African women than we would otherwise.

Despite the difficulties in learning about women's relationship to African religions, it is clear that women are centrally involved in these religious traditions. In many instances, women are the majority of participants, as in the Afro-Atlantic religions of Candomble and Umbanda of Brazil. Participation in these religious traditions are based on initiation into a "society" of a small, family-like worship community. The relationship between the diviner or spirit possessor and her "initiates" is based on the family model, with members of the same "house" usually having a lifelong commitment to one another (see Fandrich 1999, 15).

Women-Specific or Distinctive Aspects of African Religions

Despite the difficulties in making any generalizations about African religions, as Hackett suggests, there are a number of commonalities that allow

some generalizations to be made about the roles and status of women. Oduyoye tells us that African women are "demonstrably more religious than men." There are connections between women's ritual roles and their (perceived) physical and emotional natures (Hackett 1994, 65). Women do not often play primary ritual roles, but are generally relegated to subordinate ones, especially in the central public rituals. In fact, they are often restricted to domestic space, especially during important ritual occasions (Hackett 1994, 66). As in many other traditional societies, women's rituals are embedded in and related to their daily lives—as wives, child bearers, child rearers, and so on.

Like other religious traditions covered in this textbook, African religions generally devalue women and marginalize their participation in ritual activities, with some exceptions. Since religion in Africa tends to be integrated with the rest of social life, however, women's subordinate status in the religious realm follows logically from their overall social status. Women have mostly been in asymmetrical relations with men in African societies. Prior to colonialism, women in many parts of Africa held economic independence (as the primary agriculturalists and marketers) and a political voice, yet they were not dominant, or even equal (Hackett 1994, 64). Most of African kinship is arranged on patrilineal lines, and women have held subordinate roles to those of men in most spheres, which are largely gender segregated. One of the major exceptions is their roles in spirit possession cults as diviners and mediums, roles which are about the most important and public ritual roles available to women. Unlike the negative connotations that are generally associated with spirit mediums in the West, in the African context spirit mediums are highly regarded as ritual specialists possessing the ability to "channel" or embody the essence of the gods. Thus, like the devadasis discussed in the Hinduism chapter, African women who lack status in conventional society may gain it through their religious roles. Mediumship is regarded as a form of service to the divine and to the community, as Brown notes with respect to Alourdes.

Some African cultures do have distinctive rituals for women, many of which revolve around aspects of reproduction, such as the onset of menstruation, pregnancy, childbearing, and the lack thereof (infertility). For example, contrary to most religious or other cultural traditions, Yoruba societies practice a female puberty ritual to mark the transformation of girls into women. Although initiation rituals are more common for boys than girls, this ritual is participated in by all postpubescent young women who have not yet participated in such a ritual. Participation makes young women eligible to take on the primary female roles in Yoruba society of wives, mothers, and market women (see Paper 1997).

Another widespread female initiation ritual is female clitoridectomy, sometimes called FGM or Female Genital Mutilation or "genital cutting" in Western countries. Although the female variation of circumcision is far more radical a procedure than that for males and may involve cutting away parts

or all of the clitoris and labia minora, both are part of a ritual process of clearly defining differentiating male and female genders.³ FGM also accomplishes a separation of sexuality from reproduction and transforms women into mothers, the most esteemed gender role for women in Africa.

A different sort of gendered ritual in Africa is the *gelede* masquerade of the Yoruba. These parades, which take place in the female domain of the marketplace, involve elaborate costumes designed to honor the "Great Mothers" or witches, primarily older women who possess extraordinary powers. Of the two main masks used in these rituals, one is of a bearded woman, signifying the inability to contain her power within a single gender. Just as women are associated with birth, they are also associated with death and consequently often have important ritual roles to play at these times in their communities—or to have enacted upon them, such as when their husbands die.

Scholars differ, however, in their assessments about whether such ritual roles afford any real power to women, or only further entrench them within the larger patriarchal system. For instance, women are frequently excluded from leading or participating in rituals while they are in their childbearing years and/or in public spaces. As Hackett discusses, when women do occupy ritual roles, it is generally either because they are exceptional or because they have lost the characteristics that identify them as women (Hackett 1994, 76). The women who do participate in rituals as spirit mediums or diviners are often illiterate and childless.

Gender-Based Segregation and Inequalities

As noted earlier, many aspects of African women's religious lives takes place in gender-segregated activities. For example, perhaps as a means of balancing women's "natural" creative powers in childbearing, some African societies prohibit women from skills as craftsmen, especially wood carvers and iron working. This does not necessarily imply women's subordination, however. As Hackett suggests elsewhere, segregation of women in relation to menstruation "may be a source of empowerment for women, a validation of their spiritual potency" (Hackett 1995, 290). While gender divisions are carefully established in African religions, there is often a fluidity or shifting of gender designations, as in the case of the ambiguous, multiple, or shifting gender identities of many African divinities.

Some West African religions, such as some tribes of the Yoruba and Poro societies of Sierra Leone, have secret male societies. Their annual festivals serve to demonstrate male power and control over females and help perpetuate patriarchy (Oduyoye 1995, 32). However, there are also some African women's secret socio-religious societies, which Hackett describes (Hackett 1994, 87-88), although most of these did not survive passage to the New World (Fandrich 1999, 16). Thus, although African religions in general

are highly gender segregated, this segregation does not necessarily mean that men dominate and control all aspects of religious life.

Women's Access to Religious Training and Education and Opportunities for Leadership Roles

Women in African societies do have relatively open access to religious training and education. Many women have been recognized as diviners or spirit possessors, as Brown's story of Alourdes indicates. Both male and female diviners have trained female initiates in their craft.

In some African religions, women have a relatively prominent role. Among the Ondo, the Eastern practitioners of the Yoruba religion, women are considered to have actual power. This is especially true of older women, who, along with female title holders, mediums, and priests, are called "Our Mothers." The mediums, who allow their bodies to be taken over by deities (called "Orisha") so they can manifest to their worshipers, are mostly female. Men who are mediums are called "wives" of the possessing deity and often adopt female clothing and hairstyles. Mediums are highly respected in their communities and are considered to have power from their connection to the deity who "possesses" them.

There is a hierarchy of female as well as male leaders within each Yoruba subculture whose primary role is to appoint the king. The head of these female leaders is called the *Lobun* ("owner of the market") or the *Oba Obinrin* ("woman king"). The former term corresponds to Yoruba women's role as being in charge of the markets. As Hackett tells us, however, there is divided opinion about whether these women are exceptions to the general rule, and whether they actually hold political power (Hackett 1994, 75).

In the mainstream Christian churches, African women mostly have influence in women's associations and prayer bands rather than as ministers or church leaders. More opportunities are available to women in the new religious movements (which Oduyoye discusses), which have usually grown out of and broken away from more mainstream churches. As Hackett discusses in another essay, these new religious movements have provided significant new roles for women that are denied to them by traditional Christian and indigenous African religious institutions (Hackett 1995).

Well-Known and/or Influential Women in the Tradition

Hackett describes several women who have played significant roles in African religions, either as founders of new movements, or as ritual specialists or diviners or spirit mediums. Although a few of these women, such as Kongo Dona Beatrice (Kimpa Vita), probably founded the earliest African new religious movement in the early eighteenth century, most of these

women are from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Brown's essay "Alourdes" describes a very influential contemporary Haitian female spirit medium living and performing spiritual services in Brooklyn. Another is the "Vodou Queen" Mari Laveaux, who lived and practiced in nineteenth-century New Orleans (see Fandrich 1999, 14).

Because African religions have been primarily based on oral rather than written traditions, at least until recently and because male researchers have focused primarily on African men's religious activities, it is hard to know how many influential women religious leaders, diviners, and spiritual adepts may have been lost to history.

Changes in the Status of Women

Historically

Both within Africa and particularly in the diaspora Afro-Atlantic religions, women have been able to play more prominent religious roles as they have moved from rural locations, where patriarchal social roles and values are heavily entrenched, to urban areas where there are more freedom and flexibility of gender role definitions. Brown's essay portrays this trend with respect to Haitian Vodou practitioners who have immigrated to New York City. This phenomenon can also be seen in the practice of Candomble in Salvador de Bahia as well as Umbanda in Rio de Janeiro (Fandrich 1999, 14).

Hackett describes how, in contrast to traditional African religions, mission Christianity promotes women's rights. Women's involvement in the new religious movements has provided opportunities for their religious activity that has been foreclosed to them in other religious institutions. Some of the women who founded new religious movements legitimated themselves as female leaders by being exceptional in some respects, such as being childless and unmarried, having passed through menopause or otherwise renouncing their femaleness, or being affiliated with a spirit as mediums and diviners. Women are attracted to new religions mostly for pragmatic reasons, such as seeking cures for illnesses, infertility, or poverty rather than for more political reasons such as opportunities for power and authority in a religious context. But having the opportunity for more responsibilities may function to keep women involved with a new religious movement after their initial affiliation (Hackett 1995, 277). Nonetheless, the main function of mission Christianity is to prepare women for traditional domestic and support roles.

Future Prospects

Since Hackett addresses this topic at the end of her essay, I will not say much here, except to note, as she discusses, that women have been playing

key roles in the resurgence of interest in certain African religious rituals, both in Africa and elsewhere, some spearheaded by white (and some European) women. Several African religious traditions, some involving women diviners and spirit mediums, have taken root as a result of slavery outside of Africa, especially in Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, and the Caribbean. In addition, African goddess traditions are of particular interest to women outside of Africa, especially African Americans, as Sabrina Sojourner's essay in Chapter 9 discusses. New African religious movements (most associated with Christianity) are also creating new roles for women, some in positions of leadership. Some women have founded their own movements or taken over leadership after male founders have died. These trends are expected to continue in the future, but there appears to be little potential for radical shifts on the horizon.

Notes

1. Candomble, Santeria, and Umbanda are all influenced by the Orisha religion of the Yoruba (see Fandrich 1999, 13).
2. As Jordan Paper observes with respect to West African religions, since there are many prominent female deities in the sculpture, "it is quite surprising to find most descriptions of the religions of these regions downplaying female spirituality. There seems to be a disjunction between the visual evidence and descriptive rhetoric" (Paper 1997, 193).
3. As you may be aware, FGM is one of the most controversial moral issues today, especially among feminists committed to both the empowerment of women from oppression as well as the significance and value of traditional cultural practices. See references on FGM in Internet and Media References.