

**NATIONAL & WORLD AFFAIRS**

# The spirituality of Africa



Jacob Olupona, professor of indigenous African religions at Harvard Divinity School and professor of African and African-American studies in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, recently sat down for an interview about his lifelong research on indigenous African religions. "The success of Christianity and Islam on the African continent in the last 100 years has been extraordinary, but it has been, unfortunately, at the expense of African indigenous religions," said Olupona. Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff Photographer

Though larger religions have made big inroads, traditional belief systems, which are based on openness and adaptation, endure

**Anthony Chiorazzi**  
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*One of Jacob Olupona's earliest memories in Massachusetts is of nearly freezing in his apartment as a graduate student at Boston University during the great snowstorm of 1978. "I had it. I told my father that I was coming home," he recalled. But after braving that first blizzard in a land far from his native Nigeria, Olupona stuck it out and earned his Ph.D. He went on to conduct some of the most significant research on African religions in decades.*

*Olupona, professor of indigenous African religions at Harvard Divinity School and professor of African and African-American studies in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, recently sat down for an interview about his lifelong research on indigenous African religions.*

*Olupona earned his bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1975. He later earned both an M.A. (1981) and Ph.D. (1983) in the history of religions from Boston University.*

*Authoring or editing more than half a dozen books on religion and African culture (including the recent "African Religions: A Very Short Introduction," Oxford University Press), Olupona has researched topics ranging from the indigenous religions of Africa to the religious practices of Africans who have settled in America. His research has helped to introduce and popularize new concepts in religious studies, such as the term "reverse missionaries," referring to African prelates sent to Europe and the United States.*

*The recipient of many prestigious academic honors and research fellowships, Olupona also received the 2015–2016 Reimar Lust Award for International and Cultural Exchange, considered one of Germany's most prestigious academic honors. The award allows Olupona a year of study and research in Germany; he is on leave this year (2015–16).*

*Much of Olupona's work is an attempt to provide a fuller understanding of the complexity and richness of African indigenous thought and practice by viewing it not as a foil or as a useful comparative to better understand Western religions, but as a system of thought and belief that should be valued and understood for its own ideas and contribution to global religions.*

**GAZETTE:** How would you define indigenous African religions?

**OLUPONA:** Indigenous African religions refer to the indigenous or native religious beliefs of the African people before the Christian and Islamic colonization of Africa. Indigenous African religions are by nature plural, varied, and usually informed by one's ethnic identity, where one's family came from in Africa. For instance, the Yoruba religion has historically been centered in southwestern Nigeria, the Zulu religion in southern Africa, and the Igbo religion in southeastern Nigeria.

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For starters, the word "religion" is problematic for many Africans, because it suggests that religion is separate from the other aspects of one's culture, society, or environment. But for many Africans, religion can never be separated from all these. It is a way of life, and it can never be separated from the public sphere. Religion informs everything in traditional African society, including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death.

This is not to say that indigenous African spirituality represents a form of theocracy or religious totalitarianism — not at all. African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the

everyday or mundane. African spirituality is truly holistic. For example, sickness in the indigenous African worldview is not only an imbalance of the body, but also an imbalance in one's social life, which can be linked to a breakdown in one's kinship and family relations or even to one's relationship with one's ancestors.

**GAZETTE:** How have ancestors played a role in traditional societies?

**OLUPONA:** The role of ancestors in the African cosmology has always been significant. Ancestors can offer advice and bestow good fortune and honor to their living dependents, but they can also make demands, such as insisting that their shrines be properly maintained and propitiated. And if these shrines are not properly cared for by the designated descendant, then misfortune in the form of illness might befall the caretaker. A belief in ancestors also testifies to the inclusive nature of traditional African spirituality by positing that deceased progenitors still play a role in the lives of their living descendants.

**GAZETTE:** Are ancestors considered deities in the traditional African cosmology?

**OLUPONA:** Your question underscores an important facet about African spirituality: It is not a closed theological system. It doesn't have a fixed creed, like in some forms of Christianity or Islam. Consequently, traditional Africans have different ideas on what role the ancestors play in the lives of living descendants. Some Africans believe that the ancestors are equal in power to deities, while others believe they are not. The defining line between deities and ancestors is often contested, but overall, ancestors are believed to occupy a higher level of existence than living human beings and are believed to be able to bestow either blessings or illness upon their living descendants.

**GAZETTE:** In trying to understand African spirituality, is it helpful to refer to it as polytheistic or monotheistic?

**OLUPONA:** No, this type of binary thinking is simplistic. Again, it doesn't reflect the multiplicity of ways that traditional African spirituality has conceived of deities, gods, and spirit beings. While some African cosmologies have a clear idea of a supreme being, other cosmologies do not. The Yoruba, however, do have a concept of a supreme being, called *Olorun* or *Olodumare*, and this creator god of the universe is empowered by the various *orisa* [deities] to create the earth and carry out all its related functions, including receiving the prayers and supplications of the Yoruba people.

**GAZETTE:** What is the state of indigenous African religions today?

**OLUPONA:** That's a mixed bag. Indigenous African spirituality today is increasingly falling out of favor. The amount of devotees to indigenous practices has dwindled as Islam and Christianity have both spread and gained influence throughout the continent.

According to all the major surveys, Christianity and Islam each represent approximately 40 percent of the African population. Christianity is more dominant in the south, while Islam is more dominant in the north. Indigenous African practices tend to be strongest in the central states of Africa, but some form of their practices and beliefs can be found almost anywhere in Africa.

Nevertheless, since 1900, Christians in Africa have grown from approximately 7 million to over 450 million today. Islam has experienced a similar rapid growth.

Yet consider that in 1900 most Africans in sub-Saharan Africa practiced a form of indigenous African religions.

The bottom line then is that Africans who still wholly practice African indigenous religions are only about 10 percent of the African population, a fraction of what it used to be only a century ago, when indigenous religions dominated most of the continent. I should add that without claiming to be full members of indigenous traditions, there are many professed Christians and Muslims who participate in one form of indigenous religious rituals and practices or another. That testifies to the enduring power of indigenous religion and its ability to domesticate Christianity and Islam in modern Africa.

The success of Christianity and Islam on the African continent in the last 100 years has been extraordinary, but it has been, unfortunately, at the expense of African indigenous religions.



A native of Nigeria, Jacob Olupona was a graduate student when he endured the blizzard of 1978. "I had it. I told my father that I was coming home," he recalled. Instead, Olupona stayed and earned his Ph.D. Photo by Kehinde Ojo

**GAZETTE:** But yet you said it's a mixed bag?

**OLUPONA:** Yes, it's a mixed bag because in the African diaspora — mostly due to the slave trade starting in the 15th century — indigenous African religions have spread and taken root all over the world, including in the United States and Europe. Some of these African diaspora religions include Cuban Regla de Ocha, Haitian Vodou, and Brazilian Candomble. There is even a community deep in the American Bible Belt in Beaufort County, S.C., called Oyotunji Village that practices a type of African indigenous religion, which is a mixture of Yoruba and Ewe-Fon spiritual practices.

One of the things these diaspora African religions testify to is the beauty of African religions to engage a devotee on many spiritual levels. A follower of African diaspora religions has many choices in terms of seeking spiritual help or succor. For example, followers can seek spiritual direction and relief from healers, medicine men and women, charms [adornments often worn to incur good luck], amulets [adornments often used to ward off evil], and diviners [spiritual advisers].

I should also state that there are signs of the revival of African indigenous practices in many parts of Africa. Modernity has not put a total stop to its influence. Ritual sacrifices and witchcraft beliefs are still common. Moreover, the religions developed in the Americas impact Africa in that devotees of the African diaspora have significant influence on practices in Africa. Some African diasporans are returning to the continent to reconnect with their ancestral traditions, and they are encouraging and organizing the local African communities to reclaim this heritage.

**GAZETTE:** It sounds like African indigenous religions are dynamic, inclusive, and flexible.

**OLUPONA:** Yes, and the pluralistic nature of African-tradition religion is one of the reasons for its success in the diaspora. African spirituality has always been able to adapt to change and allow itself to absorb the wisdom and views of other religions, much more than, for example, Christianity and Islam. While Islam and Christianity tend to be overtly resistant to adopting traditional African religious ideas or practices, indigenous African religions have always accommodated other beliefs. For example, an African amulet might have inside of it a written verse from either the Koran or Christian Bible. The idea is that the traditional African practitioner who constructed that amulet believes in the efficacy of other faiths and religions; there is no conflict in his mind between his traditional African spirituality and another faith. They are not mutually exclusive. He sees the “other faith” as complementing and even adding spiritual potency to his own spiritual practice of constructing effective amulets. Indigenous African religions are pragmatic. It’s about getting tangible results.

**GAZETTE:** What allows African indigenous religions to be so accommodating?

**OLUPONA:** One of the basic reasons is that indigenous African spiritual beliefs are not bound by a written text, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Indigenous African religion is primarily an oral tradition and has never been fully codified; thus, it allows itself to more easily be amended and influenced by other religious ideas, religious wisdom, and by modern development. Holding or maintaining to a uniform doctrine is not the essence of indigenous African religions.

**GAZETTE:** What will Africa lose if it loses its African indigenous worldview?

**OLUPONA:** We would lose a worldview that has collectively sustained, enriched, and given meaning to a continent and numerous other societies for centuries through its epistemology, metaphysics, history, and practices.

For instance, if we were to lose indigenous African religions in Africa, then diviners would disappear, and if diviners disappeared, we would not only lose an important spiritual specialist for many Africans, but also an institution that for centuries has been the repository of African history, wisdom, and knowledge. Diviners — who go through a long educational and apprenticeship program — hold the history, culture, and spiritual traditions of the African people. The Yoruba diviners, for example, draw on this extensive indigenous knowledge every day by consulting Ifa, an extensive literary corpus of information covering science, medicine, cosmology, and metaphysics. Ifa is an indispensable treasure trove of knowledge that can’t be duplicated elsewhere; much of its knowledge has been handed down from *babalawo* [Ifa priest/diviner] to *babalawo* for centuries. (I myself have consulted with several diviners for my research on specific academic topics regarding African culture and history; consequently, if we were to lose Africa’s diviners, we would also lose one of Africa’s best keepers and sources of African history and culture. That would be a serious loss not only for Africans, but also for academics, researchers, writers, and general seekers of wisdom the world over.

**GAZETTE:** What else would we lose if we lost traditional African Religions?

**OLUPONA:** If we lose traditional African religions, we would also lose or continue to seriously undermine the African practice of rites of passage such as the much cherished age-grade initiations, which have for so long integrated and brought Africans together under a common understanding, or worldview. These initiation rituals are already not as common in Africa as they were only 50 years ago, yet age-grade initiations have always helped young Africans feel connected to their community and their past. They have also fostered a greater feeling of individual self-worth by acknowledging important milestones in one's life, including becoming an adult or an elder.

In lieu of these traditional African ways of defining oneself, Christianity and Islam are gradually creating a social identity in Africa that cuts across these indigenous African religious and social identities. They do this by having Africans increasingly identify themselves as either Muslim or Christian, thus denying their unique African worldview that has always viewed — as evidenced in their creation myths — everything as unified and connected to the land, the place where one's clan, lineage, and people were cosmically birthed. Foreign religions simply don't have that same connection to the African continent.

**GAZETTE:** How do you balance your Christian and indigenous African identity?

**OLUPONA:** I was raised in Africa during the 1960s, when the Yoruba community never asked you to choose between your personal faith and your collective African identity. But today that is not the case due to more exclusive-minded types of Christianity and Islam that see patronizing indigenous African beliefs and practices as violating the integrity of their Christian or Muslim principles, but I believe that one can maintain one's religious integrity and also embrace an African worldview.

**GAZETTE:** How can you do that?

**OLUPONA:** My father, a faithful Anglican priest, was a good example. Everywhere he went in southwestern Nigeria, he never opposed or spoke out against African culture — including initiation rites, festivals, and traditional Yoruba dress — as long as it didn't directly conflict with Christianity.

For myself, I negotiate between my Yoruba and Christian identity by, for example, affirming those aspects of African culture that promote good life and communal human welfare. For instance, in a few years time, I pray that I will be participating in an age-grade festival — for men around 70 years of age — called *Ero* in my native Nigerian community in Ute, in Ondo state. I won't pray to an *orisa*, but I will affirm the importance of my connection with members of my age group. In respect and honor of my culture, I also dress in my traditional Nigerian attire when I'm in my country. I also celebrate and honor the king's festivals and ceremonies in my hometown and other places where I live and do research. Additionally, I will not discourage, disparage, or try and convert those who practice their form of African indigenous religions. Maybe this is why I am not an Anglican priest.

In the end, I believe that Africans can make room for a plurality of religious points of view without one religious point of view excluding or compromising the other. An old African adage says: "The sky is large enough for birds to fly around without one having to bump into the other."

*Anthony Chiorazzi, who has an M.Phil. in social anthropology from Oxford University, is studying for a master of theological studies (M.T.S.) degree at Harvard Divinity School. He has researched and written about such diverse religious cultures as the Hare Krishnas, Zoroastrians, Shakers, and the Old Order Amish.*

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

