

The Cultural Foundations of African Religions

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Abstract: Two great world religions now occupy the African stage: Christianity and Islam. However, they rest upon a foundation of African spirituality that assumes very diverse forms. Distinct indigenous religious traditions are associated with the four great ethno-linguistic phyla that have historically come to define the continent's social and cultural life: the Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, and Khoisan. Each cultural-linguistic tradition gave rise to unique forms of spiritual belief and practice that continue to be observed in contemporary social life in Africa. Contemporary life has given rise not to a single, homogenized cultural world but to “alternative modernities,” which bear the imprint of both global forces and local and indigenous influences. Where universalizing religious traditions have established their foundational pillars in lands nourished by distinctive streams of spirituality and religious practice, have alternative forms of religious modernities emerged? What are these indigenous streams of African spirituality, and how have they influenced contemporary religious practice in a new age? This paper reviews the sources of the diverse bodies of belief and practice that define the four foundational African ethno-linguistic traditions and examines how the supernatural infuses everyday life through blessing, prophecy, magic, oracles, and witchcraft. These institutional practices reflect the sort of “power in the mundane” often evoked in the Bible but marginalized in our secular and rational age – although they have persisted in certain folk traditions. Nevertheless, they remain widely observed in much of African society, both alongside and in synthesis with Christianity and Islam.

Keywords: Africa, Indigeneity, Modernity, Religion, Culture

It has been argued that religion is a universal institution in human societies. Certainly, all African societies are characterized by profound ideas about how human societies interact with a spirit world. However, there is no uniformity in the customary beliefs and practices that can be seen as religious across African cultures, but rather great diversity. A major finding in anthropological theory is that interactions between cultures are selective, with influences from one community being absorbed and assimilated according to the cultural understandings and existing terms of another.¹ Durkheim² long ago affirmed that what is deemed “religious” is often the key ingredient out of which a social order is forged, as it embodies a commonly embraced set of norms and ideas associated with a social group and its very principles of cohesion, manifested through ritual. But socio-religious systems bear the imprint of their histories of engagement with spirit worlds in their linguistic usages and the ritual practices seen as central to their identities. In this regard, the spread of religions like Islam and Christianity, which in principle are not wedded to any particular ethnic community but open to all, has come to reflect the fertile cultural

1. Franz Boas, *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911* (University of Chicago Press, 1982); Edward Sapir, “The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society,” in *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, ed. Paul A. Erickson and Liam Donat Murphy (University of Toronto Press, 2017); Marshall Sahlins, “What Is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): i–xxiii.

2. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (Free Press, 1995).

grounds where their seeds have been propagated, a point illustrated by Weber's famous study comparing the Romanized profile of Catholicism and the Germanic conformation of Protestantism.³

The African continent has been the recipient of Islamic and Christian influences, the latter dating to the fourth century spread of Coptic Orthodoxy to Abyssinia, the former to the seventh century Muslim expansion across North Africa. But the impact of both world religions was heightened during the age of European travel and trade and expansion into empire, which accelerated from the sixteenth century onward. The fervour for missionization during the period of European colonization of the continent led, in the colonial and post-colonial periods, to Africanized forms of Christianity and, in parallel, of Islam. Given the diversity of endogenous religious ideas and ritual practices we find across Africa, which predate and have persisted during the spread of world religions, how has the impact of these global religious forces been modulated by the existing religious systems that they encountered and continue to encounter?

It has become commonplace to hold that religions in general manifest a set of essential common concerns. Bellah's observation that religion is "a symbolic form within which one comes to terms with one's fate,"⁴ is often cited, and it has become conventional to speak of Stark and Bainbridge's views that religions pose "[a] solution to questions of ultimate meaning which postulate[s] the existence of a supernatural being, world, or force."⁵ Does such an assumption underlie the notion that there should be a common core to what has been called "African spirituality"⁶ or that there is something called "African religion," a singularity amidst diversity? Or should observers follow the anthropological tendency to see a distinctive body of beliefs and practices in each African community, as reflected in the proliferation of myths of origins, names for divinity, systems of divination, or sacrifice? In contemporary scholarship, an assumption of diversity among African religious forms has arisen, reflected in the very title of Olupona's edited volume on "Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity"⁷ and Mbiti's recognition of the plurality of African religions and philosophy.⁸

This paper adopts a historical and hermeneutical perspective, proposing that rather than choosing between a singularity or an endless diversity of African religious forms, it may be instructive to trace commonalities among societies that share a linguistic and cultural heritage. We will review the range of variation in the foundations of religious ideas and practices in Africa, finding neither a single complex nor a multitude, but four religious complexes. These are associated with the four great linguistic-cultural families that originated up to 15,000 years ago and, through migration and socio-cultural divergence, have given rise to the societies of today.⁹ Khoisan speakers now inhabit southern Africa (but were once spread throughout Eastern Africa); Niger-Congo speakers are found in sub-Saharan West Africa, and its Bantu-speakers have also spread throughout Southern and Eastern Africa; Nilo-Saharan speakers originated in Sudan, near to the Nile Valley, and then spread westward across the Sahara and southward through East Africa; and Afro-Asiatic speakers likely arose in the Ethiopian highlands, where the greatest diversity of

3. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 2001).

4. Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Harper & Row, 1970), 2.

5. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (University of California Press, 1985), 119; James Spickard, "Theorizing Religion for a Post-Colonial Era," in *Topographies of African Spirituality*, ed. Jacob Olupona (Routledge, 2025), 25.

6. Jacob Olupona, ed., *Topographies of African Spirituality* (Routledge, 2025).

7. Jacob K. Olupona, ed., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity* (Routledge, 2004).

8. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Doubleday, 1970).

9. Roger M. Blench, "Recent Developments in African Language Classification and Their Implications for Prehistory," in *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals, and Towns*, ed. T. Shaw, P. Sinclair, B. Andah, and A. Okpoko (Routledge, 1993), 126–138; Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Currey, 2002).

their languages is still found, and then moved through Northern and Saharan Africa into the Middle East, where Semitic speakers proliferated. One could hypothesize that a fifth great linguistic family may have once characterized the Twa-Akan or “Pygmy” populations of Central Africa, who now speak the languages of their neighbours. This paper will explore whether distinctive religio-cultural complexes are associated with these four great civilizations, complicating the assumption of a singular system of African religiosity and the empirical observation that there are, in fact, thousands of societies with their own distinctive forms of religious belief and practice.

A hermeneutical perspective on understanding African religious forms

There is a long historical tradition of interpreting the Bible, most notably the idea that each Testament – the Old and the New – provides lenses for understanding the other. Paul Ricoeur,¹⁰ building on the work of Gadamer,¹¹ proposed a strategy for applying hermeneutical methods to the study of cultures. This approach influenced his colleague, Clifford Geertz, whose work became foundational to the study of culture in Anthropology.¹²

“Interpretive Anthropology” strives to understand local actors in their own terms. Their concepts illuminate what they are doing (the ground of their intentionality), and help explain the context of assumptions and motivations that underlie their actions. This approach helps us to understand others, as well as ourselves. But people do not always make themselves available to another’s understanding, even when it is presented in their own terms. Thus, a “hermeneutical” approach also rests on a simple idea – that one thing is best understood in light of another.

We understand something by considering something else that frames it, brackets it, or lends it meaning. So, we are most successful in “understanding” objects of thought (whether texts, religious practices, social action, the intentions of persons and even cultures) not in isolation, but in relation to other things, which provide the lenses through which we view them. A foundational idea in contemporary Christianity is that the Old Testament offers lenses through which we strive to comprehend the New Testament, as an anticipation of a realization. Similarly, consider how, within the local and regional contexts through which religious influences have spread, a customary set of institutions, beliefs and practices could help us understand how religions that lay claim to universality are understood, interpreted, and enacted in practice across diverse locales.

Understanding the Cultural Foundations of African Religious Forms

What are the fundamental African religious forms and ideas that can be regarded as hermeneutical keys? By “foundations,” I mean both essential to our understanding and original in a historical sense. What makes an idea “religious”? I will not pursue the suggestive ideas mentioned above, which have persisted from Tillich to Bellah, about how philosophical notions of ultimate meaning underpin concerns identified as religious. Instead, I propose to focus on the more anthropological question of the social institutions that connect practices with ideas.

To explore the foundations of African religious forms, I will examine and compare the complex of ideas and practices associated with each of the four cultural-linguistic systems in relation to six issues: 1)

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum, 1989).

12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).

the nature of Spirit and Divinity and the actions directed towards them (evocation, prayer, cursing, blessing, sacrifice); 2) the role of human mediators in interactions with the spirit world (prophets, diviners, seers, sacrificers, officiants, cursers or blessers); 3) ideas regarding the afterlife and human interaction with it (ancestor veneration, sacrifice, gift giving); 4) explanations for and ways of mitigating evil, misfortune and suffering in the world (guilt, penance, witchcraft, sorcery, generational responsibility); 5) practices intended to secure justice for wrongs suffered or committed (transmission of guilt, recompense for wrongs, compensation, blood price, accusation, confession, cleansing); and 6) practices of worship and sacred celebrations (collective sacrifice and blessing, prayers, collective feasts, musical instruments, song and dance). The communities that received and refined these four distinctive systems of ideas necessarily relied on institutionalized oral traditions and ritual practices to transmit them across generations and to neighbouring groups. Thus, practices of living cultural interpretation, rather than textual analysis, are most helpful in understanding these foundations of religious forms.

The Emergence of Distinctive African Civilizations

Evidence suggests that Neanderthals diverged from the main human lineage somewhat more than 500,000 years ago, with two hominoid stems emerging in Africa around 500 ka.¹³ Over time, one stem differentiated into all the major genetic streams, while the other contributed gene flow to those streams in varying ways. Ragsdale et al. observe that “the earliest divergence among contemporary human populations differentiates the southern African Nama population from the other African groups at 110–135 ka.”¹⁴ Much later, Western African populations, like the Mende (c. 50 ka), separated. The eastern African line subsequently divided into ancestral Nilo-Saharan (such as the Gumuz in their sample) and Afro-Asiatic streams (such as the Oromo and Amhara) (10–12 ka). One stream of ancestral communities related to the eastern line began to disperse from Africa to the rest of the world at approximately 60 ka. Outside of Africa, these populations subsequently acquired some Neanderthal and Denisovan attributes, distinguishing them from remaining African populations, which lack traces of the distinctive characteristics associated with populations that migrated out of Africa.¹⁵

One theory regarding the differentiation and dispersal of ancestral populations argues that these processes were stimulated by pressure on available resources or by resource expansion, potentially resulting from climatic change. For ancestral populations practicing hunting, fishing, and foraging, increased aridity would have prompted game movements, thus stimulating the dispersal of human groups and the diversification of subsistence patterns. Conversely, increases in edible resources with climate amelioration may also have contributed to population expansion and linguistic diversity.¹⁶

This brief account of African genetic history provides a general chronological framework for the emergence of distinct populations, from which four distinctive language families and cultures arose. Those four pre-Neolithic African families were, and continue to be, identified with distinct regions of Africa.¹⁷ Figure 1 below shows a visual representation of these distinct regional populations and language families.¹⁸

13. I will use the standard abbreviation for kilo-annum in archaeology and paleontology: ka. Accordingly, 500 ka is equivalent to 500,000 years.

14. Aaron P. Ragsdale et al., “A Weakly Structured Stem for Human Origins in Africa,” *Nature* 617 (2023): 756.

15. Ragsdale et al., “Weakly Structured Stem,” 756.

16. Blench, “African Language Classification,” 137.

17. Blench, “African Language Classification.”

18. Blench, “African Language Classification.”

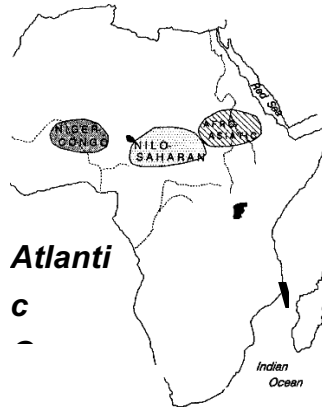


Figure 1: Putative geographical regions of the origins of three African civilizations

These included Khoisan speakers in Southern Africa; Niger-Congo speakers in West Africa, who later spread throughout central and southern Africa; Nilo-Saharan speakers in the Middle Nile and the Sahara, who later moved south along the Rift Valley into East Africa; and Afro-Asiatic speakers, who originated in the Ethiopian highlands and then migrated north to Egypt, west across North Africa and the Sahara, and northeast into the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East. A fifth “Pygmy” family, whose members still occupy the forests of Central and Western Africa, are perhaps related to the second genetic stem mentioned above. However, they have become linguistically assimilated into the expanding Niger-Congo-derived Bantu speakers and Nilo-Saharan speakers to the north, who now dominate these regions.

In their sites of origin, the four streams developed distinct civilizations, each characterized by different economic pursuits, social structures, and ideas about the human condition. These include the ideas and practices discussed above concerning Spirit and Divinity, human mediation, the afterlife, evil and suffering, justice, and worship through celebration. Our knowledge of their foundational ideas has been ascertained indirectly, drawing on historical linguistics, archaeology, and comparative ethnology. Most importantly, historical linguists infer that terms associated with a proto-language ancestral to contemporary cultures provide evidence of concepts and patterns of thought and action characteristic of the societies from which those cultures diverged. Thus, by examining shared terminology, beliefs, and practices, we can trace the putative origins of historically related languages that diverged from a common ancestor. Commonalities among geographically and linguistically distant groups reveal evidence of the likely characteristics of the original “proto” language and culture, including the religious ideas that inspired members of each family.

Nilo-Saharan Civilization¹⁹

The degree of differentiation among Nilo-Saharan language families suggests that it may have begun during the arid period prior to 13,000 BCE in the Sahara,²⁰ when diverging societies developed a deep structural

19. Nilo-Saharan includes the following language families, though the precise affinities of each are still subject to debate (Blench, “African Language Classification”): Songhai, Saharan, Maban, Fur, Eastern Sudanic, Central Sudanic, Berta, Kunama, Komuz. The largest branch is Eastern Sudanic, which includes the Nilotic languages such as Nuer and Maasai. See Christopher Ehret, “Nilotic and the Limits of Eastern Sudanic: Classification and Historical Conclusions,” in *Nilotic Studies, Part Two*, ed. R. Vossen and M. Bechhaus-Gerst (Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983), 375–421.

20. Blench, “African Language Classification,” 137.

genealogy as they spread westward across North Africa and the Sahara, and southward throughout East Africa.²¹ After 9,000 BCE, Nilo-Saharan peoples likely held nontheistic beliefs in a spiritual power that resides in an animating force, similar to those held today by the Uduk of the Koman branch of Nilo-Saharan. The Uduk call this spiritual power or animating force, which does not reside in a deity but in the stomach, “arum.”²² Following a long period of combining hunting and foraging with managing wild cattle and their ritual sacrifice, it appears that, from about 7000 BCE, the Nilo-Saharans transformed their close interaction with wild aurochs through domestication, giving rise to cattle.²³ Over time, the Northern Sudanians developed theistic religious ideas distinct from the nontheistic views attributed to their ancestors and began to associate Divinity with cattle and their sacrifice.

These post-Neolithic practices among Nilo-Saharans effectively represented a religious revolution. In contrast to their ancestors’ earlier non-theistic beliefs, the Sudanic religion they developed was monotheistic, centered on belief in a single overarching Divinity, metaphorically associated with the sky or heavens and symbolized by lightning. Divinity could manifest in the form of lesser spirits, seen as guides. Cattle were viewed as symbols of Divinity and, through sacrifice, were considered a quintessential gift both from and to Divinity.²⁴ Archaeological findings strongly suggest that this cultural complex may have originated in close interactions between these people and wild aurochs before their domestication as cattle.²⁵

Manifestations of evil were understood as divine judgments or retribution for transgressions committed by individuals or their ancestors. After death, ancestors were believed to enter a vaguely conceived afterlife, which played no functional role in ritual practice. The religious practices of later Sudanic speakers, centred on a transcendent Divinity, spread across the Middle-Nile region and across the Sahara through the Chad Basin. Early Sudanic speakers did not practice circumcision or clitoridectomy, although those who migrated southward later adopted circumcision from Eastern Cushitic speakers in southern Ethiopia or northern Kenya. However, they did extract their lower incisors. Patrilineal reckoning began to displace matrilineal practices around the fifth millennium, except in certain cases in the Middle-Nile region. Cattle and antelope horns were used as side-blown trumpets. Dance forms involve vertical leaps while holding a stick or spear, as illustrated by the practices of Western Nilotic speakers, such as the Nuer, and the Eastern Nilotic speakers, such as the Maasai.²⁶ See Figure 2 below for a visual illustration of this form of dance. The practice of sacrificing aurochs extended to their domesticated descendants, cattle, whose sacrifice became a central ritual for the Nilo-Saharans, especially the Sudanic branch.²⁷

21. Christopher Ehret, *A Historical-Comparative Reconstruction of Nilo-Saharan* (Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2001), 184–185.

22. Wendy James, *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion, and Power among the Uduk of Sudan* (Clarendon Press, 1988).

23. Elena A. A. Garcea et al., *The Deep History of Cattle Herding and Symbolism: New Perspectives from Anthropology, Archaeology and Zooarchaeology in Sudan* (Springer Nature, 2026).

24. John Galaty, “Ceremony and Society: The Poetics of Maasai Ritual,” *Man* 18 (1983): 361–382; Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (University of Chicago Press, 1964).

25. J. Clutton-Brock, “The Spread of Domestic Animals in Africa,” in *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals and Towns*, ed. Bassey W. Andah et al. (Taylor & Francis, 1993); Jérôme Dubosson and Matthieu Honegger, “Funerals as Feasts: Past Nubian Mortuary Practices in the Light of Anthropology,” in *Society and Subsistence in the Prehistory of Northeastern Africa: Papers in Honor of Romuald Schild*, *Studies in African Archaeology* 17 (Poznań Archaeological Museum, 2023), 220; Garcea et al., *The Deep History of Cattle Herding*, 23–27.

26. Galaty, “Ceremony and Society.”

27. Garcea et al., *The Deep History of Cattle Herding*.

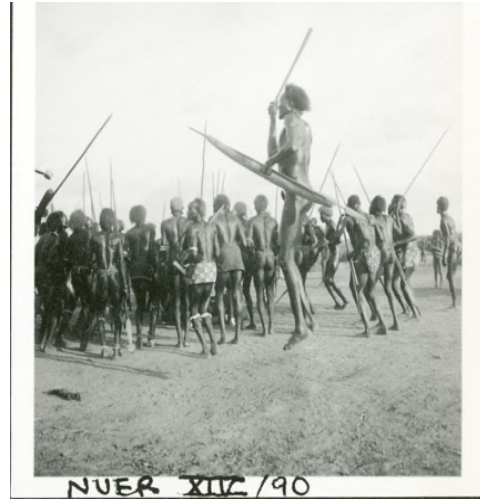


Figure 1: Dance by a Nuer of Sudan. Western Nilotic Speakers from the Eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan Civilization.

It should be noted that the Nilo-Saharanans, whose religious traditions are best documented through the studies on Nilotic speakers, embrace a monotheistic complex of beliefs. This complex includes belief in a single supreme Divinity, intermediate spirits, mediating ritual leaders, animal sacrifice, notions of guilt and expiation, divine retribution for sins, a vaguely defined afterlife, and worship involving dance, song, and a trumpet.²⁸ These religious ideas and practices spread from the Nilo-Saharanans to Afro-Asiatic civilization, as Semitic speakers progressively expanded throughout Southwest Asia and the Ethiopian Highlands.²⁹ In these regions, this religious complex of ideas and practices influenced the emergence of multiple religions. Alongside the invention of writing, religious ideas and mythologies were expressed in textual forms, facilitating their diffusion and legitimization as they spread across the Arabian Peninsula and farther into the Middle East.³⁰

Afro-Asiatic Civilization³¹

As Blench has observed,

If Nilo-Saharan originated during the extremely arid period, it would explain the deep divisions between its various branches. If both Afroasiatic and Niger-Congo developed during the 12,500-10,000 BP period, respectively east and west of the Nilo-Saharan heartland, this would explain the isolation of some of its branches.³²

28. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Clarendon Press, 1940).

29. Paul T. W. Baxter, "Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder: Some Suggestions Why Witchcraft Accusations Are Rare among East African Pastoralists," in *The Allocation of Responsibility*, ed. Max Gluckman (Manchester University Press, 1972), 163–191.

30. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*; William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (Routledge, 2007).

31. The branches of Afro-Asiatic languages are Cushitic, Semitic, Berber, Ancient Egyptian, Chadic and Omotic, the latter occupying the Omo River Valley of southern Ethiopia, apparently the first to diverge.

32. Blench, "African Language Classification," 137.

The genetic information reviewed above suggests that the West African branch diverged from the original genetic stem before the two East African lines divided into Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic groups. Among the latter, who had shifted to gathering wild grains sometime after 13,000 BCE, clan-based communities emerged that claimed common descent from a founding ancestor associated with a localized clan divinity.

Within the Afro-Asiatic family, hereditary ritual leaders known as “wap’er” emerged among Cushitic speakers, who appear to have believed in a clan deity that was the object of rituals and worship. These leaders served as intercessors and interpreters of the deity on behalf of their communities, as is still the case among related Omotic peoples and the ancient Semites.³³ Evil was attributed to harmful spirits, demons, or Jinn. Male circumcision shortly after birth appears before 9000 BCE, followed later by female circumcision: both practices preceded circumcision at adolescence, which emerged later.³⁴

From the seventh millennium BCE, interactions between the Nilo-Saharan and early Afro-Asiatic traditions resulted in the blending of two traditions: an ancient Cushitic system of clans led by clan priest-chiefs (*wap’er*), and the Sudanic notion of divinity, which expanded the old Cushitic root “*waaka*” to encompass the sky and Divinity. The duties of the “*wap’er*” were redirected toward Divinity, while evil was attributed to spirits and also understood as divine retribution. This gave rise to a Cushitic synthesis of Sudanic notions of Divinity and Afro-Asiatic beliefs, representing a very early instance of religious syncretism between two civilizations.

These civilizations remain associated, respectively, with the Nilo-Saharan family in the Sudanic lowlands, the Sahara, and the East African Rift Valley, and with the Afro-Asiatic family in the Ethiopian highlands and the Horn of Africa, as well as its offshoots to the north (Ancient Egyptian), across North Africa (Berber and Chadic), and across the Arabian Peninsula into the Middle East (Semitic). They continue to interact along the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderlands and in southern Ethiopia, where Oromo and Nuer forms of religious practice interact.³⁵ In this way, Sudanic notions of a singular, supreme Divinity were combined with Afro-Asiatic beliefs that spirits cause evil, alongside the role of a human mediator.³⁶



Figure 2: Dance by the Oromo Women of Ethiopia, speakers of an Eastern Cushitic language within the Afro-Asiatic family.

33. Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*.

34. See Javier C. Angulo and Marcos García-Díez, “Male Genital Representation in Paleolithic Art: Erection and Circumcision Before History,” *Urology* 74, no. 1 (July 2009): 10–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.urology.2009.01.010>.

35. Chayot Gatdet, “Rethinking the Roles of Pastoralists’ Indigenous Religious Practices in Nuer Nation Zone, Gambella Region, South-West Ethiopia,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2025): Article 2451508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2451508>.

36. See Christopher Ehret, “Sudanic Civilization,” in *Agricultural and Pastoral Societies in Ancient and Classical History*, ed. Michael Adas (Temple University Press, 2001), 224–274.

We can also trace the evolution of characteristic means of subsistence through the development of Sudanic agriculture, an aquatic fishing tradition, and animal husbandry, with domestic animals serving as objects of religious veneration and sacrifice.³⁷

Niger-Congo Civilization³⁸

Niger-Congo civilization arose in West Africa after diverging from the earliest African stem group. From the Benue-Congo group, Bantu speakers emerged and, over time, migrated throughout the Congo Basin, eastward to the Great Lakes region of East Africa, and southward to Southern Africa. Some later turned northward, moving into the coastal and highland regions of East Africa. Their beliefs included the ancient concept of a distant God, who represented the source of Creation or a “First Cause” but was not actively engaged in the world. More salient were beliefs in territorial spirits, which represented natural forces like rivers and streams, and ancestral spirits, who were venerated rather than worshipped. Ancestors were thought to have greatly influenced the lives of the living and were owed respect and remembrance. Burial sites became sacred forests that communities cared for.

The ancestors were subjects of reflection, prayer, deliberation, and remembrance, especially during times of crisis, when their blessings were sought. Evil and misfortune were thought to arise from neglect of the ancestors, the actions of an ancestor remembered as malevolent, or the conduct of living individuals motivated by malice or envy. The latter might use forms of witchcraft, like ritual medicines or spells, to harm others. We do not find notions of devils or individuals with supernatural powers; rather, “witches” (if we can use that culturally loaded term) were thought to be individuals motivated by hatred, envy, or malice, whose malevolence emanated from them without their necessarily being consciously aware of it.³⁹ Those experiencing misfortune, illness, unexplained deaths, or bad fortune might appeal to a specialist in remedies, a type of “doctor-diviner” (also referred to as “witchdoctors”), whose expertise covered medicine and clairvoyance in interpreting the past or anticipating the future. These specialists were charged with divining the causes of misfortune and identifying possible remedies, including addressing past failures to properly attend to ancestors, sources of resentment, or witchcraft. Their findings could lead to accusations of witchcraft, followed by reconciliation or expulsion.⁴⁰

Practitioners of Niger-Congo culture also developed the arts of wood carving, including the creation of figurines and masks, as well as hair braiding. Niger-Congo civilization was associated with a tradition of drumming and dancing, featuring percussion and polyrhythmic performances in which drums of different pitches were beaten in time through interwoven rhythmic patterns. These performances included vigorous dances characterized by bent posture and horizontal movement, often combined with masks and costumes, and were used to celebrate ancestral spirits (see Figure 4).

37. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*.

38. The branches of the Niger-Congo language family and civilization are: West Atlantic, Mande, Gur, Kwa, Benue-Congo, and Adamawa. The Bantu speakers are an offshoot of the Benue-Congo group that expanded throughout the Congo Basin, Southern Africa and Eastern Africa.

39. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Clarendon Press, 1976). An important Anthropological tradition treats the agents of conscious malevolence using learned techniques as “sorcerers,” and agents of unconscious malevolence as practicing “witchcraft.” This distinction may be too strictly drawn since in many cases sorcerers are thought to be intrinsically dangerous to others and witches to exercise conscious threats.

40. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Présence Africaine, 1959).



Figure 3: Azande Men from Southern Sudan, speakers of the Eastern Branch of the Adamawa Language Family from the Niger-Congo Civilization.

This tradition was associated with elaborate wood carving, including masks, statues, and instrumental objects like plates and cups, some of which were considered repositories of power.⁴¹

Khoisan Civilization⁴²

The first African civilization to diverge from the original population stem is associated with Southern Africa. This divergence apparently long predated the out-of-Africa movement, which is associated with the Eastern African grouping. We associate the Southern African cluster with speakers of Khoisan languages, characterized by phonological “clicks.”⁴³ The deep roots dividing the five families in this group indicate considerable time depth, while their distinctive phonology attests to their unity. Two outliers are also found in Tanzania, the Sandawe and Hadza (or Hadzape). These groups may indicate that this civilization was more widely dispersed before the three other civilizations migrated into East Africa at the onset of the Neolithic period. Although there is some evidence that Khoisan speakers previously owned livestock⁴⁴ brought to Southern Africa by Bantu speakers, Khoisan groups predate those migrations, and, even today, are associated with various hunting and foraging subsistence strategies, including in areas where they live near pastoralists and cultivators.⁴⁵

It is suggested that Khoisan groups lived in highly mobile bands of approximately fifteen to fifty people, with ties to one another but not formally recognized clans or lineages. These individuals were

41. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*.

42. Southern African Khoisan languages are divided into three distinct groups: Northern (Ju), Central (Khoe) and Southern (! Kwi and Taa) Khoisan. The language of the Sandawe of Tanzania is related to the Central group, but the place of the Hadza or Hadzape from Tanzania remains unclear; see Anthony Traill and Oswin R. A. Köhler, “Khoisan Languages,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khoisan-languages>.

43. These languages are distinguished by their use of click sounds – made by sucking the tongue against the teeth, roof of the mouth, or cheeks – as ordinary consonants in everyday words.

44. Edwin N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

45. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*.

related bilaterally through kinship ties. Bands had defined territories where they held the first rights to gather and hunt, but no hereditary leadership. They lived in hemispherical houses that were easy to move and rebuild. In some cases, they simply marked out family space on the ground where they slept. Their music used a single rhythm, and their dance forms emphasized footwork with little bodily movement. Music was generated using several types of string instruments, such as instruments with four or five strings and a gourd resonator. Drums were unknown until recently. They held a nontheistic outlook involving an impersonal spirit or force that existed outside of human beings but manifested in some animals. Through a form of trance dance, they could access this force and use it to heal illnesses or relieve personal conflict and stress. Individuals with some form of religious power served as shamans or “trance healers,” entering a trance state through dance that could last several hours (see Figure 5).



Figure 4: San Men from Botswana in the Kalahari Desert practicing a Trance Dance, “click.” Speakers of the Khoisan Civilisation.

However, such a healer did not occupy a distinct status position, given that his capacities were personal rather than institutional.⁴⁶ This dimension of their religion was also associated with a unique Khoisan rock-art tradition, which could depict religious experiences of “trance healers,” who were also artists.⁴⁷

Contemporary Significance of African Religious Ideas and Practices

This profile of religious ideas is based on terminology reconstructed from the histories of related languages using a method pioneered by Ehret, as well as on comparative ethnology, which examines the institutions and cultural forms of historically associated societies. The table below summarizes the reconstructed religious ideas and related cultural forms.

46. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*.

47. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*.

Table 1. Cultural Foundations of African Civilizations

<i>Civilization</i>	<i>Divinity</i>	<i>Source of Evil</i>	<i>Afterlife</i>	<i>Mediators</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Worship & Dance</i>	<i>Musical Forms</i>
<i>Nilo-Saharan I pre-9000 BC</i>	<i>Nontheistic Animating Force (arum), resides in the stomach</i>	<i>Free arum: source of danger & harm, explaining evil.</i>	<i>free arum, residue of lives, from the past</i>				
<i>Nilo-Saharan II Post-9000 BC</i>	<i>Transcendent Divinity, spirits Monotheistic</i>	<i>Personal wrongs, guilt, divine judgement</i>	<i>Vague afterlife</i>	<i>Ritual leaders</i>	<i>Animal sacrifice</i>	<i>Vertical dance, leaping</i>	<i>Cattle & antelope horn trumpets</i>
<i>Afro-Asiatic</i>	<i>Clan deities, henotheism</i>	<i>Spirits, demons, Jinni</i>		<i>Wap'et clan priest, authority</i>	<i>Worship of Clan Deity</i>	<i>swaying bodily movement footwork</i>	<i>Stringed instruments like lyres</i>
<i>Niger-Congo</i>	<i>Vague Creator Territorial Spirits, Ancestral Spirits</i>	<i>Neglect of Ancestors, Personalistic Envy & Malice Witchcraft</i>	<i>Ancestral spirits</i>	<i>Clan chiefs, Doctor- Diviner (medicine & divination</i>	<i>Venerati on of ancestors , Propitiat ion gifts to ancestors</i>	<i>Horizontal dance, arm motions, masks & statues</i>	<i>Drums and Dance, poly- rhythmic percussion</i>
<i>Khoisan</i>	<i>Nontheistic outlook, impersonal spirit or force</i>		<i>Force</i>	<i>Trace Healer or Shaman; Non- hereditary healers as artists</i>	<i>Force could heal sickness or relieve conflicts</i>	<i>Trance dance, footwork, restrained movement</i>	<i>4-5 stringed instruments& resonator</i>

Anthropologists have tended to examine the interrelatedness among institutions within particular societies using field methods that date back to Malinowski.⁴⁸ The analysis takes a macro-level perspective on four distinct African civilizations, or foundational cultures, and asks which cultural elements shared by societies within the same linguistic group are sufficiently similar to suggest that they originated historically before their contemporary societies and languages diverged from an ancestral population. In addition to transmitting ideas across generations, all cultures also accumulate ideas, beliefs and practices drawn from other societies, whether related or not; these are usually selectively integrated and synthesized.⁴⁹

Linguists speak of “core vocabulary” as being comprised of words associated with essential objects and notions that are thought to be the most resistant to change and, therefore, relatively more indicative of continuity between earlier and current linguistic practices. Arguably, religious notions, because they are interrelated within complexes, may represent “core ideas” characterized by relative durability or resilience over time. However, the ethnographic tradition has tended to associate religious institutions with particular communities rather than with regional or civilizational patterns. Although changes over time often represent variations within regional patterns or cultural flows between the great African civilizations, these religious patterns appear mainly throughout the ethnographic record and are reflected in the vocabularies of societies that speak historically related languages.

48. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Routledge, 1922).

49. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

It appears that the Nilo-Saharans profoundly influenced the Afro-Asiatic stream of religious thought. Both traditions encompass beliefs in an overarching Divinity, practices involving blessings and curses, individual experience of guilt and acts of penance, belief in the existence of an afterlife for individual souls, sacrificial offerings with cattle serving as the quintessential gift, the accompaniment of ritual with song, dance, and instrumental music, and the role of ritual leaders as mediators between the human community and a larger force, spirit, or Divinity.⁵⁰ These ideas resonate with early forms of Semitic worship and are reflected in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament.⁵¹ Similarly, clan-based and nature-based divinities, together with priest-like leaders in Afro-Asiatic traditions, appear to have influenced the traditions of the Nile Valley and beyond.⁵²

In addition to recognizing the four distinct cultural forms that constitute the great African civilizations, these findings have two major implications for the study of religion (see Figure 6 below).



Figure 5: African Language Families:
Their Geographical Distribution Following Historical Expansion and Migration.

Firstly, these foundational systems remain alive today in the diverse forms of belief and practice found in contemporary societies. Some have been regenerated within their own social contexts, while others have blended with religions marked by their global reach, most notably Christianity and Islam. Christianity is now deeply established in most corners of Africa and predominant in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Islam extends from the Sahel northward across the Sahara to North Africa and along the East African coast. This blending, often described as syncretism or “indigenization,” may help explain why religions are rarely

50. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*.

51. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*.

52. Garcea et al., *The Deep History of Cattle Herding*.

adopted in their entirety; instead, they acquire meaning and spiritual depth through reinterpretation in local and Indigenous terms.⁵³

Second, the historically prevalent colonial-era question of whether African societies were influenced by cultural and religious traditions originating in Egypt or the Hebraic traditions must now be reconsidered. The development of distinct African civilizations significantly predates the Neolithic emergence of ancient Egyptian culture and Judaic traditions, following cultural and linguistic movements out of Africa. The evidence therefore suggests that Nilo-Saharan and, subsequently, the early Afro-Asiatic language families were major sources of foundational religious ideas that disseminated across the Arabian Peninsula and into the Middle East as ancient Semitic speakers evolved.

Today, African forms of worship, derived from the four great civilizations largely found in distinctive regions of the continent, may reflect diverse expressions of spiritualism, including embodied possession and trance-like states, the experience of visions of distant places, the past and the future, divination, practices of witchcraft, herbalism, the interpretation of omens, and the integration of dance, music and worship. These African-derived religious forms persist today and are often evident in the ways Christian and Islamic traditions are reinterpreted in local contexts. These ideas and practices may provide hermeneutical keys for a deeper understanding of the forms of religious life that continue to inspire people.

The fact that these religious concepts, practices, and institutions are associated with different African civilizations may shed light on the conceptual frameworks used to characterize African religions. This challenges the assumption that there is a single, underlying African religious prototype or form of African spirituality. It also casts a critical eye on the often-unspoken view that each African community embodies a religious form. The latter notion appears to be Durkheimian in inspiration, arising from the identification of a religious community, or “church,” with the divinity it worships, and from the idea that worship provides an image of the social order and drives societal integration.⁵⁴ While this perspective is undoubtedly valuable in attempts to understand the institutional origins of the social order, it sets aside the historical question of how larger regions came to share religious forms, as well as how religious concepts and practices became embedded in languages and cultures shared across time and space.

This article addresses this question by examining the connection between Africa’s four great civilizations, with foundations in language and culture, and their distinctive religious ideas and practices. These ideas and practices reflect points of unity within each of the four diverse communities found in West to Central Africa, Southern Africa, the Sudanic regions, and North-Eastern Africa, in relation to the major issues raised at the outset of this paper. The religious complexes shared within these civilizations may also help us anticipate the contributions they make, and will continue to make, through processes of indigenization, as global religions are reshaped. The many modes of religious participation found among distinctive communities throughout Africa can often be traced to these indigenous cultural forces underlying customary religious ideas and practices. Rather than disappearing with modernity, these forms provide the emotional and intellectual basis for how globalized religions are embraced by people whose identities remain shaped by foundational beliefs and practices.

53. John Galaty, “The Indigenization of Pastoral Modernity: Territoriality, Mobility, and Poverty in Dryland Africa,” in *Pastoralism in Africa: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Michael Bollig, Michael Schnegg, and Hans-Peter Wotzka (Berghahn Press, 2013), 473–510; Sahlins, “What is Anthropological Enlightenment?”

54. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*.

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