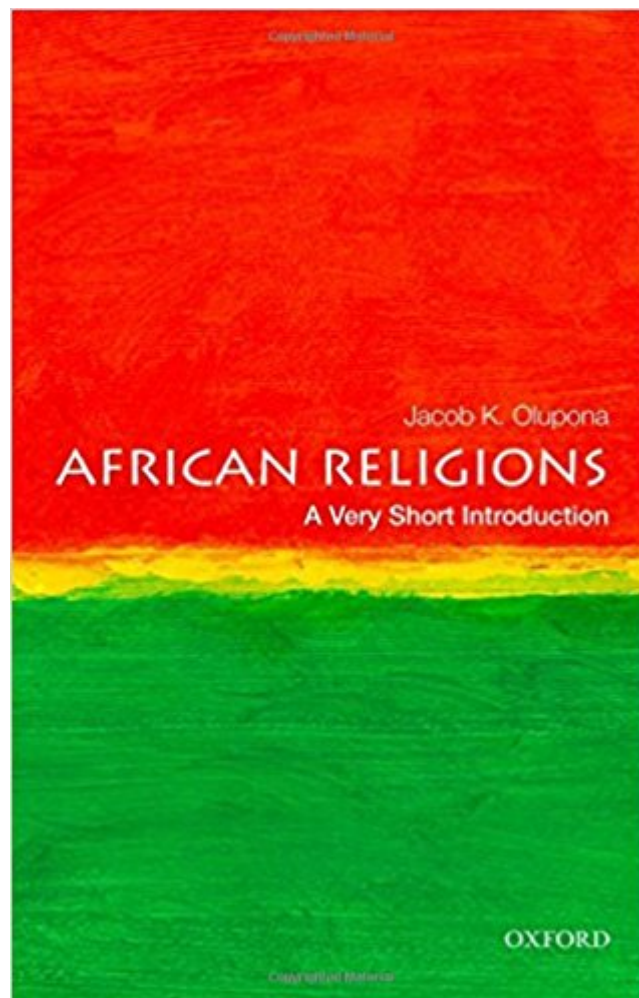




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# African Religions: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



## Synopsis

What are African religions? *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* answers this question by examining primarily indigenous religious traditions on the African continent, as well as exploring Christianity and Islam. It focuses on the diversity of ethnic groups, languages, cultures, and worldviews, emphasizing the continent's regional diversity. Olupona examines a wide range of African religious traditions on their own terms and in their social, cultural, and political contexts. For example, the book moves beyond ethnographic descriptions and interpretations of core beliefs and practices to look at how African religion has engaged issues of socioeconomic development and power relations. Olupona examines the myths and sacred stories about the origins of the universe that define ethnic groups and national identities throughout Africa. He also discusses spiritual agents in the African cosmos such as God, spirits, and ancestors. In addition to myths and deities, Olupona focuses on the people central to African religions, including medicine men and women, rainmakers, witches, magicians, and divine kings, and how they serve as authority figures and intermediaries between the social world and the cosmic realm. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* discusses a wide variety of religious practices, including music and dance, calendrical rituals and festivals, celebrations for the gods' birthdays, and rituals accompanying stages of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, elderhood, and death. In addition to exploring indigenous religions, Olupona examines the ways Islam and Christianity as outside traditions encountered indigenous African religion. He shows how these incoming faith traditions altered the face and the future of indigenous African religions as well as how indigenous religions shaped two world religions in Africa and the diaspora. Olupona draws on archaeological and historical sources, as well as ethnographic materials based on fieldwork. He shows that African religions are not static traditions, but have responded to changes within their local communities and to fluxes caused by outside influences, and spread with diaspora and migration.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jacob K. Olupona is Professor of African Religious Traditions at Harvard Divinity School, with a joint appointment as Professor of African and African American Studies in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences. A noted scholar of indigenous African religions, his books include *City of 201 Gods: Ife-Ifé in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, *Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, co-edited with Terry Rey, and *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yoruba Festivals*. In 2007, he was awarded the Nigerian National Order of Merit, one of Nigeria's most prestigious honors.

The Very Short Introductions Series of Oxford University Press offers many opportunities to expand one's thinking and experience. For example, I read and reviewed John Parker's and Richard Rathbone's short, challenging "Very Short Introduction" to African History. As a result, I became interested in pursuing a new book in the series about Africa: "African Religions: A Very Short Introduction" (2014) by Jacob Olupona. (While thinking about Olupona's book, I also heard for the first time a song, "Africa" by the rock group Toto which speaks of the fascination Africa exerts on a young man from a different culture. The song helped me understand my interest in the two "Very Short Introductions" to Africa that I have now read.) Born and raised in Nigeria, Jacob Olupona received his advanced degrees in the United States. He has written prolifically on indigenous African religions with a particular emphasis on the transmission of these religions to the African diaspora. Olupona is Professor of African Religious Traditions at Harvard Divinity School and also holds an appointment as Professor of African and African American studies at Harvard. As does the book by Parker and Rathbone, Olupona's study describes the difficulty of making generalizations about Africa and about religions in Africa given the size and diversity of the continent and its peoples and the nature of the historical record. He begins his book with a brief discussion of the historiography of the study of African religions. The goal of his short study is "to provide a fuller picture of what these traditions are and do for their practitioners in order

to inspire intellectual curiosity in readers who are encountering these traditions for the first time, while also encouraging scholars and educators to think creatively about how to introduce these traditions to their students."Olupona proceeds by offering broad observations on the subject of religion, followed by informed generalizations on African religions followed in its turn by specific examples. He notes several differences between how religion is conceived in the West on one hand and in indigenous African religions on the other hand. In the West, with Christianity, religion and politics have been separated with the Enlightenment into separate spheres, the personal, and the secular and public. Indigenous African religions tend not to make this sharp distinction between the religious and the secular. Further, Christianity and Islam, which have come to be predominant in Africa, view religion in universalist terms while indigenous African religions tend to be local and particular Olupona writes: "Religious worldviews, often unique to different ethnic groups, reflect people's identities and lie at the heart of how they relate to one another, to other people, and to the world at large.". African religions tend to be practice oriented rather than oriented to doctrine and belief. Olupona draws other distinctions and parallels between indigenous religions and religions imported to Africa throughout his study. The successive chapters of the book become increasingly more specific and move from worldview and myth in indigenous religion, to gods, ancestors, and spirits, to the role of figures such as kings, diviners, priests, and witches, to religious ceremonies and rituals, such as rituals for marriage, rites of passage and death, to the use of art, music, and dance in the service of religion. Much of the material is fascinating. It also tends to become difficult to follow in a short book as Olupona offers highly specific examples from a number of separate indigenous religious practices. The individual detail in the book tends to overshadow the broader picture, and probably necessarily so. The focus of the book is on indigenous religion. Olupona also devotes a short but learned chapter to the histories of Christianity and Islam in Africa, to the manner in which they spread, and the way in which they compete with each other in current Africa. Olupona also explores how various indigenous traditions tended to blend with Christianity or Islam, creating some unique practices in various African versions of both religions. In a final chapter, Olupona examines the continued influence of African indigenous religions in the African diaspora. He offers discussions of churches and other institutions in the United States, Britain, Ukraine, the Caribbean and elsewhere showing the spread and increasing popularity of these religions, both as practiced by sincere believers and, in some cases, as exploited by charlatans. Olupona concludes: "[I]f in our world of increasingly hyphenated and hybrid identities, it has become more challenging to say what African religion is, it has become perhaps even more challenging to say for certain what it isn't. If we look more carefully, we can find manifestations of it everywhere."Olupona's book offers a thoughtful,

detailed introduction to African religions in the scope of about 120 pages. The book fulfilled its goal of making the subject interesting to a curious reader with little prior knowledge. Readers with an interest in comparative religion will particularly enjoy this "very short introduction" to African religions. Robin Friedman

There's a basically insoluble problem facing any of these VSIs: the more effectively it communicates the complexity and interest of its subject matter, the more obvious it becomes to the reader that the book is giving a basically superficial view. This one, because of the immensity of the topic, runs into even more trouble than most. Olupona is clearly being careful not to simplify or overgeneralize, and gives a great range of information about beliefs and practices from all over the continent; but the result tends to be page after page of tantalizing descriptions, without the space to go into the purposes or meanings of particular local practices and beliefs. I don't mean to blame the author for this -- in most places, it's hard to see how it could have been done better without making a Very Long Introduction (though I do wish the chapter on Islam and Christianity in Africa had spent less space on history and more on contemporary worship). But it made the book a somewhat frustrating read.

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The author of this book, Olupona, is irrationally defensive of African religion. For instance, he actually defends belief in witchcraft. Not on its truth claims, of course. Rather, he likens it to prayer, saying they're not so different. So, he asks, who are Westerners to view the belief as harmful, irrational, etc.? He goes on to defend it further by asserting, without evidence, that African wives have more power in relationships, because husbands fear their power due to beliefs in witchcraft. So, let me get the logic straight here. The irrational belief of witchcraft (which we know encourages murder and conflict in Africa) helps counteract patriarchy, ergo, witchcraft is not so bad. If I recall correct, Olupona does point out a few of the problems with belief in witchcraft - but he downplays them while playing up any perceived benefits. The problems with African superstition don't seem to really draw his ire. His main concern, rather, is a prolonged attempt to say Westerners don't have a leg to stand on if they seek to criticize African beliefs and practices. Let me elaborate. Right off the bat he blames a substantial portion (if not all) of Africa's problems on Western colonialism. He even goes so far as to defend female genital mutilation. Yes, he defends female genital mutilation. He falsely claims that clitorectomies, the surgical removal of a young girl's clitoris, is as bad female

circumcision gets. Well, that's patently false. Infibulation, the removal of all external genitalia, is the worst, and over 8 million African women have experienced it. He also likens the clitoris to the male foreskin, and asks, who are Westerners to judge if they circumcise males? Except that's scientifically illiterate. The male foreskin is the male version of the clitoral hood, and the clitoris's male equivalent is the head of the penis. (Let me also make clear that I'm not defending male circumcision. I'm simply pointing out the numerous false claims in this book.). Olupona also attempts to make African religion appear advanced in ways that it isn't. To take one example, some Africans believed that there was a great goddess whose belly expanded and expanded until it popped--and the earth was the product of her stomach explosion. Olupona actually says something to the effect of "And notice just how similar this is to the Big Bang, which is now the scientific explanation for the origin of the cosmos" -- as if to suggest the African mythmakers had some keen insight into science or something. Sorry, not buying it. I'd also say that, if one understands astronomy, that he/she would see that this myth is not similar to the big bang at all. Olupona spends far less time than I would like discussing African animism. He discusses Christianity and Islam at great length. He (understandably) seems somewhat hostile to those religions and Westerners' attempts to spread them in Africa. He discusses African variations on Christianity, which is somewhat interesting. And, though he won't say it, these variations are basically more superstitious versions of Western Christianity. He defends this added dose of superstition, saying rather euphemistically that it helps meet "African spiritual needs," and it "makes sense to the African people." Never does he go into any explanation as to why Africans have these unique "spiritual needs" or why these variations are helpful. The book doesn't linger as long on old African belief systems as I would like--though of course that is likely due to the fact that most African religions were passed on through oral tradition. Still, I think there were probably many interesting myths that Olupona left out. I realize he was constrained, as this is a very short introduction, so here's an idea -- include more myths and spend less time railing against the West's perceived offenses. I did not buy this book to learn about why Olupona thinks the Westerners need to take a humble pill and are just as superstitious as Africans. Rather, I bought it to learn about African myths. I give it two stars because it did this to some extent.

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