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## Traditional Religious Beliefs of Tropical Africa Peoples in the Collections of Kazan University Ethnographic Museum

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### Abstract

The interest regarding to African cultural values has intensified in all countries of the African continent in the second half of the twentieth - early twenty-first century. The aim of the article is to analyze the traditional religious beliefs of Tropical Africa peoples. The interdisciplinary approach that allows us to consider social realities in the context of historical and cultural changes has become the leading one to the study of this problem. The article shows the role of religion in African society. They considered the system of traditional beliefs and cults, the main forms of religious beliefs, as well as the diversity of religious attributes and its use on the basis of materials from the museum collection of the Ethnographic Museum of the University. The materials of the article can be useful for ethnologists, anthropologists, museum staff and everyone who is interested in this topic.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, Religion, Museum, Beliefs, Cults, Africa.

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## **Introduction**

Religion plays an essential role in any culture. But in Africa, where religious beliefs permeate a person's entire life, religion is of particular importance. African religion combines not only sacred moments, beliefs and rituals, but also morals, customs, social institutions (Traditional cultures of African peoples: past and present, 2000). Traditional cults and beliefs are the core of African cultures and in many ways they are the main principle of life for most Africans. This circumstance determines the relevance of the topic under study.

In African society, religion accompanied a person from birth to death: in the process of passing special initiation rites, during the transfer from one age group to another, during the birth ceremony, weddings, funerals, veneration ceremonies for deceased ancestors, transfer ceremonies and others. It is customary to understand religious beliefs, beliefs, cults and rituals of African peoples that have been formed over time under traditional African religions (Shpazhnikov, 1981). Traditional African religions are prevalent mainly south of the Sahara. Although there is no exact statistical data, it can be argued that their adherents were more than half of this vast region population, i.e. tens of millions of people.

Since the 19th century, the colonialists and missionaries began to implement not only European methods of production, clothing, household items, but also the views on the world, enlightenment, and, of course, they tried to introduce their religion and culture. Nevertheless, the spread of European religious views on the territory of Tropical Africa has not provided serious results. It should be taken into account that among those who officially considered himself to Christians and Muslims, there were many "hidden" followers of traditional African religions (Sharevskaya, 1964).

In this article, it is proposed to consider the system of traditional beliefs and cults, the basic forms of religious beliefs, as well as the diversity of religious attributes and its use on the basis of materials from the museum collection of the Ethnographic Museum at Kazan University.

## **Methodological Framework**

The methodological base of the research involves the consideration of historical facts and ethnographic realities in the interrelationship, development and critical evaluation. The work uses general historical methods: problem-chronological, historical-comparative and cultural-anthropological. The work is also based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods: discourse and content analysis, the biographical method related to the study of African scholar activities, and the method of applied visual analysis that presupposes the stage of description, reconstruction and social-cultural interpretation. The corps of sources includes the items from the collection of the Ethnographic Museum at the Kazan (Volga region) Federal University.

## **Literature Review**

A great contribution to the development of African people study was made by the well-known scientist F. Ratzel (1904) in his two-volume work "People studies". The works on general ethnography are also important, for example, the work by S.A. Arutyunov (1989) "Peoples and cultures: Development and interaction".

Also the works of art critics are of great importance: V.B. Mirimanov (2014) "Primitive and traditional art", E.S. Makaryan (1969) "Essays on the theory of culture"; as well as the works of religious scholars - S.A. Tokarev (1990), J. Fraser (1980) and others.

It should be noted that historiography describes the life of African society. For example, F. Ratzel describes what he saw, the scholars of a later period create their works on the basis of traveler notes and memories. And only from the middle of the twentieth century, classifications began to appear on the problem under study, typological features emerge, etc. For example, in the second half of the 20th century, the ethnographic essays of the peoples of the world in 18 volumes, prepared by the Institute of Ethnography named after N.N. Miklouho-Maclay at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in the book *Peoples of Africa* (1954) the classification of Tropical Africa peoples on a linguistic basis is presented.

Due to the peculiarities of a source complex, one of the trends of historiography is the study of collection development concerning the Ethnographic Museum of Kazan University: the works by E.P. Busygin (2002), Ye.G. Gushchina (2013), which give the idea of the formation and the content of museum collections.

The attitude to traditional African religions is ambiguous and quite contradictory. A number of scientists (B. Olya, S. Lvova) are wary of materials about the traditional religions of Africa, which are written outside the continent. Also science has the opinion that traditional cults bring only harm and contribute to the stagnation of the population. But it is also believed that traditional African religions need to be studied very seriously.

### **Discussion and Results**

An important place in traditional African religions was occupied by the cult of ancestors, developed in close relation with animistic and fetishistic ideas. Researchers consider African culture a classic example of ancestor worship (*Traditional cultures of African peoples: past and present*, 2000). It was developed among agricultural and cattle-breeding peoples.

It took different forms among different peoples. But there was something in common concerning the veneration of ancestors: the belief that the dead continued to live, but in a different state - like spirits. They could exist invisibly, preserve their former appearance, "migrate" into certain animals, plants, etc.

It was widely believed that the spirits of their ancestors often preferred to stay in their native places or nearby, participated in the earthly affairs of their living relatives, helped them in everyday life, made personal and collective decisions, warned against wrong and bad deeds, and even punished them (Yablochkov, 1958).

There was a kind of ancestral spirit hierarchy, the top of which was usually occupied by those who were considered as the ancestors. Spirits of family, clan, community, tribe and people ancestors were distinguished (mythical ancestor is the primary founder), as well as those who died a natural or violent death - because of age, diseases, accidents, hunting, fighting, etc. (*Traditional cultures of African peoples: past and present*, 2000).

The ceremonies of ancestor veneration were the most vivid and significant component of traditional African religions. This, for example, is the Egungun festival, one of the oldest cults of the Yoruba tribes, which was held at the beginning of the agricultural work in order to beg for a good harvest, the festival of Oro departed commemoration, the funeral ceremonies of the Mmo among Igbo people. As a rule, drumming, ritual batons, masks were used to conduct ancestor worship ceremonies (*ibid.*).

Animism was the most popular form of traditional African beliefs i.e. the belief in souls and spirits, their multiplicity, totemism is the belief in the existence of a special kind of connection between a group of people (a genus, a tribe) and a certain kind of animals, plants, and fetishism is the worship of inanimate objects, or fetishes, both of natural origin, and manufactured especially. There is no consensus among scholars about the following thing: which of these forms is a primary one (Choros, 2003).

The manifestations of animism in Africa are diverse. In the beliefs of some peoples (Yoruba, Lodzy, Shilluk, Eve) the souls of their ancestors lived in the sky, others (Igbo, Ibibio, Nyaruanda) believed that they lived underground. The dead could take new forms, incarnate in plants, animals or move into the living members of their families and genera.

The souls of the deceased were revered, they were feared, because it was believed that the well-being and the luck of the living are largely dependent on them; to anger the souls of the dead meant to bring misfortune upon oneself. This attitude to the dead gave rise to a variety of forms, but with a single basis - respect and fear - burial rites. The Bushmen (South Africa) believed that after the funeral of a deceased, his double appears - *gaua* (literally "the creature that died"), indistinguishable from the deceased one neither by appearance nor by the way of life. However, tired of the earthly life, *gaua* lies down in the grave. In order to appease the soul of a deceased one, his bow and quiver with arrows were left near him, after which the relatives left this place for a long time. Part of the heterogeneous, indigenous inhabitants of South - West Africa believed that the evil forces of the soul are hidden in a certain worm living in the spine of a deceased one, therefore the spine was broken before burial (Turner, 1983). The people of Tugen (Kenya) did not bury the dead in the ground and did not burn them, as is customary in many African countries, but carried them away far into the savannah. A deceased one was laid on his side. If a corpse remained untouched after 7 days, it meant that the spirit of the deceased had not yet left the earth. If the wild beasts ate it, he was given a wake (Traditional cultures of African peoples: past and present, 2000).

Totem (the term is borrowed from the language of one of the North American tribes) was understood as a species of animals or plants (less often - a lake, a river), which is a symbol for blood relatives, especially for the generic group. Totems personified the connection of a man with living nature (Shpazhnikov, 1981).

The traces of totemism appear in the left or still preserved generic names. Totemism is associated with the myths about ancestors, which have the images of a semi-plant - a half-animal (Fig. 2) (Olya, 1976).

Fetishism is another of the main religious forms. In Africa, fetishism is spread in the form of a cult of deified material objects - from wooden tables, bars, shells, stones, trees, rocks to the objects of traditional African art (statues and figurines of people and animals, various decorations, masks, drums), all kinds of talismans and amulets.

Scholars distinguish several conventional groups among the whole variety of African fetishes. These fetishes are intended for families and kinds; for communities, tribes and tribal unions; so-called national or generic fetishes: idols-statues, figurines, masks, drums, tomtames and, finally, personal fetishes (all kinds of amulets made from various materials - leather, wood, etc.) (Traditional cultures of African peoples: the past and Present, 2000).

There was a taboo in almost all traditional religions of Africa - a ritual prohibition imposed due to the fear of punishments by supernatural forces because of people actions, words and deeds. Taboo literally permeated the daily life of almost all peoples of Africa.

A taboo can include the prohibition to hunt totem animals and eat them, as well as totemic plants. Some peoples had the taboo on crocodiles, lions, bulls, blue antelopes - they could not be killed, and according to the beliefs of some tribes it was prohibited to look at them (*ibid.*).

There were prohibitions concerning funeral rites and marriage. In some peoples, men and women of one totemic group were forbidden to marry each other. A woman of Ashanti people was obliged to observe not only her tribal taboos, but also the taboo of her husband after marriage. The Hottentots had a temporary taboo on the communication with the relatives of the deceased (*ibid.*).

The fear of breaking taboos led to the search for protection from them. Ashanti had a widespread cult of human fetishes, defending from evil witchcraft or rescuing from death, if a fetish owner violated a taboo (Lvova, 1984).

Thus, the system of cults developed independently - the rules, prohibitions gave rise to the ways of protection from them. One of the key provisions of the religious worldview of Africans is the belief that everything is interconnected in terrestrial and extraterrestrial life, that after the death of a body "unearthly" life continues and a person's soul is even able to return back, to the earthly world, but in a different form, in another quality.

Religious representations do not exist by themselves, they are closely related to social practices - cult ritual actions aimed at specific goals. The ceremonial side of all religions is closely related with religious attributes fully represented in the funds of the Ethnographic Museum at Kazan University (EMU, the Africa Foundation).

The fund has a large number of statuettes-idols, for example:

1. The wooden idol from South Africa: a female figure with bent knees, a straight body, a relatively large head. Drawing an analogy with other peoples at different stages of their development, in particular their religious beliefs, it can be said that some scholars distinguish a number of similar idols, through which the goddess of fertility is usually represented.
2. A wooden rough-worked idol of a kneeling woman from West Africa.
3. Two wooden idols depicting men. One of them has a sword in his right hand and a skull in his left hand. He has a flat wide circle on his head. The other one is with a sword in his hand. These idols symbolize the deity of war in the hierarchy of African deities, have their own name in each tribe.
4. Wooden idol: two figures of solid wood, one has a belt of beads.
5. The head depicting a two-faced creature is placed on a stand illustrating the neck. There is no data about the exact origin of this idol, but there was a similar deity in the African hierarchy of the gods. For example, the Yoruba tribe (West Africa) has faith in the twin brothers Egungun and Oro. They were depicted, as a rule, together, they symbolize the spirits of their ancestors, they asked for grace and help through their ancestors (Traditional cultures of African peoples: the past and Present, 2000).
6. Wooden figure of the head, standing on a woven reed circle. The idol obviously has a ritual meaning, since the material of manufacture was also human skin with hair. Presumably, this is either the idol of the god, to whom the human sacrifice was brought, or the image of the deceased leader, which was common in South Africa (Linguiston, 2009).

Thus, despite the differences in the names of deities, the statuettes from various parts of Tropical Africa have similarities. And one can identify idols from western, central and southern Africa in the funds. This is primarily the material of manufacture - wood. Secondly, this is the way of depicting - basically a deity is pictured on his knees or with half-bent legs, or only his head is presented.

The differences can be seen in the thoroughness of the treatment (from rough processing to the working out of the smallest details).

Personal fetishes are also widespread in Africa. Most often they were received or bought from sorcerers, healers and visionaries, who sanctified fetishes and were responsible for their effectiveness. Fetishes were called upon to help their owners, guard against enemies, diseases, evil eye and other misfortunes. Some fetishes could act independently, without the mediation of sorcerers, but only those fetishes were strong, which obeyed them. Fetishes are represented by the following samples:

1. A fetish of a bird's bone with a fringe of threads. A personal fetish to protect against disease, failure.
2. An amulet of bird claws, drilled and bound with hard hair. Brought from South Africa. It was worn around the neck to protect the owner.
3. A leather amulet with embossed signs and an amulet made of animal canines with a copper ring. The material of manufacture, in particular copper, is not so often found in the manufacture of amulets, and the thoroughness of the decoration indicates the belonging of these fetishes to a noble person.
4. Hunting fetish of ivory.

In addition to fetishes the items for certain rituals are common. For example, the wands for the ceremony of ancestor veneration. They vary, depending on the area of production, from very simple, carved from wood with pointed ends to difficult ones in manufacture: an upper end has a round head; there is the serpent in the middle, wrapped in a spiral around the shaft, so that its body changes its direction three times; the head from above, the tail from below.

For holidays, during which they ask the ancestors of a good harvest, cattle, a good attitude of the gods, ritual dances are performed in masks in order to get closer to what they are asking for or symbolizing. For example, the Dance mask depicts the head of a cow with its horns bent forward and pressed, and the ears protruding back; its eyes, ears, muzzle are black due to burning.

The items belonging to a shaman are also important. For example, a wooden idol of a man, connected to a smoking pipe. Presumably, it is an attribute of a shaman for immersion in trance.

Relying on the works of a number of African scholars (B. Olya, S. Lvova), it can be said that the items presented in the collections were distributed not only in the local region, from which they were brought (for example, from Cameroon, Sudan, Somalia), but typical for total, large area under study concerning the distribution of traditional religious beliefs of African peoples. Moreover, scholars draw parallels with some peoples of South and South-East Asia who, at a certain stage of their development, by the methods and forms of idol, mask and other items of ritual attributes making, by the way they are ornamented and by the meaningful loading of these objects were similar to the attributes of Tropical Africa peoples in some degree.

## **Conclusion**

The collections of the Ethnographic Museum of Kazan University represent the main types of religious attributes from the peoples of Tropical Africa, each of which has a great semantic value. Based on the materials from the collections of the Ethnographic Museum at Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, one can reconstruct the image of religious attributes of Tropical Africa peoples. The picture presented here will represent the collection of typical idols, statuettes, amulets and the objects for carrying out certain rituals clearly.

This article allows to reconstruct the traditional African religious beliefs of the 19th century on the basis of the Ethnographic Museum collections at Kazan Federal University. The results of the research can be useful for ethnographers, historians, museum staff and anyone interested in this topic.

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