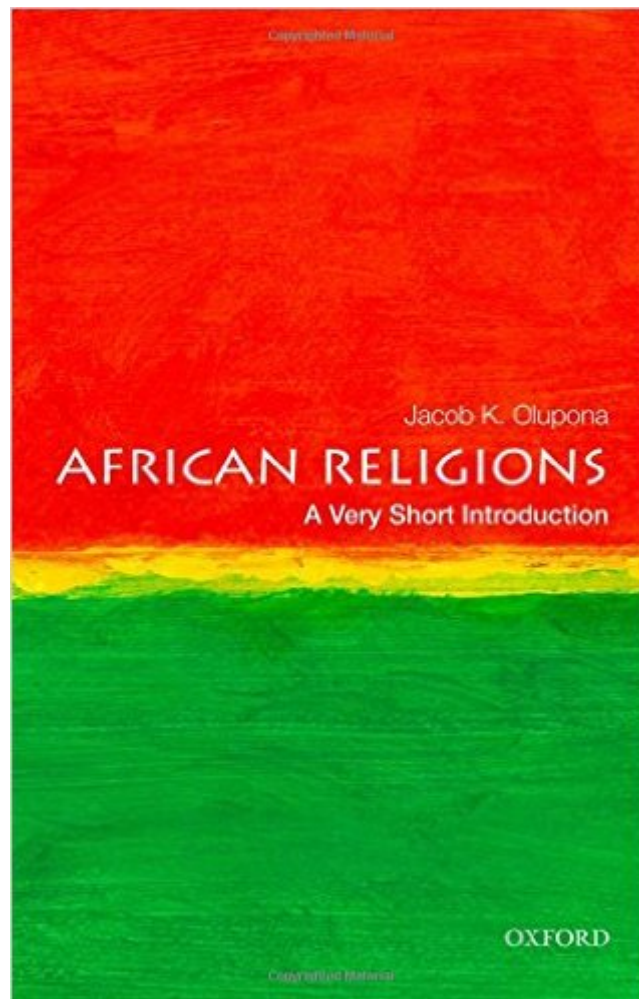


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African Religions: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



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

Series: Very Short Introductions

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (March 14, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199790582

ISBN-13: 978-0199790586

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.7 x 4.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #208,881 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #31 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Buddhism #53 in Books > History > World > Religious > Buddhism #55 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Agnosticism

Customer Reviews

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 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 of 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 as 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.

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