



FACT FILE: RELIGION AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

Understanding the religious beliefs of others is a vital element to communicating with all citizens of the world.

There are only 3 places in the world that have 100% followers of a certain faith.

- Pitcairn Island an island in the Pacific, which has 46 inhabitants
- The Holy See in the Vatican City (where all 480 inhabitants are Roman Catholics) and
- Mount Athos (a Greek mountain where only Greek Orthodox men can go!)

So with the exception of these 3 places, anywhere that you go in the world, you will meet people with different faiths from each other, let alone from you!

It is impossible to say how many religions there are in the world, as it depends on how you define religion e.g. faith groups etc. But at a loose estimate there are

10,000 distinct religions,

150 of them having more than 1 million followers.

If you look at denominations, there are 33,830 Christian denominations alone, including the largest: Catholicism, and the smallest: Shakers.

Current Events

Pope John Paul II died on the 2nd April 2005. He was the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

The church then elected a new Pope, on the 18th April 2005.

So why is this important?

Pope John Paul II did a lot of good work by getting together with different religions. He apologized to the Jews for the part that the Christians played in the Holocaust and started a dialogue with Muslim leaders.

But Pope John Paul II is also known for his views on contraception. He forbade all use of contraception for all Catholics. For many in Africa, this meant that those with HIV/AIDS were told that they could not use condoms to protect others from transmission. Pope John Paul II believed that sex should only be practiced within marriage for the purpose of having children.

Therefore, if you were not married you should not have sex. Should you have contracted HIV/AIDS you should abstain from having sex (not have any) rather than use condoms to protect others. Many people are looking to the Vatican City to see who will be elected to the Pontiff, and whether they will have different views on contraception.

Election result

On the 19th April 2005, the 'Conclave' (group of 115 Cardinals from all over the world) chose their new Pope. He will be the head of a church of 1.1 billion people.
1 in 6 of the entire globe!

Popes in the Roman Catholic church can only be MEN!

Joseph Ratzinger

But you won't know him under that name any more. As Pope he had to choose a new name. Quite often they take the name of a previous Pope and add a number to it. This time, many thought he might choose Pope John Paul III, after the Pope that has just died. But he decided to go with:

Pope Benedict XVI

That means he is the 16th Pope with that name (he is the 265th since St. Peter became the first Pope). The 15th Benedict was the Pope during the 1st World War.

What do some people want him to change?

- The Catholic rules on use of condoms.
- The ordination of women (meaning that they could become priests).
- The marriage of priests (currently a priest has to be celibate, which means he has no sex at all - ever).

What will this mean for the future?

There is no telling what kind of Pope he will be. He is 78 years old, so some people say he is a 'stop gap', which means they believe it will be some time before the church is ready for change, so as an old Pope they do not believe he will last long and then the time for change might be better. Others say that he is a gifted theologian (the study of religion) and you cannot rule out that he will make changes.

Traditional Beliefs

Approximately 9% of Africans (this includes the North African region) have retained their traditional religious belief systems, while Christians number 49% and Muslims 41%. 1% of are of other faiths including Jewish, Hindu, Sikh BahaI, Buddhist.

Christianity was first established in North Africa during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD and formed some of the earliest Christian communities in the world. Slowly Christianity spread west and east before retreating under the influence of Islam. However, it was during the 19th and 20th century European colonial period that the most accelerated process of change occurred in the form of conversion to Christianity with the arrival of missionaries.

Islam arrived in Africa in the 7th century AD and spread down the East coast of Africa during the 8th century. Intermarriage between people from the Middle East and Africa produced the Swahili culture whose influence is widely felt today. Foreign trade and a distinct architectural style are features of Swahili culture. Kiswahili is the official language of both Tanzania and Kenya.

Some Africans, whilst practicing non-traditional or more recently introduced religions such as

Case Study: Nigeria

Nigeria is a country with many different religions. The majority of people are Muslims, but there is also a large Christian community and many different ethnic religious communities.

The Ibo make up 17% of Nigeria's people. Most Ibo reside in the southeast, but they have long been spread throughout the nation as shopkeepers, clerks, and government officials. Christianity now dominates among the Ibo, but local religions remain strong.

The Ibo are among the most literate peoples in Africa, largely because of a strong tradition of attending Christian missionary schools after the British conquest of Iboland in the early 1900s. Many Ibo have adopted Christianity, but they also continue to practice some of the older religious traditions, such as ancestor worship and the belief in herbal cures. Between 8 –19 mill adherents depending on sources.

The Igbo, who live in Iboland (Southern Nigeria) make up 5.5 million people. The Igbo religion is a tribal religion in the sense that its major tenets are shared by all Igbo-speaking people, but in matters of participation, it remains locally organized and most forms of religious worship is within the extended family.

Christianity, still retain some or all of the customs associated with their traditional religious beliefs. These beliefs are not in themselves static and have evolved over thousands of years and are still evolving.

The study of African religion by Western observers has primarily taken place over the last 100 years.

African Society and Religion has evolved over thousands of years and is still evolving and changing...

During the 1950s anthropologists began to describe African religion practices in greater depth and in a more positive way. They refuted earlier claims that African religions were inferior to Christianity.

The word for religion is not found in most vernacular African languages and as such religion exists as part of everyday life and not separate from it.

Many misconceptions about African religion and society have arisen both with anthropologists and missionaries: for instance many missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries felt that they were bringing God to Africa. In fact most African religions already worshipped one God.

African culture is rich and diverse. Did you know that: there are over 1000 tribal groups in Africa? and associated with these groups, many religions are practiced?

Respect for deities This is not the same as worship. Lesser gods or deities often have the same function as angels in Christianity.

Reverence for sacred places For instance the modern Bushmen of the Kalahari revere the moon, which comes into their speculations about death.

Reverence for ancestral spirits Some African people believe that the souls of their forefathers are closer to God because they are dead. Ancestors serve as mediators between the living and the divine

God

Although it is impossible to generalise, most African religious practitioners worship only ONE God. The word for God depends on the region where they live and the tribal group to which they belong.

Witchcraft and Sorcery

The belief in witchcraft is known throughout the world. In some parts of Africa this belief is still very much part of everyday life. To many people in Togo, West Africa, belief in witchcraft is common, even if they are practicing Christians or Muslims:

Some of the Kabye people of Togo believe:

- That witches meet at night and fly to their meeting places like birds. Others believe that they attend their meetings on owls, antelopes, vultures and leopards.
 - A witch can be either male or female.
 - A witch may possess both good and evil spirits.
- Witchcraft can be acquired through birth: the foetus in a mother's womb can be removed and a witch spirit given to it. The baby is replaced in the womb.
- A disease caused by a witch can only be cured by tribal medicine men not at the local hospital.
 - That they need to wear charms to protect themselves against witches.



Customs and Rituals

Traditional African Religions often include a set of inter-related ceremonies and values which may be at variance with Western Ways of thinking but are often dynamic and life-affirming, but sometimes bring up human right issues.

Body art

Usually has some sort of social or religious significance in traditional African societies and can include:

- tattoos, body piercing and painting sometimes with henna
- elaborate jewellery eg the Masai people
- colourful clothes eg in West Africa

Initiation and rites of passage activities, rituals and ceremonies: these include ceremonies that clearly mark the transition from childhood to adulthood.

For instance Masai male children traditionally spend many months in the bush or open countryside away from their families learning and performing skills enabling them to defend their families. In the

past this would have included killing a lion but the practice is now outlawed.

After the ceremonies are complete a Masai male child becomes a Warrior.

Male and female Circumcision: this practice is often associated with initiation. Female Circumcision, often known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is considered by some people to be barbaric and contrary to human rights and should be universally outlawed.

It usually involves removal of the clitoris and surgical change to other parts of female genitalia. Male Circumcision involves the removal of the foreskin.

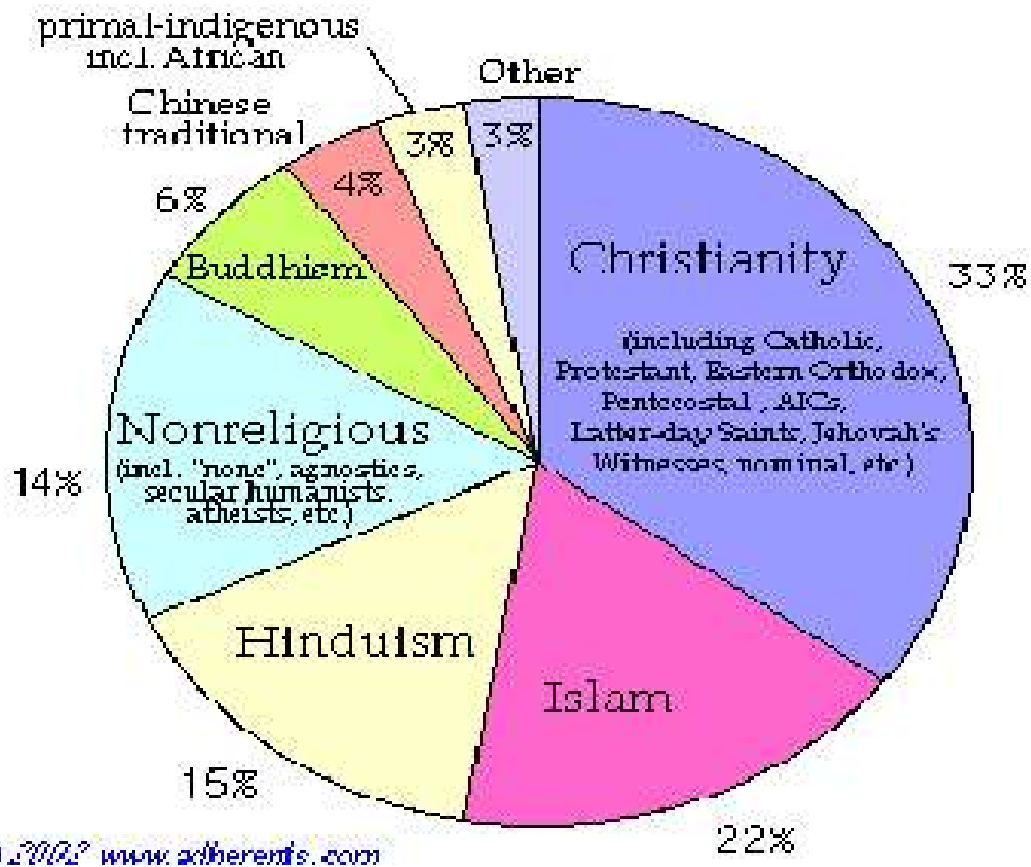
Often these practices are carried out by untrained practitioners using unsterile equipment, therefore increasing the risk of the spread of disease including HIV/Aids.

Amnesty International has created an in-depth web-site about the human rights aspect of the culturally sensitive issue of FGM.

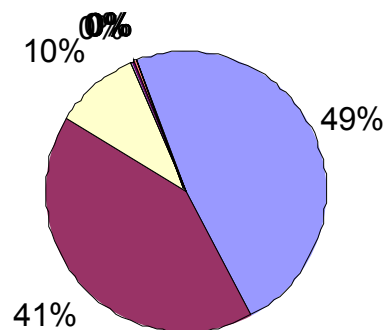
Male and female roles in society: many women in African society still play a traditional role in home making and bringing up children. In rural areas this often involves collecting water from many miles away and tending to the farm and animals.

Girls and boys often receive no formal education. For example only 2% of Masai girls receive any formal education.

Statistics

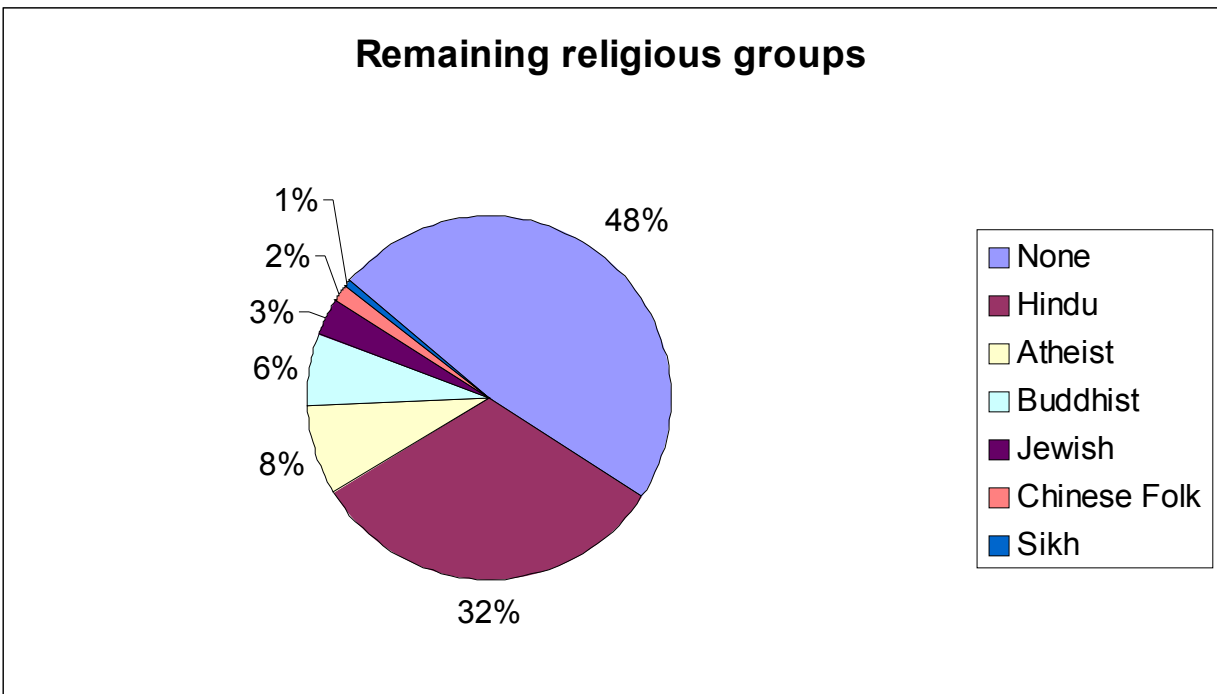


Distribution of Religion in Africa



- Christian
- Muslim
- Ethnic
- None
- Hindu
- Atheist
- Buddhist
- Jewish
- Chinese Folk
- Sikh

Religious Group	Number of followers
Christian	348000000
Muslim	300000000
Ethnic	73000000
None	3000000
Hindu	2000000
Atheist	500000
Buddhist	400000
Jewish	200000
Chinese Folk	100000
Sikh	40000
Total	727,240,000



Glossary

Monotheism: the belief that there is only one God. Most traditional African religions are monotheistic.

Rites of passage: a series of rituals and ceremonies marking an important transition from one period of life to another eg in the UK your 18th birthday is an important one because it allows you to vote. In some parts of Africa rituals can take place over many months. For example the Masai people of East Africa have an extended ritual marking the transition from being a child to becoming a warrior.

Monogamy: The practice of having only one wife or partner.

Polygamy: the practice of having more than one spouse. This is common practice in some tribes in Africa. For example Masai men often have more than one wife.

Polytheism: the belief that there is more than one god.

Initiation ceremonies: these ceremonies often form part of rites of passage, for example, male and female circumcision is considered part of initiation into adulthood in some African societies.

Research Links

<http://www.adherents.com/> A Superb website, gives statistics of adherents of each religion by region and by specific religions. Explains the basics of all major religion, with facts, figures and links to religious organisations.

<http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/Statistics.htm> Statistics on the number of adherents of African traditional religions as a percentage of the total percentage of each population.

http://www.classbrain.com/art_cr/publish/Cat_index_501.shtml Breakdown of different countries according to their religions.

The Oslo Coalition is an organisation that has members from a large variety of religious and non-religious organisations. Their goal is to further religious tolerance and they are trying to work on a programme for teaching religious tolerance in schools. The site is a little technical, but worthwhile if you are interested in this topic, as they are taking the lead internationally.

<http://www.oslocoalition.org/index.html>

In August 1998 a gathering of 150 different religious groups and states agreed the 'Oslo Declaration on Religious Tolerance'. Click here to read what it said.

http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/oslo_declaration.html

DISCUSSION POINTS: RELIGION AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

How does the study of a religious belief system that may not be your own help your understanding of what it means to be human?

Are there any similarities in the Kabye people's belief about witches with other beliefs about witches?

Describe some positive and negative effects of social change on African culture.

What effect did 19th and 20th century European colonialism have on traditional African religions and customs?