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ARTIFACTS

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Polytheism in Early Africa

Tighe McCandless

Tighe McCandless is alumni right now. He graduated from the University of Missouri in December 2014. He was born in Wildwood, MO and lived in St. Louis. His major is history, and he is working at Mizzou. He wrote about this topic because it was part of his class study.

Much of the subject matter regarding religion in early Africa seems alien to someone living in the modern Western world. Everything has its own explanation and cause in nature. We still fear things like the flu, earthquakes, or illnesses, but we know now that they have natural rather than supernatural causes. People acting strangely are the result of malicious spirits, our ancestors live somewhere beyond our own shores and the gods must frequently be placated to keep them happy. It was a fundamentally different worldview than what the West believes today.

The world has evolved since then. Even if it would be a mistake to take the West's view of the world and apply it to every other culture and faith as universally applicable, what has happened in the intervening centuries has drastically changed how we see things. Scientists are now the go-to source for answers rather than clergy, and it is considered the final word on things. This has been spread, either through trade or previous conquest, to the entire world by Europe. Yet not everyone was willing to make such a judgment call for a long time. The prevalence of indigenous beliefs—even in the face of the monotheism so favored by the West—shows that native thought has a strong tenacity to it. It can evolve and even thrive where some might assume that it would simply die off in favor of 'superior' ideas; something that must have affected our ancestors as they marched across the continent of Africa, settling in new regions and creating religious experiences around that, such as yam deities. One of the best examples to see the perseverance of faith is in art.

This continuity between the past and present was on full display at the University of Missouri Museum of Art and Archaeology. The piece that I looked at was one from the Yoruba people in modern day Nigeria, probably made sometime in the first half of the 20th century, which was donated by collector Edward Merrin. It is a deceptively simple design: four humanoid heads (two males and two females), lacking appendages, made out of wood and dressed in clothing made from cowry shells and leather strips which also connect them to one another. These sorts of idols were not special, however; the trickster figure and god of chaos Eshu is one of the main, primordial gods of the Yoruba people and this

was a frequent way to represent him and his other *orisha* – gods that, interestingly, are “maintained and kept in existence by the attention of humans” (Barber, 1981, p. 724), an idea that recurs in western African religious thought. Eshu himself is a trickster god considered to be “an essentially protective, benevolent spirit” who functions as “a messenger between heaven and earth” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).

A major difference between Western and Yoruba and other early African religions is a way of humanizing its divine figures. The god portrayed in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is aloof and unknowable, except for broad concepts (like ‘merciful’ or ‘vengeful’). To the Yoruba, though, as we can see with the representation of Eshu, this is not true. For many early polytheistic societies, the gods behaved almost exactly like people do. In this sense, one can see how stories told are in a sense highly relatable—everyone is subject to feelings of jealousy or anger, for example, and if the gods reflect how we are on earth it sets an example for the ‘proper’ sort of behavior expected in the culture that someone finds themselves in. Such things also would’ve been done in an oral tradition, ensuring that elements of them would endure but change in little ways over time.

One of the most important elements that the idols dedicated to Eshu also show is the free mixing of what sociologist Emile Durkheim would’ve called the sacred (religious) and the profane (secular) (Christiano, Swatos & Kivisto, 2008, p. 18). Cowry shells, an important form of currency in many parts of Africa in the past—right up until the arrival of Europeans – are used to adorn the figures, as stated by the plaque available at MU’s Museum of Art and Archaeology. At this point, in a sense, they cease to be a currency and act more as a part of a distinctly holy nature. The past is alive and well in these situations because the gods still take an active role in human affairs all the time so whatever people might think about things, it should be put aside to honor those beings who aid them every day.

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