

History and Religion

History of the Anlo-Eve People

The *Eve* people of West Africa live primarily in coastal regions of southeastern Ghana and southern Togo, divided by a border established by Western leaders for political rather than cultural reasons. These regions are collectively known as Eveland. Among the several autonomous districts of southern Eveland, the *Anlo* district is the most populous and influential, often the focus of Western-style research on the *Eve*.

The *Anlo-Eve* came to their present home in southeastern Ghana by a long series of migrations through what is now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Oral tradition suggests their original home may have been as far away as the Sudan, but these legends are very old and sometimes contradictory. Each migration seems to have been forced by a sudden turn of events which proved unfavorable to the ancestral *Eve*; wars, persecution, over-population, inadequate land, famine and the quest for adventure are among the probable causes.

By 1600 the *Eve* had settled in the city of Ijotsie in what is now southern Togo, where they were treated well and prospered for about seventy years. But a change in the local leadership brought more persecution, and eventually the *Eve* were forced to stage a daring escape from the walled city of Ijotsie. Legends of the *Eve* ordeal at Ijotsie are strikingly similar to Biblical accounts of the Jews in Egypt; both tell of a short period of prosperity, a new king who inflicted hardships, a heroic leader who managed to intimidate the hostile king, a daring escape, and a long journey to a new home.

From Ijotsie the *Eve* split into several groups and traveled west. By the late 17th century they had come to settle the coastal territory of Eveland. They were never again forced to flee from oppression, but their struggles were far from over. Their new home was situated along the Gold Coast, a region of West Africa where the natural balance of power between ethnic groups had been seriously disrupted by the presence of European settlement, trade and colonization. In particular, the human slave trade had already introduced economic forces which would devastate inter-tribal relations in the region, not to mention millions of human lives.

Of the several tribes of *Eve* who settled in the Gold Coast, the *Anlo* were regarded as the most war-like during this period of history. They had settled near the coast where slave raiding and trading were heaviest. The *Anlo* found themselves drawn into continuous wars, skirmishes and petty disputes with their new African neighbors, and later with Danish and British traders and military forces in the area. They fought for territory, plunder, slaves, fishing grounds, and in defense of their settlements. At one point even north and south Eveland were drawn into opposing camps, resulting in an *Eve* civil war.

For the next 200 years, their struggle continued until the *Ahlo* were finally defeated and resigned themselves to British rule in the late 19th century. After becoming a crown colony in 1874, the Gold Coast remained relatively peaceful and prosperous. The *Ahlo* warriors set aside their weapons of war to become fishermen, weavers, farmers, and traders; they had finally found a peaceful home. In 1957, the Gold Coast gained independence from British rule and became the modern state of Ghana.

Ahlo Towns and Military Divisions

For the *Ahlo*, the 250 or so years preceding the 20th century were a time of constant danger and military confrontation. This war-like past is reflected strongly in their contemporary communities and traditions.

As the *Ahlo* settled new territory they would always do so with military expediency in mind. In every major *Ahlo* township, three fighting divisions are represented: *Lashibi*, *Adotri*, and *Woe*. These hereditary divisions were originally established for purposes of military precision, representing the right (or east), center, and left (or west) wings of the battlefield. They enabled any town to be instantly mobilized and coordinated for war. Each division was a distinct community with its own sense of identity. Each carried out its duties with a fierce sense of determination and pride. If a battle was lost because a flank gave way, the responsible division would be deeply humiliated by the defeat.

Today the *Ahlo* live in peace with their neighbors, so the nature of these divisions has become political rather than military. Although modern *Ahlo* no longer engage in tribal warfare, the same sort of patriotic competition between neighboring divisions still exists and plays a vital role in *Ahlo* society. This competition is now expressed primarily through participation in community *dance-drumming* activities.

Religion in West Africa

African songs can't be discussed without some understanding of traditional African religious practice, because virtually all aspects of life in Africa are imbued with spirituality. Our Western concept of religion is so very different (and in some cases so inflexible) that I'll start with a discussion of what African religion is *not* in order to address some common misconceptions:

- Religion in Africa is *not* something reserved for a certain time or place, or a last resort to engage only in times of crisis. In fact, there is often no formal distinction drawn between sacred and secular, religious and non-religious, spiritual and material. In many African languages there is no word for religion, because a person's life is a total embodiment of his or her philosophy.
- Traditional African religious practices are *not* exclusive in the way we are used to in the West (although it is true that some sects are secretive to non-initiates). Individuals commonly participate in several distinct forms of worship, and they are not thought to conflict in any way - rather they are considered cumulative means of achieving the same result, which is a better quality of life.

- In Judeo-Christian theology, it is assumed that the same spiritual connection with one God will work for everybody, but African religions don't work that way. Africans call on various deities in an attempt to influence their lives, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The methods of worship which work for one individual may not work for another, because results depend on building personal relationships with particular deities over time.
- When people grow old and die in our part of the world, it is a process of gradual detachment and finally leaving forever. The dead are believed to move on to a distant place where we no longer can reach them; they cease to interact with the physical world and in time we forget them. In Africa, quite the opposite is true. As people age they are accorded more and more deference and respect. The deceased continue to play an active role in family and community life, and if anything become *more* respected and influential because of their deceased status.

Ritual and Cosmology

Sacred rituals are an integral part of daily African life. They are interwoven with every aspect of human endeavor, from the profound to the mundane. From birth to death, every transition in a individual's life is marked by some form of ritual observance. In a practical sense, these ubiquitous rituals are at the heart of religious practice in Africa. They are the means by which individuals nurture relationships with ancestors and other divinities.

What motivates this extreme devotion to ritual in daily life? How do people maintain a high level of integration between the spiritual and material, the sacred and practical? The answer lies largely in the West African concept of how the natural world works, the physical and spiritual relationship between man and the universe.

In this view, the universe consists of dynamic forces which are constantly influencing each other. Humans (both living and dead), animals, vegetables and minerals all possess this vital force in varying amounts. The supernatural entities which can benefit or hinder the endeavors of mankind are also composed of these natural forces, but to enlist their aid the human component is considered especially vital. In a sense, each divinity is created and empowered by the concentration and devotion of the worshiper, whose own life force combines with that of, say, an animal or a river to bring the deity into power. If there is no human effort, there is no god, and thus no chance to improve the quality of life.

In *Eve* mythology there is a supreme God called *Mawuga Kitikata*, the Great and Overall God. This entity is too remote and inaccessible to be of practical importance in daily life and so is not worshipped directly. There are numerous other spirits, deities and agents which act as intermediaries on behalf of mankind, and which are worshipped directly because they have direct influence over the affairs of man. Sometimes these agents are worshipped symbolically in the form of natural objects such as a stones or rivers; in light of the previous paragraph, however, you can see that the Hollywood notion of a simple-minded native praying to a statue or a rock tells us more about our own misconceptions than about the way Africans experience the world.

So to an African, everything in this world and beyond is explained in spiritual terms; consequently, nothing happens that is not interpreted as some form of divine intervention. Gods and deceased ancestors require the proper respectful observances in order that they might maintain a benevolent interest in the affairs of mankind, and thus lend a helping hand when called upon to do so. The more divinities that a person can call upon in prayer, the better his or her chances of success. For example, imagine yourself running into trouble and asking around for help. If you approach a person you've kept in touch with and who knows you quite well, aren't you more likely to get help than if you ask a stranger? The divine world is thought to work in the same way.

This outlook leads individuals to a relentless pursuit of the knowledge and proper use of these natural forces, learning to manifest the supernatural agents which can prevent sickness, improve harvests, ward off danger or death, build a happy marriage, bless children, and so forth. This ancient, immutable way of life motivates respectful attitudes towards traditional values and fellow human beings in ways that no legal or educational system can hope to match.

Ancestor Worship and Respect for Elders

Ancestor worship is common in West Africa and is an important part of *Aṅlɔ-Eve* religious practice. Among the *Aṅlɔ*, the dead are believed to live on in the world of spirits. In this form, they possess supernatural powers of various sorts. They watch over their living descendants with a kindly interest, but have the ability to cause trouble if they are neglected or dishonored. Proper attention to the ancestors, especially at funerals and memorial services, results in helpful intervention on behalf of the living. It also ensures that the pious individual receives favorable treatment when he or she inevitably joins the ancestors in the spirit world.

In light of these beliefs, it's easy to understand why the elderly are treated with great respect in African societies. Among people who worship ancestors hundreds of years after their death, reverence for age takes on a mystical quality, as though the living were slowly becoming gods. Individuals of advanced age are identified with some of the awe and fear normally associated with the dead. They will soon join their forefathers in the spirit world to become divinities and wield supernatural powers over the living; it would be foolish to treat them poorly now.

Mystical beliefs aside, each old man or woman is regarded as a storehouse of priceless, irreplaceable knowledge and secrets to success in life. Because they have witnessed and participated in historical times, each is appreciated as a bearer of unusual wisdom and experience in a society where custom and tradition are cherished. Guidance is often solicited from the elderly to resolve questions of tradition or to settle personal or family disputes.