



April 2010 Pew Research study on religion and witchcraft in Tanzania.

Persistence of Traditional African Religious Practices

At the same time, many of those who indicate they are deeply committed to the practice of Christianity or Islam also incorporate elements of African traditional religions into their daily lives. For example, in four countries (Tanzania, Mali, Senegal and South Africa) more than half the people surveyed believe that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm.

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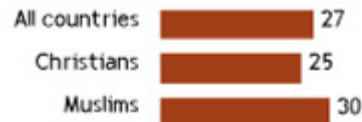
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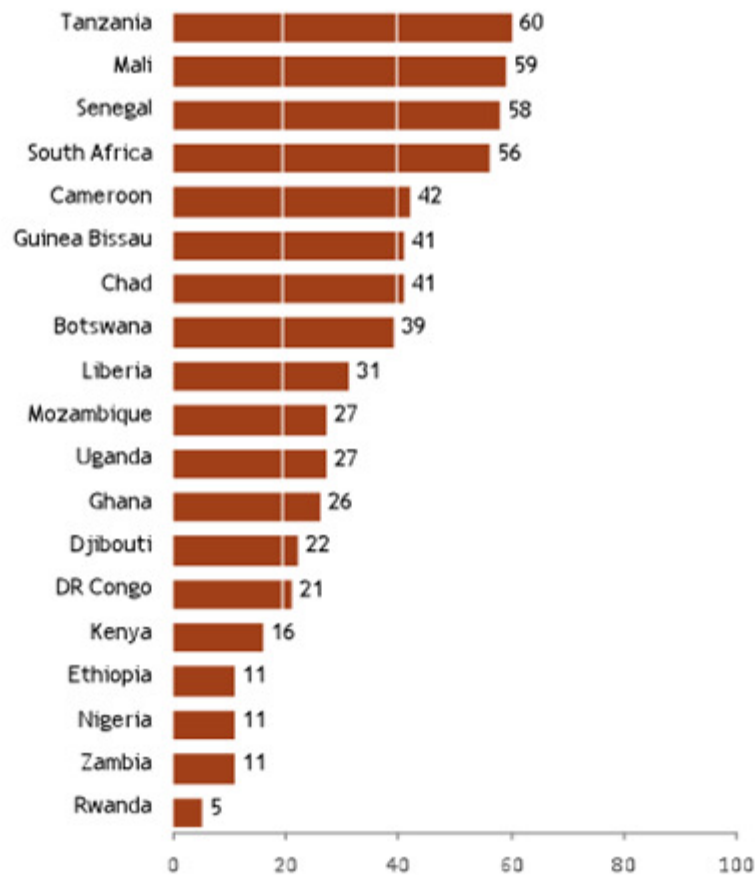
Belief in the Protective Power of Sacrifices to Spirits or Ancestors

% who believe sacrifices to spirits or ancestors can protect them from bad things happening

Median results:



Among general population in...



Q51i. Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? That sacrifices to spirits or ancestors can protect you from bad things happening.

Sizable percentages of both Christians and Muslims - a quarter or more in many countries - say they believe in the protective power of juju (charms or amulets). Many people also say they consult traditional religious healers when someone in their household is sick, and sizable minorities in several countries keep sacred objects such as animal skins and skulls in their homes and participate in ceremonies to honor their ancestors. And although relatively few people today identify themselves primarily as followers of a traditional African religion, many people in several countries say they have relatives who identify with

Quick Definition: African Traditional Religions

Handed down over generations, indigenous African religions have no formal creeds or sacred texts comparable to the Bible or Koran. They find expression, instead, in oral traditions, myths, rituals, festivals, shrines, art and symbols. In the past, Westerners sometimes described them as animism, paganism, ancestor worship or simply superstition, but today scholars acknowledge the existence of sophisticated African traditional religions whose primary role is to provide for human well-being in the present as opposed to offering salvation in a future world.

Because beliefs and practices vary across ethnic groups and regions, some experts perceive a multitude of different traditional religions in Africa. Others point to unifying themes and, thus, prefer to think of a single faith with local differences.

In general, traditional religion in Africa is characterized by belief in a supreme being who created and ordered the world but is often experienced as distant or unavailable to humans. Lesser divinities or spirits who are more accessible are sometimes believed to act as intermediaries. A number of traditional myths explain the creation and ordering of the world and provide explanations for contemporary social relationships and norms. Lapsed social responsibilities or violations of taboos are widely believed to result in hardship, suffering and illness for individuals or communities and must be countered with ritual acts to re-establish order, harmony and well-being.

Ancestors, considered to be in the spirit world, are believed to be part of the human community. Believers hold that ancestors sometimes act as emissaries between living beings and the divine, helping to maintain social order and withdrawing their support if the living behave wrongly. Religious specialists, such as diviners and healers, are called upon to discern what infractions are at the root of misfortune and to prescribe the appropriate rituals or traditional medicines to set things right.

African traditional religions tend to personify evil. Believers often blame witches or sorcerers for attacking their life-force, causing illness or other harm. They seek to protect themselves with ritual acts, sacred objects and traditional medicines. African slaves carried these beliefs and practices to the Americas, where they have evolved into religions such as Voodoo in Haiti and Santeria in Cuba. ([back to text](#)) these traditional faiths.