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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET AFRICAN TRADITIONAL AND INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

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*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Religious Freedom Concerns for Followers of African Traditional and Indigenous Religions

Introduction

Africa is home to followers of a variety of traditional beliefs and practices indigenous to Africa. These religions represent some of the oldest and some of the newest faiths practiced and spread in Africa today. In several contexts, practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions have faced religious freedom violations in recent years. These include violence and impunity for violence, legal restrictions, coerced conversion or forced repentance, and the desecration and removal of their sacred sites and objects. Practitioners of these faiths have also faced bias and discrimination from governments.

This factsheet places adherents of African traditional and indigenous religions within the broader international religious freedom discourse, from which they have historically been underrepresented. The report summarizes historical themes and trends highlighted in scholarly literature, identifies relevant international legal mechanisms that protect freedom of religion or belief for practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions, and explores threats facing some practitioners of these faiths, including religious freedom violations and societal discrimination.

Historical Overview

African traditional and indigenous religions encompass a broad range of faiths, practices, and worldviews geographically specific to the African continent. Other commonly or historically used terms whose meanings may encompass facets of African traditional or indigenous religious practice include animism, folk religions, and mysticism. The scope of this factsheet is limited to faiths, theologies, and worship practices with sociological origins on the African continent that are still practiced in the region today. The report focuses on non-Abrahamic faiths, while recognizing that the origins of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism may include locations and communities based in parts of Africa.

As some of the oldest and the *newest* faiths practiced and spread in Africa today, African traditional and indigenous religions represent a dynamic and complex landscape of beliefs and worldviews. Some of these traditions originated as many as *100,000 years ago* or earlier. While some experts assessed that the number of practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions decreased throughout

the 20th century and [predicted](#) they would continue to do so, recent decades have seen a [resurgence](#) of traditional and indigenous practitioners in the region. Some of these faiths combine traditions and philosophies from a variety of schools of thought that originate both in and outside of Africa.

While generalization across this wide swath of beliefs and practices is difficult, many African traditional and indigenous religions [share](#) common elements. Many have been closely linked to ethnicity and family heritage and have [lacked provisions](#) for formal conversion, though this trend has [changed](#) in recent decades. Oral storytelling plays a [prominent role](#) in many of these traditions, as does the worship of specific lands and natural spaces. Due to the malleable and inclusive nature of many African traditional and indigenous worldviews, these faiths are often practiced in conjunction with other traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, and humanism.

Relevant Legal Frameworks

Several international legal mechanisms protect freedom of religion or belief for individuals who profess or practice African traditional or indigenous religions. Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all. This right includes the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of one's choice; to manifest that religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching (either individually or in community with others, and either in public or in private); and the freedom of parents and legal guardians to educate their children in conformity with their own religious and moral convictions. It also protects individuals from coercion that would impair their ability to have or adopt the religion of their choice. The United Nations' (UN) expert committee that interprets the ICCPR [advises](#) that the terms "belief" and "religion" are to be broadly construed and include "theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief."

Additionally, Article 8 of the [African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights](#) guarantees that "freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms." Article 2 of the Charter also grants all rights protected under the Charter to all individuals without religious distinction.

Moreover, the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP) provides that indigenous peoples have "the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains." UNDRIP also protects indigenous peoples' rights to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit their philosophies to future generations and to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditional territories and resources.

Religious Freedom Violations

Throughout Africa, many adherents to African traditional and indigenous religions practice their faiths in relative peace. However, in several instances these individuals have experienced violations of their rights to freedom of religion or belief as protected under international law. This section highlights religious freedom violations that practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions have faced in recent years, including violence and impunity, legal restrictions and coercion, and the desecration of sacred sites and objects.

Violence and Impunity

Given the close link between ethnicity and traditional religious practice in parts of Africa, political and ethnic tensions have sometimes led to targeting of African indigenous worshippers and ceremonies. In Ethiopia, practitioners of the [Waaqeffannaa](#) tradition inhabit land in the country's central Oromia region, where an ongoing ethnocentric insurgency is also taking place. In December 2021, Ethiopian security forces attacked indigenous religion practitioners conducting the sacred [Waaqa Kadhaa](#) prayer ceremony and abducted at least 40 worshippers, including several spiritual leaders known as [Abba Gadaas](#). Officers beat and tortured the abductees, and systematically [executed](#) some of them.

In other parts of Africa, militant Islamist groups target those they perceive as practitioners of indigenous religions that the militants consider "pagans" or "infidels" due to their differing beliefs. In central Mali, jihadists targeted and burned down a traditional gathering place with significant mystical value to the indigenous ethnic Dogon in their campaign to enforce their singular interpretation of Islam in the area. In 2020 fighters from the Islamic State in Mozambique insurgency [attacked a male initiation](#)

[ceremony](#) and beheaded over a dozen men and teenage boys. In 2022, Boko Haram fighters [slit the throats](#) of 20 women they accused of witchcraft after the sudden death of the children of the group's leader.

Mob violence against individuals accused of witchcraft constitutes an intersection of violations of various human rights, including religious freedom. Assailants subject individuals accused of witchcraft to some of the most [gruesome and inhumane](#) violence imaginable, including stoning, burning, drowning, starvation, dismemberment, and being buried alive. Perpetrators of this violence are often close family or community members, while victims disproportionately and systematically comprise individuals from marginalized groups like women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex individuals, and atheists. While some governments prosecute offenders, others frequently fail to do so, denying justice to the victims and their families. Most violence against alleged witches goes [unreported](#) due to the systemic marginalization of those victimized.

Considering not all individuals who are targeted with violence based on allegations of witchcraft are necessarily practitioners of African traditional or indigenous religions, one cannot conclude that all these abuses constitute religious freedom violations targeting practitioners of these faiths specifically. However, violence against alleged witches contributes to broader societal stigma against practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions, implying that traditional or indigenous beliefs are inferior or dangerous. This can make the practice of such faiths more dangerous for those who do espouse and seek to manifest traditional or indigenous beliefs peacefully.

Legal Restrictions and Coercion

The enforcement of laws that criminalize blasphemy constitute a [violation](#) of an individual's right to freedom of religion or belief as protected under international law. In some African countries, these laws affect practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions. For example, in November 2022, authorities in Mali issued a warrant to arrest a Kamite preacher. Kamitism (or Kemetism) is a traditional belief system that predates Christianity and originated in what is now Egypt. The preacher was [arrested](#) on charges of blasphemy and sentenced to one year in prison after he released a video that contained content that many considered insulting to Islam. Officials [arrested six](#) of the preacher's followers for complicity when they refused to tell them where he was hiding.

Moreover, some state or state-sanctioned activities may amount to forced or coerced conversion, especially in cases involving alleged witches. Some police and judicial systems have reportedly forced individuals accused of witchcraft to [undergo exorcism rituals](#) to avoid imprisonment. Some reports suggest that "[trial by ordeal](#)," whereby a defendant charged with witchcraft is forced to undertake a difficult task or ingest a mystical concoction to demonstrate his or her innocence, remains a part of traditional justice mechanisms in several regions of Africa today. Several governments in the region [tolerate](#) religious leaders and entrepreneurs who capitalize on "hunting" alleged witches and subjecting them to abusive and sometimes violent [conversion and healing rituals](#). Such actions may violate the religious convictions of individuals from a variety of faiths and beliefs, amounting to forced or coerced conversion.

Desecration of Sacred Sites and Objects

One of the greatest challenges practitioners of African traditional or indigenous religions face is access to sacred sites and objects. [UN Human Rights Council resolution 6/37](#) urges states to "ensure that religious places, sites, shrines and symbols are fully respected and protected and to take additional measures in cases where they are vulnerable to desecration or destruction." Additionally, UNDRIP calls for the protection of indigenous peoples' rights to "maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard," as well as their rights to "maintain, protect and develop ... manifestations of their cultures," including archeological and historical sites, artefacts, and ceremonies. However, in many regions of Africa these rights are under threat from myriad challenges.

Across the globe, state-backed policies and efforts have at times [destroyed or threatened](#) lands held sacred by practitioners of traditional or indigenous faiths. In Africa, such policies have included development activities, deforestation and extraction, and conservation efforts. In 2022, the Tanzanian government [cordoned off](#) land traditionally inhabited by Maasai communities for conservation, despite the communities' reliance upon that land for rituals and herbs. The government used live ammunition and tear gas to quell the resulting unrest. In [Kenya](#), park rangers deny permits to indigenous persons seeking to conduct spiritual ceremonies on their lands in

conservation zones and instead extract bribes from those communities in exchange for access. In the [Republic of Congo](#), protections for customary land rights apply only to land used for “productive activities” like agriculture and pastoralism, excluding land that indigenous peoples’ use for gathering or religious practices and subjecting to designation as forest reserves, national parks or conservation areas or for commercial exploitation.

Legacies of looting have also inhibited practitioners’ access to sacred objects and weighed on traditional practitioners’ consciences. Throughout modern African history, state and nonstate actors have illegally pillaged and removed [sacred items](#) and other cultural artifacts from African countries. A [UN report](#) found that around the world “the damages incurred (from such removals) include loss of human dignity, difficulty carrying out spiritual practices without the necessary religious items, and the inability to honour their cultural obligations to care for the dead and for ceremonial objects.” Governments in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Benin, and Congo have submitted [formal requests](#) to foreign institutions to return stolen items of sacred or cultural significance, many of which have yet to be repatriated. More recently, as civil conflict escalated in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region in 2021 and 2022, destruction and looting of ancient religious sites corresponded with an [increased availability](#) of Ethiopian antiquities and sacred objects in online auction sites.

Bias and Discrimination

In addition to rights violations, some governments discriminate against practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions. While not all of these challenges amount to violations of freedom of religion or belief as defined under international law, they demonstrate systematic discrimination and bias against practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions, many of whom are religious minorities in their areas of origin, based on their beliefs.

State institutions like founding documents, judicial procedures, and school curricula show overt favoritism for faiths like Christianity or Islam and skepticism or bias against traditional or indigenous religions. In Nigeria, traditional religious advocates [routinely petition](#) the government to formally recognize traditional holidays as it does Christian and Muslim holidays with no success.

Practitioners have also criticized government bias against African traditional and indigenous religions in schools in several African countries. For example, the Nigerian government obligates schools to provide both Christian and Islamic education for students who require it but has no such requirements for traditional or indigenous religions. Some schools have [required](#) children from African traditional religious backgrounds to select either the Christian or Islamic course track for learning against the wishes of their parents. While Nigerian law protects students’ rights to wear headscarves and many schools allow for the wearing of crosses and other symbols of Christian or Muslim faiths, schools have prohibited students from wearing symbols of traditional faiths like [prayer beads](#).

Finally, in some countries, practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions report difficulties finding land to bury their dead. In Ethiopia, most cemeteries are owned or managed by religious institutions and will not permit practitioners of traditional or indigenous religious practices to be buried there. In 2022, reportedly the government allowed Waaqeffannaa practitioners to bury an individual in a plot next to Muslim cemetery in Ciro. During the burial, several members of the Muslim community began beating those digging the grave, leading to escalated conflict between the two communities.

Conclusion

Within the discourse on freedom of religion or belief in Africa, the experiences of practitioners of African traditional and indigenous religions are often neglected or peripheral. Some of the most significant challenges adherents of these faith traditions endure include violence and impunity, legal restrictions and coercion, the desecration of sacred lands and objects, and official and societal discrimination.

Through inclusive network building and information channels, U.S. government officials, including foreign service officers and other U.S. policymakers and implementers, will be better placed to advocate for the religious freedom rights of these practitioners and identify further challenges or opportunities for policy improvement.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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