

African Traditional Religions

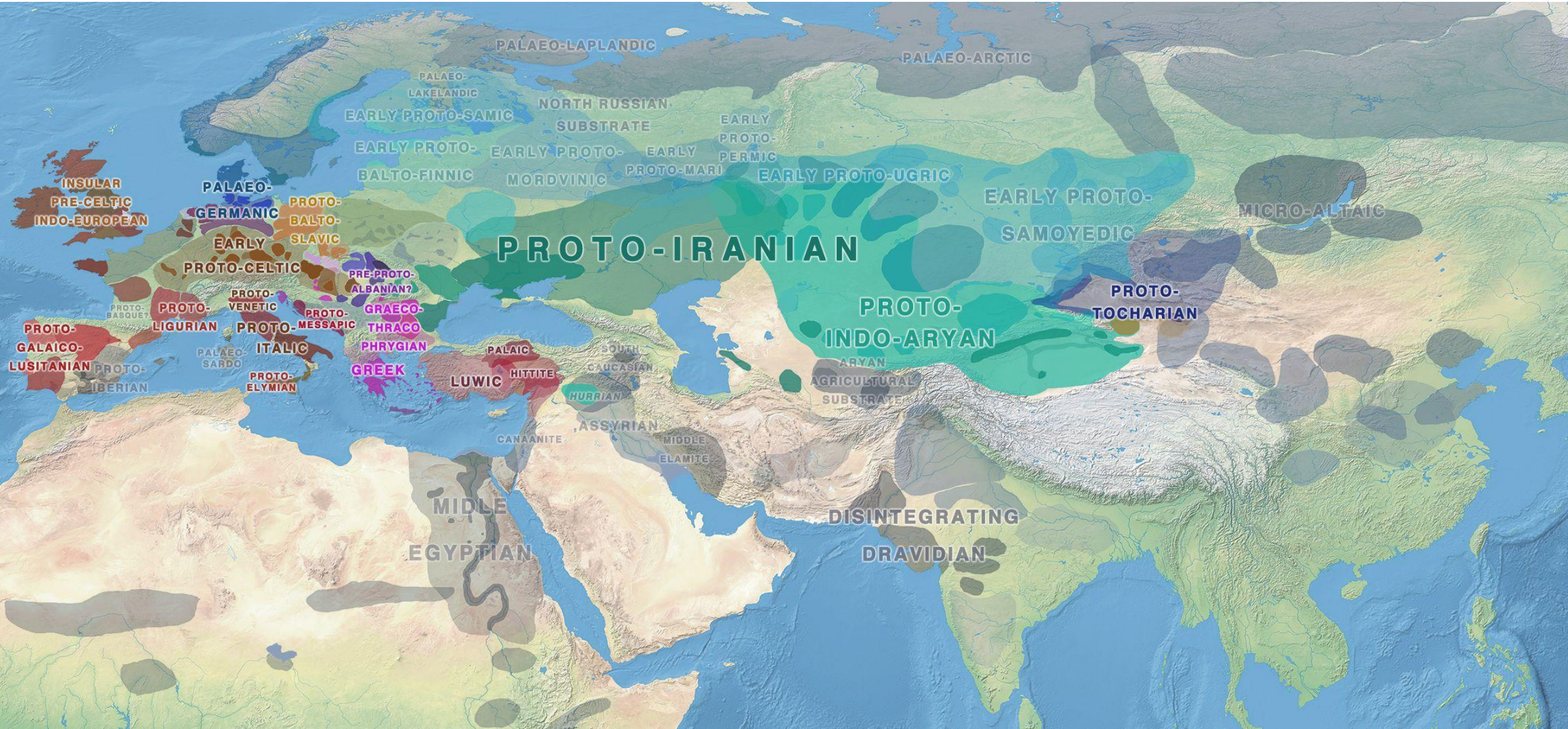
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The Middle Bronze Age

- The Middle Bronze Age (1500-1200 BC) gave rise to revolutions in religion.
- In the Levant, God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, Moses received the Ten Commandments, and Joshua conquered Canaan (c. 1300-1400 BC).
- In India, the Rig Veda, oldest and most important of the Brahminic Vedas, was composed from irretrievable source documents.
- In Persia, Zarathustra wrote the Avesta (c. 1300) and Zoroastrianism became the official religion.

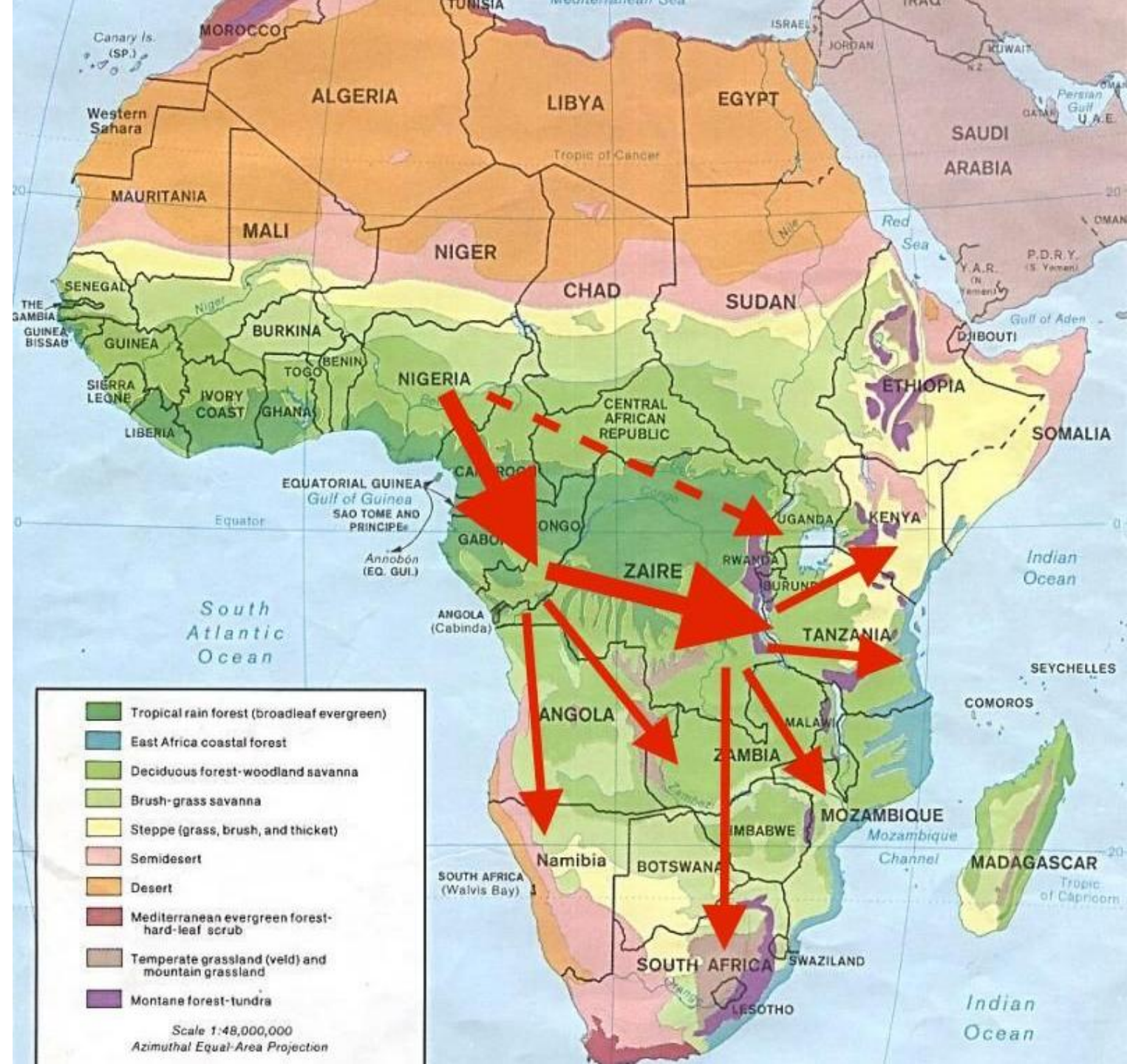
Cultures in Europe, Asia, and North Africa 1600 BC



The Bantu Migration (3000-1500 BC)

- To the southwest in Africa, the Bantu-speaking peoples migrated from West and Central Africa into East and South Africa, bringing competing and complementary genomes, cultures, languages, and belief systems to the indigenous peoples.
- This migration had an enormous impact on the people and continent of Africa, including their belief systems.
- Whole populations of natives were destroyed or replaced. Since stabilizing around 100 BC, Bantu comprise over 90% of the population of most South and Central African nations today. Bantu violence towards pygmy, Khoisan, and Hadza populations, the few remaining pre-Bantu Africans, continues even today.

Bantu Migration

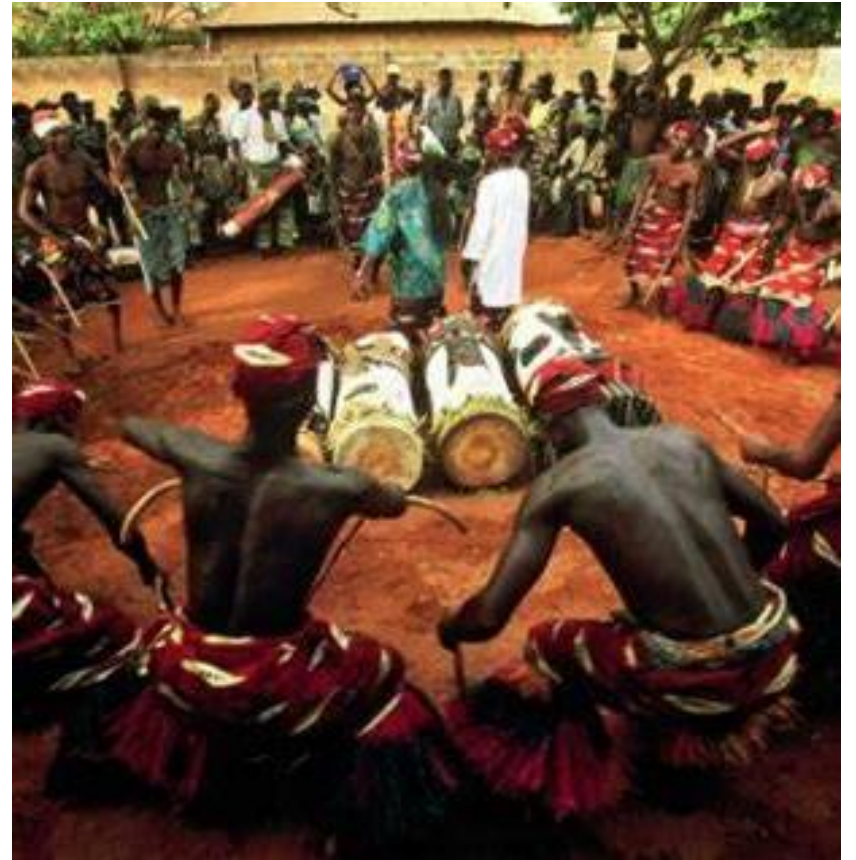


Causes of the Bantu Migration

- Agricultural expansion: The need for more land for cultivation and grazing due to population growth.
- Population pressure: High fertility rates and abundant food supply created demand for new territories.
- Conflict and political factors: Hostile neighbors, land disputes, and succession conflicts prompted relocation.
- Technological and economic opportunities: The spread of ironworking skills and agricultural techniques encouraged movement.
- Natural and social pressures: Epidemics, overstocking of animals, and environmental change

African Traditional Religions (ATR) Beliefs (1)

- A Supreme God exists, but he is very, very distant from man. In fact, He is unapproachable, unknowable, and uninvolved in the lives of people.
- The universe is eternal, or in some traditions hatched from a cosmic egg.
- Our world is filled with spirits, including our ancestors, minor deities, and demons. They are powerful, benign or malign, and capable of helping or harming people on earth.
- Spiritual beings called *orisha* mediate between God and man.



African Traditional Religion (2)

- African traditional religions (ATRs) are highly diverse and largely oral, passed down through stories, songs, myths, and festivals rather than written scriptures.
- Core beliefs and practices
 - Belief in a supreme being
 - Spirits and lesser beings
 - Ancestor worship
 - Harmony with nature
- Rituals
 - Rituals are central to ATRs and often mark life events, agricultural cycles, healing, and conflict resolution. Common practices include:
 - Divination and magic: Used to understand spiritual causes of events and to influence outcomes.
 - Ceremonies and festivals: Celebrations often involve music, dance, and symbolic offerings to deities or ancestors.
 - Traditional medicine: Healing practices integrate spiritual and herbal knowledge, reflecting the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit

Olodumare – Supreme God

- As is usual in religion, God is pictured as a man:
 - A male god
 - An old god
 - A cosmic god
 - A handsome god
 - A powerful god
- How different is this from the God of the Sistine Chapel?
- How does our mental image of God impact our beliefs?



YORUBA AFRICAN ORISHAS

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Orisha of the Yoruba

The mediators between god and man, young and beautiful

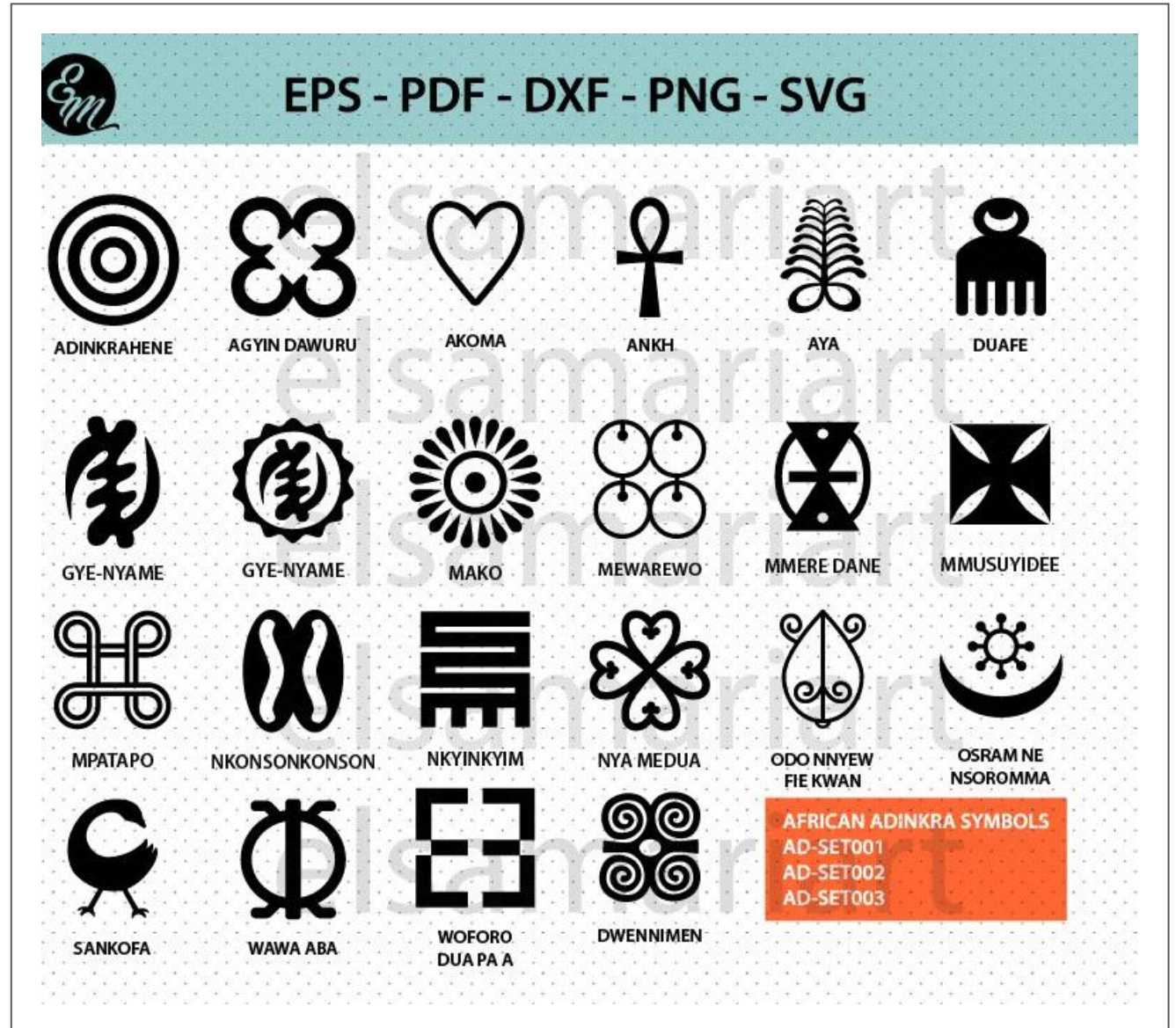
- Eleggba: The Orisha of crossroads, he acts as a messenger between different worlds and is the guardian of crossroads.
- Shango: The Orisha of thunder, lightning, and fire, he is a warrior Orisha who controls these elements and is often associated with dance and drumming.
- Oshun: The Orisha of love, fertility, and prosperity, she is known for her healing powers and is often associated with the ocean.
- Ogun: The Orisha of iron, war, and the supernatural, he is a warrior Orisha who is often associated with the forces of nature.
- Abata: The Orisha of wetlands, she is connected to fertility, healing, and ecological balance.
- Aja: The Orisha of the forest, she is associated with herbal healing and is revered as a patron of herbalists and traditional healers.
- Ajala: The Orisha of creation, he is known for molding the physical bodies of humans and determining their fate.

African Traditional Religions Beliefs (3)

- The sacred permeates every area of life, every crisis has a specific cause that is rooted in the spirit world.
- If you sprain your ankle and your wife burns her hand on a hot cooking pot, a spirit was involved at some level. Maybe the spirit temporarily distracted you and you tripped on a tree root. Maybe a different spirit made a cat run across the kitchen, knocking a pot on to the open fire, which your wife reflexively tried to grab, burning her hand.
- Followers of African traditional religions do not deny material causes, such as the root and the hot pot, but search for spiritual causes behind them.
 - Is AIDS a punishment from God?

Protection symbols from spirits in Africa

- Symbols sometimes found on artifacts offering magical protection from the spirit world



African Traditional Religions Beliefs (4)

- Because the sacred is ubiquitous, tribal rites are part of everyday life. Never a day passes when a person does not do something pertaining to religion. Worship is the duty of the entire tribe, and everyone works together on it. In the West, a family may go to church on the occasional Sunday and never help the church in any way. Such a lifestyle is unheard of in African traditional religions.
- Regional Variations
 - West Africa: The Yoruba practice Ifa, worshipping Orishas, each governing aspects of life like wisdom, love, or weather.
 - Southern Africa: The Zulu follow Ubuntu, emphasizing interconnectedness and communal harmony.
 - Northern Nigeria and Niger: Hausa animism, including Maguzanci or Bori, involves spirit possession and magic alongside belief in a supreme being.
 - Ancient civilizations: The Kushite religion in Sudan blended indigenous beliefs with Egyptian influences, worshipping deities like Apedemak and Amun.

Distinctive African Traditional Religious Beliefs (1)

- Man has a physical and spiritual dimension (dualism) but he is not made in God's image. Instead, chiefs and kings are living symbols of the tribe.
- Sin involves not adhering to social standards and not doing prescribed rituals. Major infractions are failures to uphold relationships with tribe members and the spirit world.
- Believers in ATR think that spirits are everywhere and, just like people, spirits are prone to punish those they dislike and reward those they like.
- Departed souls and others in the spirit world need sustenance, honor, and recognition. Living people also need sustenance, honor, and recognition. Upholding a relationship with each being, dead or alive, means providing what they need.
- If each person in the tribe upholds their relationship with each other and with the appropriate spirits, the tribe will prosper. If not, the tribe will face tribulation caused by the offended spirit(s).

Distinctive African Traditional Religious Beliefs (2)

- In African traditional religions, salvation focuses on the present world rather than the world to come. People want help with day-to-day trials, not cosmic wars.
- Salvation comes from magic, special ceremonies, sacrifices, tribal medicine, and items (talisman, amulet).
- An amulet may protect a young mother from the “evil eye” of an old woman who wishes to hex the baby.
- Local herbs may heal someone sick from a cold, or at least help them feel better. In extreme cases, such as with Jonah, one would be sacrificed to save many.



Distinctive African Traditional Religious Beliefs (3)

- After death, some tribes believe in reincarnation, in which the human spirit passes into another human body.
- More commonly, adherents to African traditional religions believe that after death, the person's spirit (and invisible body) migrates to the spirit world.
- A river exists between the land of the living and the abode of the dead, which is a common theme in world religions (cf. Jordan River, Styx River).

Variation in African Traditional Religions

- The Yoruba religion is mainly practiced in West Africa. The river goddess Oshun is a focus of worship.
- The supreme deity for the Akan people is Nyame, and spider god is Anansi.
- Ancestor worship is characteristic of many traditional African religions, but especially among the Vodou tribes.
- The Ifa people use cowrie shells for divination.
- The Kemetic people worship the sun god Amun-Ra.
- Sango is the deity most associated with storms (thunder and lightning)
- The supreme deity is sometimes called Olodumare.

Oshun, river goddess



What is the
difference in
psychology
in
worshipping
a god or a
goddess?

Attribute	God	Goddess
Gender	Male	Female
Role	Creator, Protector, Judge	Creator, Nurturer, Protector
Symbol	Beard, Thunderbolt, Crown	Moon, Earth, Fertility symbols
Domain	Heaven, Sky, War	Earth, Nature, Fertility
Worship	Monotheistic religions	Polytheistic religions



Caribbean Religions (1)

- Caribbean religions such as Rastafari (1900s), Santeria (1500s), Umbanda, and Voodoo, are a mix of African traditional religions with Catholic influences from Spain, Portugal, and France.
- The slave trade was a major factor in mixing these influences, and consequently these Caribbean religions tend to be about oppressed opposing oppressors.
- Counter-cultural politics, the sanction of revolt, racism, and dealing with slavery are larger themes than eternal salvation, philosophy, and traditional theology.

Voodoo Priestess



Caribbean Religions (2)

- In Rastafarianism, for example, knowledge comes from group insight, aided by Ganja marijuana.
- God (Jah) is black, the Israelites were black, and whites are inferior to blacks.
- The late Ethiopian Emperor Halle Sellasie (1892-1975) was the savior of blacks and a direct descendent of Israel's King David.
- Ethiopia is heaven on earth and Jamaica is hell. There is no afterlife.



Rastafarians

Caribbean Religions (3)

- In Santeria, Olorun is the supreme God but is unapproachable. Spirits called Orishas are His emissaries, ruling over the forces of nature and human lives, but must be sustained by humans offering animal sacrifices.
- Twelve levels of hierarchy, from high priests to commoners, comprise the religion.
- In Umbanda, Ogun is God, but many deities exist. Revelation came to the Red Race of the Tupy lineage in ancient Brazil.
- In Voodoo, priests and priestesses have authority rather than a holy book. They serve as magicians, doctors, confessors, advisors, and story tellers. They perform rites, make potions, and cast spells.

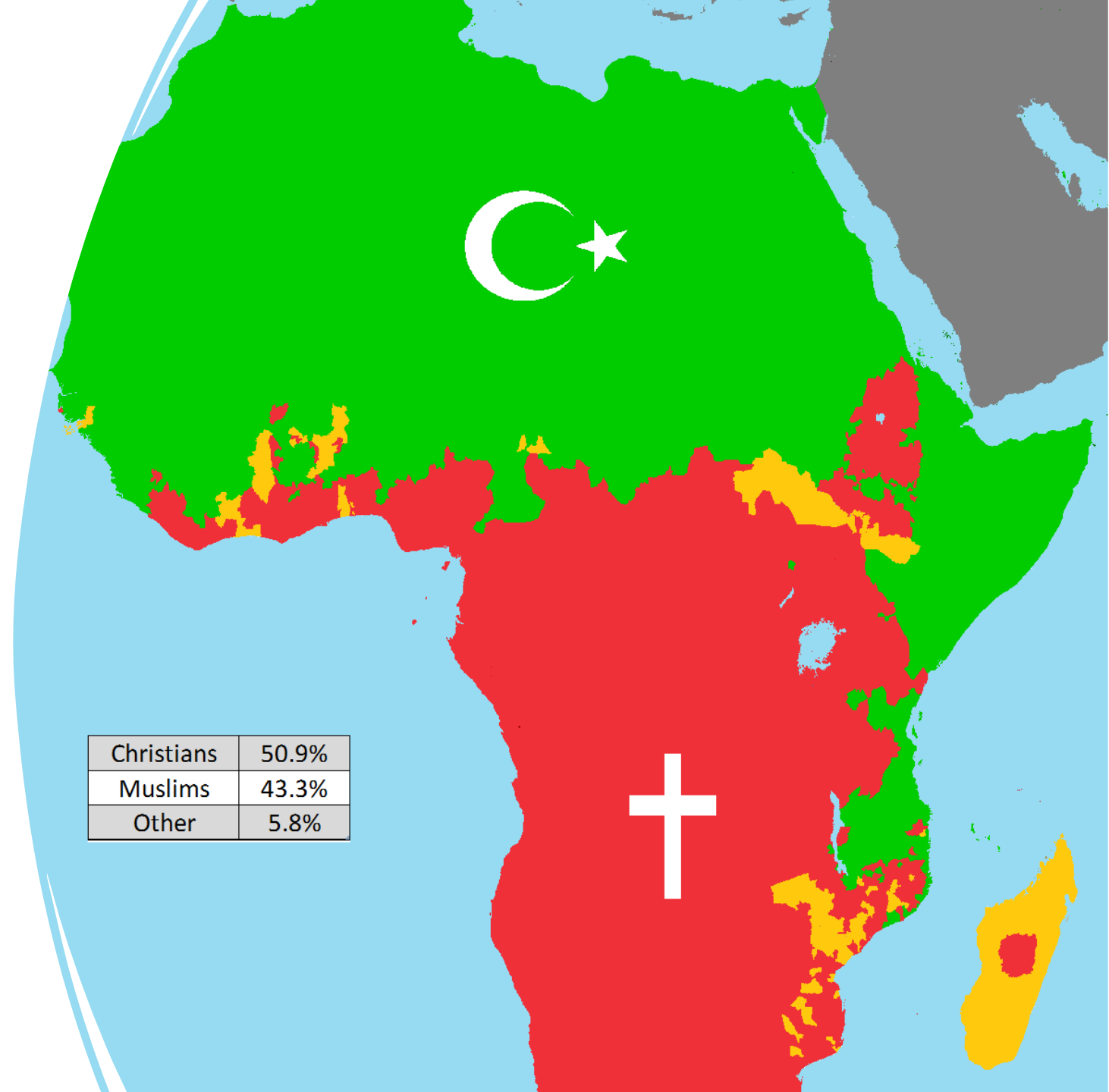
Religious...GOD



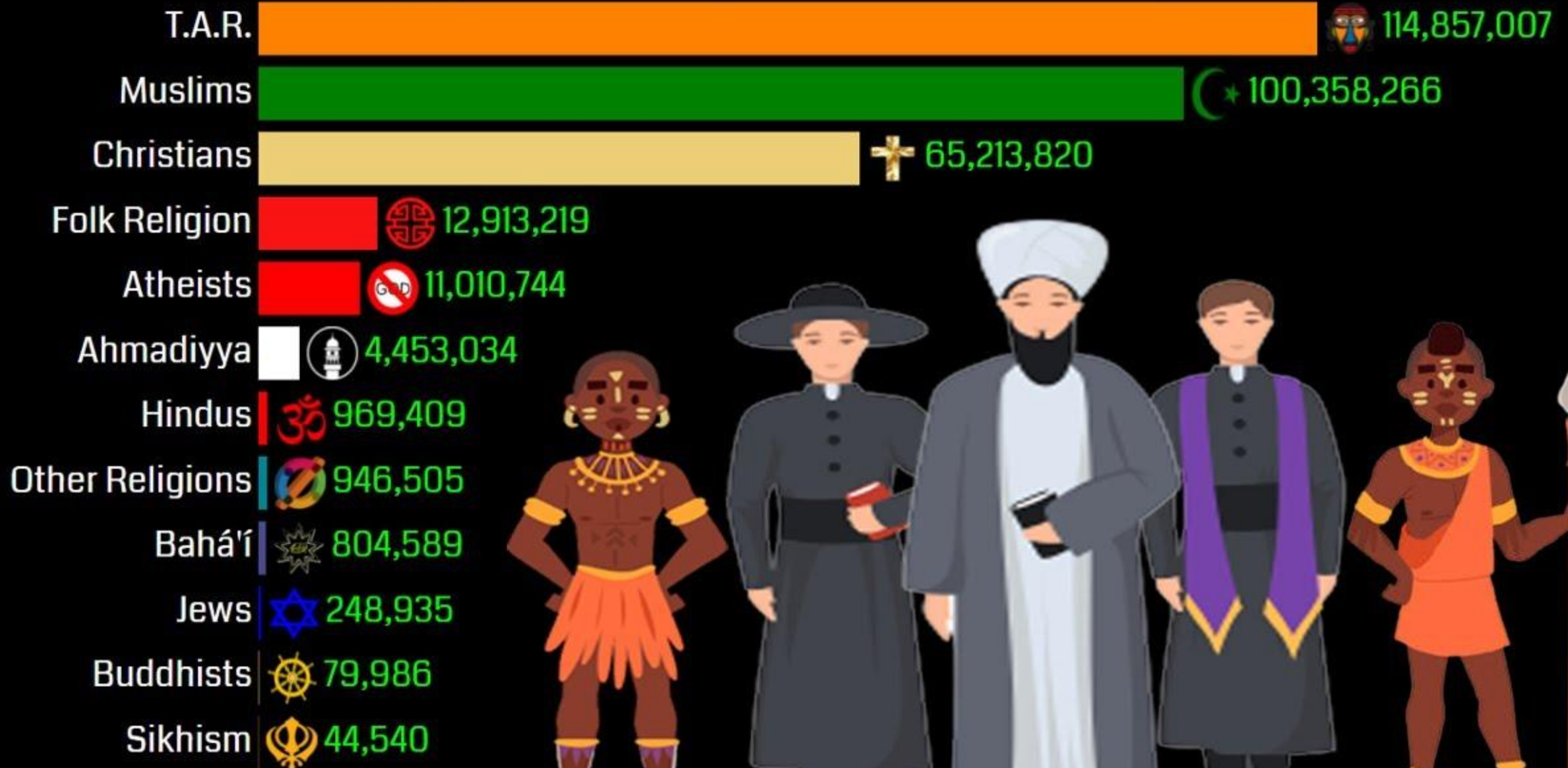
- Missionaries were sent to convert the peoples of Africa to Christianity
- European rule was the best way to save the animal people of Africa... "they need to be fixed...no more savages"
- Wanted to civilize (westernize) the people of foreign lands
- Positive: these groups help make schools, hospitals, roads, and dams

African Traditional Religion (ATR) Today

- The African Continent was conquered by Muslims in the north and colonized by merchants and missionaries in the south.
- Most Africans who follow a religion believe in a syncretistic mix of ATR with Islam in the north and ATR with Christianity in the south.



Religion in Africa



Conclusion

- Discussion



References

- H. Wayne House, Charts of World Religions, Zondervan, 2006

