Water: a Sacred Spirit
Water is sacred to many cultures. When life depends on water in the form of rainfall, rivers, and streams, water takes on a life of its own.

Africans use water for rituals such as the washing of the newborn and the dead. Therefore, it must come from a source of sacred, living water. It must not be heated or boiled, or treated with chemicals as that would kill the spirit in it.

In Ghana there is a water spirit called Mami Wata (Mother Water). She is often portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer, or a combination of both. The fishermen consider her so sacred they do not talk about her openly.

Ol Doinyo Lengai - “Mountain of God”:
Sacred Mount Lengai is in Kenya’s crater highlands, a region populated by Maasai pastoralists. Their main god Lengai is benevolent as the black god of rain and evil as the red god of the sun. Maasi pilgrimage here to pray for rain, cattle, and children.

Ancestor Worship:
Most commonly recognized spiritual forces in Africa. The ancestors continue to live on in the spirit world. Unlike the High God, they take an active interest in the well-being of those who live in the world.

Ancestors are consulted before the birth of a child, beginning of an agricultural season, prior to battle, or political conflicts. In some tribes, no one may eat the first fruit of the harvest until it has been offered to the ancestors.

While in China and Japan ancestors are loved and respected, in Africa they are feared. They can be capricious (do whatever they want, fickle) and unpredictable. Despite many offerings, they can turn on you or the community. May cause sickness, death, childlessness (a major curse).

Ancestors more than the gods are the enforcers of the moral codes of the tribe. Gifts and sacrifices are offered to them. Belief that ancestors own the land and its products. Portion of the harvest must be offered to them. When animals are born, some must be slaughtered and offered to ancestors to ensure their blessings.

Modern Africans living in cities, return to their native villages to offer sacrifices.

Traditional African Religions – Religious Leaders:
There is not a major need for religious leaders; many activities can be performed by individuals (example: offerings of food and drinks to ancestors).

There is no complex theology or rituals like in Hinduism, Judaism, or Christianity.
No requirement of a priesthood and temples are very rare. Some communities in West Africa do have temples and altars; people trained in African mythology, taboos, and rituals to prepare them.

- **Diviners** - Served as interpreters. Their job is to explain misfortune.
- **Shaman** - Medicine man or woman. Conducts religious ceremonies.
- **Diviners and Healers** are rooted in Tradition. Their purpose was to explain the cause of misfortune. Experts in herbal medicine. Today, doctors study the roots and herbs used in traditional African healing.
- **Healers** - Helped families become aware of problems, along with providing remedies.

**Diviners: Communication with Ancestors:**
Ancestors can speak to you in dreams. Ancestors can send signs to you in nature that can be interpreted with the help of diviners, spiritual specialists. Signs are sometimes interpreted by looking at the organs of sacrificed animals. Diviners can also contact ancestors for help with knowing the future.

**Tallensi Tribe: Example of Pleasing Ancestors:**
A Tallensi man named Pu-eng-yii left his family and settled with a rival group to earn more money. He had an auto accident and seriously injured his leg. A Diviner told him that ancestors were angry; told him that his ancestors had intended to kill him, but failed to follow through on the plan. Solution: He had to make restitution (monetary compensation) for leaving his family, severe ties with newly adopted family, and return home.

**Sacrifice:**
Pouring out a bit of their drinks or tossing away bits of their food (similar to when you drop a hot dog at a BBQ – an offering to the backyard gods). A simple act that pleases spirits and ancestors. Sacrifice of animals for more serious occasions – dogs, birds, sheep, goats and cattle. The blood is poured out on the ground or altar.

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Rituals and Rites of Passage:

**Rituals** take place outdoors in nature. Rituals are organized group activity. Important parts of life are marked with rituals. Relationships among humans, super-humans and nature give meaning to ritual.

**Rites of passage**: define social, religious, physical identity. Rites of passage are regulated by religious functionaries.

- **Adulthood** – responsibilities and privileges.
- **Leaving the family** home.
- **Marriage** is very important; so is bearing children; a childless couple will go to great lengths to discover why they are childless with the help of a diviner.
- **Death** – rituals to make the deceased comfortable; fear that their ghosts will return to haunt the living; widows fear that husbands will return to cause their wombs to die.
- **Birth of child** – time for great rejoicing; great blessing from the world of the spirits.
  - **Twins** – are not a blessing, dangerous and evil. Sometimes, regarded that women had two men and each were the fathers. Occasionally, one or both are killed.

In many African societies, including the Ashanti, children are not named for the first week of life. Because of high infant mortality, African tribes believe that it may be a trickster god who wants to trick people into loving it; only to have it leave them. After they make it through a week, then much love is lavished on the child.

After naming the child, there is a ceremony of gently throwing the child in the air and introducing it to the moon, which is a deity. The ceremony of naming the child is often followed by showing the child the moon.

The Gu people of Benin throw their children gently into the air several times instructing them to look at the moon. The Basuto of South Africa lift their children toward the moon and say, “There is your father’s sister.”

**Circumcision:**
Circumcision is a religious requirement for Jews and Muslims and is significant to many Christians. Some African people practice circumcision at birth or shortly after. For most Africans, circumcision is reserved for when young men reach puberty.

Severity can vary from a minor cuts that have no major threat to genital mutilation which can be life threatening. Usually no anesthetic is given. The man who performs the ceremony may wear a mask representing the ancestors. Circumcision represents passage into adulthood. The initiate is expected not to flinch or cry out in pain.
Female circumcision is practiced in some African societies, although there is growing opposition around the world. As with male circumcision, there is no major medical reason for doing it, but it is supposed to control their erotic desire.

Marriage Rituals:
Virginity is highly prized especially among young women. Some tribes sew part of the female genitalia when the girls are small for the future husband.

Frequently, husband may not have sexual relations with wife while she is pregnant and nursing, which altogether may be two years.

Polygamy is practiced by elites of many traditional African tribes. May have several wives and separate houses.

Rituals for The Dead:
Funerals are to celebrate life instead of mourning death. Because of Africa’s warm climate - the dead are buried quickly. Sometimes embalming and mummification; occasionally offered to hyenas. The dead are buried with objects that will make their time in spirit world more enjoyable.

In some African societies, illness, misfortune, death don’t just happen. Often the result of witchcraft or foul play. In past, the dead were allowed to identify their killers. If their hands, dropped as they passed someone in the community or if they fell near someone as they were being carried, that person would have to defend his/her innocence.

Most tribes do not have a system of eschatology or concepts of judgment and retribution after death. The dead simply move into the world of the spirits and continue to be interested in the world of the living.

LoDagaa people of Ghana – exception: The dead must cross a river with a ferryman (similar to Greek idea of River Styx and Hades). The crossing is easy, if you were good in life. If you were bad, the crossing is difficult and could take up to three years, making up for your evil.