



# African Traditional Religion and the Coming of Christianity



*Global Initiative: Africa*

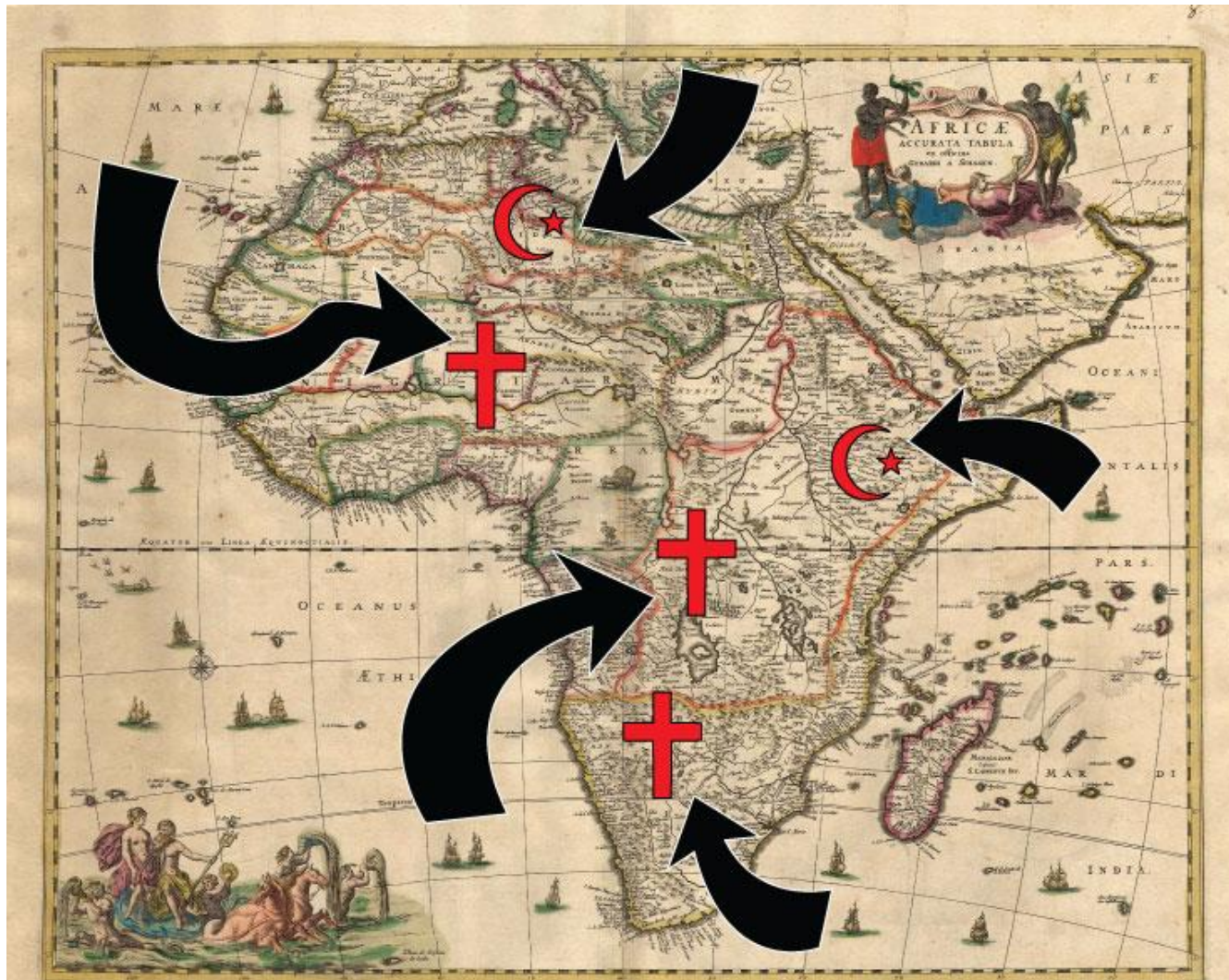
Dr. Michael F. Strmiska



SUNY-Orange :: October 9, 2013

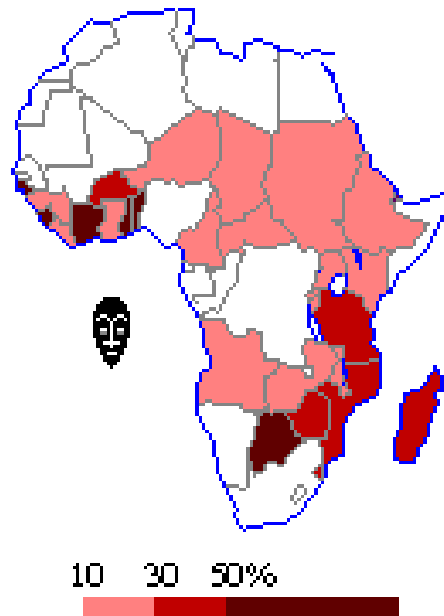


# Are there only two religions in Africa?

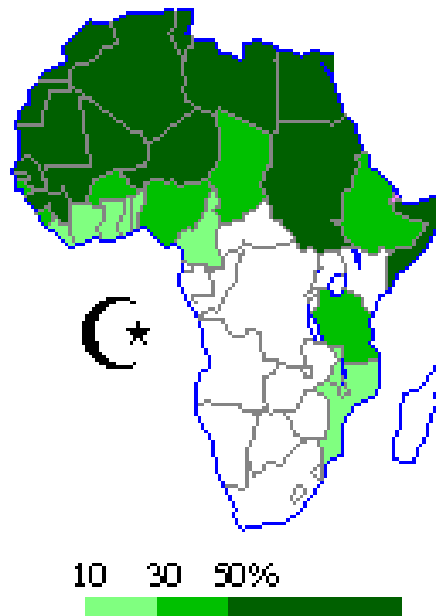


# There is a third religion in Africa, or rather, a large family of religions: **African Traditional Religions.**

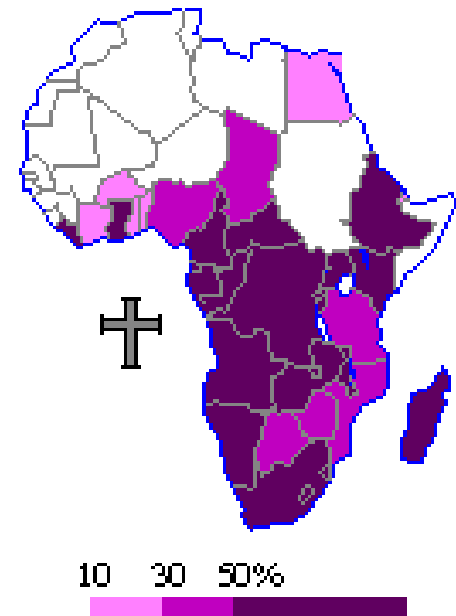
**Traditional**



**Moslem**

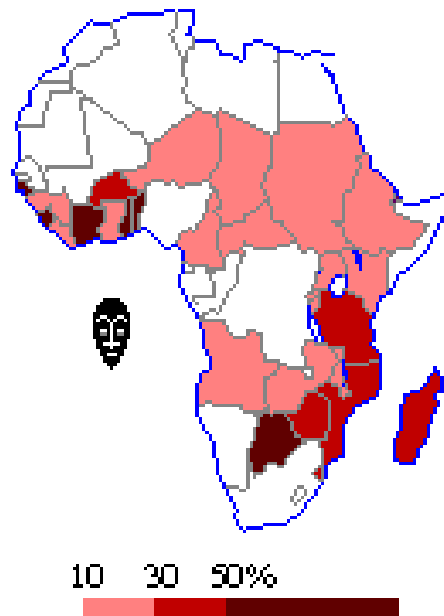


**Christian**

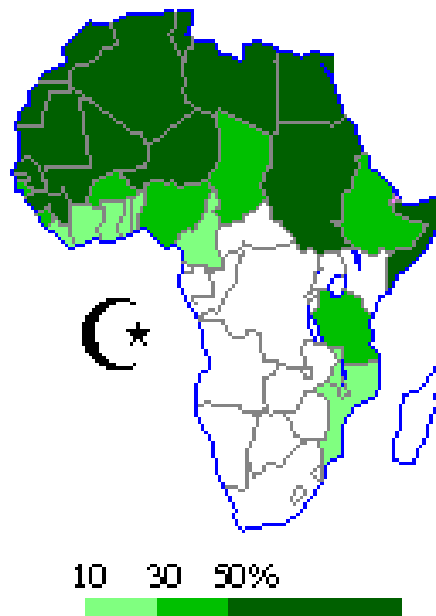


Breakdown of religions in **Africa today**:  
About 40% follow Christianity, 40% Islam,  
and 20% African Traditional Religions.

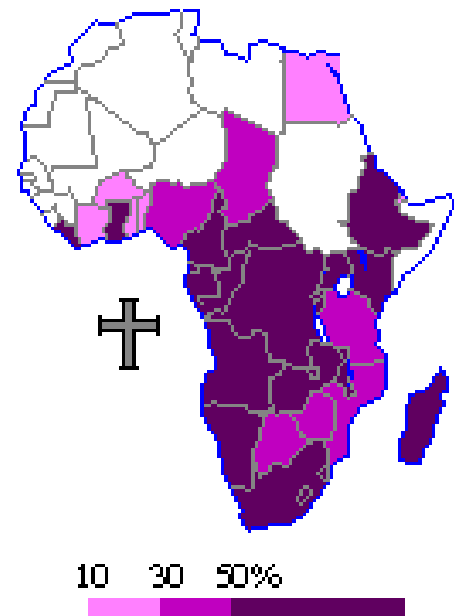
**Traditional**



**Moslem**

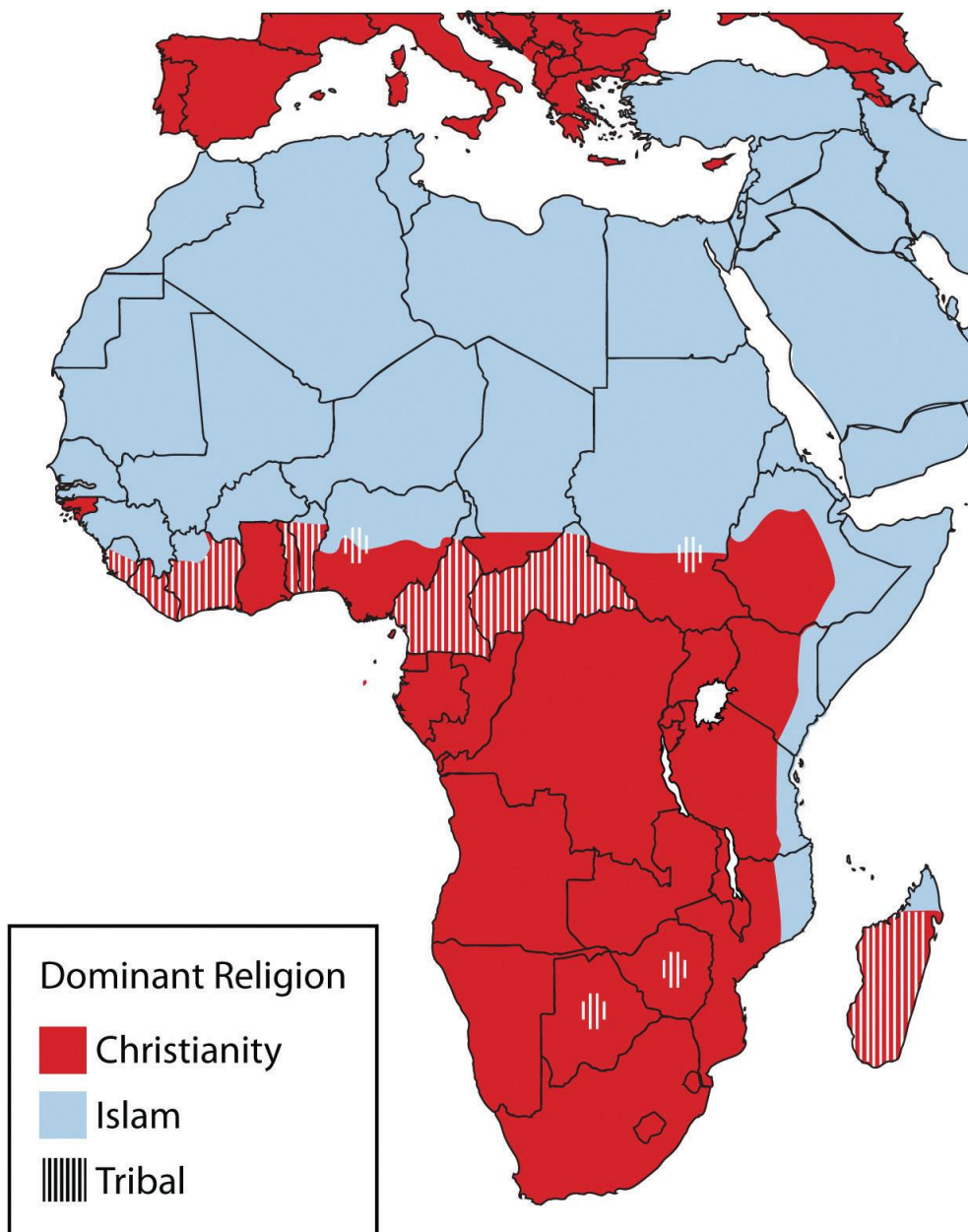


**Christian**



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# Changing Views of Traditional African Religion

- In late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup>, Europeans and Americans tended to view traditional African religion as an inferior, primitive form of religion
- Since mid 20<sup>th</sup> c., there is increasing respect for traditional African religion, after African nations overthrew colonialism, gained independence, and gained new respect for their own culture & history



# Five Phases in the Modern Understanding of Traditional African Religion

- 1. European Christian missionaries from 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards see African religions as demonic, primitive, evil & stupid
- 2. Foreign anthropologists from late 19<sup>th</sup> c. take more objective view, seeing some value in social functions of African religions
- 3. Native African historians and scholars, from mid-20<sup>th</sup> c. onwards, examine traditional African religions from a cultural-insider point of view, find meaning and depth
- 4. African churches develop which blend native traditions with Christianity in many ways, such as ancestor worship and traditional music, dance, and dress
- 5. People of African descent living outside Africa come to know African traditional religions through transplanted forms such as **Ifé** (Yoruba), **Voudoun** (voodoo), **Sante Ria**, and **Candomblé**, influencing African views of traditional religion

# Common Elements of Traditional African Religion

- Combination of polytheism and monotheism, with a variety of gods with many different functions and meanings, but one Supreme God superior to the others & remote from human life
- Other, lesser gods serve as the Supreme God's assistants and subordinates & are more accessible and responsive to humanity, and can be reached by prayer, worship & sacrifice
- Nature is sacred and divine
- Ancestors are honored as powerful supernatural beings able to intervene on earth to help or harm the living
- Ancestors are as important as gods, if not more so, and receive regular worship
- Kingship is divine, the king linked to gods and ancestors
- Evil spirits can cause harm
- The purpose of morality is preserving order & harmony not a list of do's and don'ts



# Partial Timeline of African Religion

- **Ancient Egyptian Religion** develops ~ **3000 BC**
- **Judaism** in Egypt by **700 BC**
- **Christianity arrives in North Africa** in 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, first spreading among Jewish population, with thriving Chr. communities by 3<sup>rd</sup> c., often persecuted by Rome
- **End of Ancient Egyptian Religion** 300-400 AD...  
*but other native African religions continue across Africa to present day*
- Major Christian figures in North Africa: **Clement** of Alexandria (150-215 AD), **Origen** of Alexandria (184-234), **Athanasius** of Alexandria (293-373), **Tertullian** (Carthage) (160-225), **Cyril** of Alexandria (378-444), **St. Augustine** of Hippo (Algeria) (354-430)
- **Islam arrives** in North Africa, starting in Egypt, from ~ **640** onwards

# **A Very Important Ancient Egyptian-Traditional African Parallel: Ancestor Worship**

- **In Ancient Egyptian Religion:**
- Myths about death and afterlife, such as those about Osiris and Horus, and ritual practices, from mummification to pyramids and temples for Pharaohs to providing the departed with instruction manuals—“Books of the Dead”—all demonstrate the emphasis Egyptians placed on caring for the dead long beyond the moment of death.
- Pharaohs were still considered powerful after death.
- **In Traditional African Religion:**
- Many scholars of traditional African religion report that the ancestors are so important that they eclipse the gods in the concern and worship that they receive.
- Unhappy , neglected ancestors are believed able to lash out and harm the living.
- Many pray to the dead and make offerings to ancestors for help and guidance, to stay on their good side and avoid incurring their wrath.

# Yet Another Parallel: Divine Kingship

- **In Ancient Egyptian Religion:**
  - The myths of Osiris, as first Pharaoh, and then ruler of the dead, and Horus , his son who becomes the ruler of the living and our world, and hence identified with each new Pharaoh, underlined the centrality of the Pharaoh in Egyptian life, as the world's earliest example of Divine Kingship.
- **In Traditional African Religion:**
  - In many traditional societies, the authority of kings and chieftains is often based on their descent from gods in the distant past.
  - Even in modern African societies with democratically elected leaders, kings still retain great authority as living links to past tradition and tribal mythology.

# Pharaohs, Divine Kings & Symbols of Eternal Order: Both Human and Divine



# Importance of Religious Parallels and Commonalities

- The similarities and parallels between ancient Egyptian religion, and traditional African religions suggest they derive from a common African “family” of certain religious ideas and practices
- These include: single supreme creator god, many lesser gods, belief in sacredness of nature, worship of ancestors and divine kings
- Some of these similarities and parallels were also shared with Christianity, making it easier for Africans to relate to Christianity and for Christianity to replace African religions
- Trad. Supreme Creator God >> Christian God the Father
- Egy. Horus (son of Osiris/Isis) >> Chr. Jesus (son of God/Mary)
- Egyptian Isis >> Chr. Mary
- Trad. Ancestors >> Ch. Saints
- Trd. Divine Kings >> Rom. Emp.



# Egyptian Gods: Ptah (creator), Re (sun)



# Egyptian gods: Isis and Osiris, and as a trinity, Horus-Osiris-Isis





King Akhenaton (left) with Queen Nefertiti and three of their daughters under the rays of the sun god Aten, Egypt, mid-14th century BCE



# Comparing Ancient Egyptian and Traditional African **Creation Myths**



# Egyptian Creation Myths

- **Version One** (The “Heliopolitan Cosmogony”): The first divine being, **Atum**,\* creates himself, and then creates the first male-female pair of gods, **Shu** and **Tefnut**, via masturbation. (*And you thought no one could get pregnant that way...! Watch out.*) They go on to mate and create **Geb** and **Nut**, male Earth and female Sky.
- (This is intriguing, because most mythologies have an Earth-mother and a Sky-father.)
- Geb and Nut produce two brother gods, **Osiris** and **Seth**, and two sister goddesses, **Isis** and **Nephthys**. These nine gods together form a unity known as the **Ennead**.
- \***Atum** is in later Egyptian religion identified with the Sun, though the primary Sun god is **Re**.



# Egyptian Creation Myths

- **Version Two** (The Hermopolitan or Memphite Cosmogony): The first divine being, **Ptah**, creates the world by imagining it in his mind, then speaking. Each thing or being he names comes into existence, producing a similar set of gods as in the previously cited myth.
- **Version Three** (The Esna Cosmogony): The goddess **Neith** is the first being to emerge from the watery chaos. She takes various forms such as cow and fish, then speaks thirty names which become thirty gods. She secretes a substance that she places in an egg, which hatches and becomes the sun god Re-Amun.

# Traditional African Creation Myths

- **In Bashongo myth:** Out of a watery chaos, the first god **Bumba** emerged. He vomited, creating the sun, whose heat dried up the water, allowing land to emerge. Further vomiting—poor Bumba!—created the moon, the earth, the first animals—nine of them, like the Egyptian nine Ennead, and the first humans, and soon our world was complete.
- **In Akan myth:** A single god, **Borebore**, a name with such meanings as “Architect, Carver, Creator, Inventor,” created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), by himself, according to his own architectural design. Similar “craftsman” myths are common among many African peoples, such as the Ila & Tiv. *Note that Egyptian Ptah is also a “craftsman” god.*

# Akan traditional religion today.

Bottom right, 400 year old Akan funerary stature.

## AKANFO NANASOM



ANCIENT AUTHENTIC AKAN ANCESTRAL RELIGION

[http://www.odwirafo.com/Akanfo\\_Nanasom.html](http://www.odwirafo.com/Akanfo_Nanasom.html)



# Traditional African Creation Myths

- **In Zulu myth:** The First One, **Unkulunkunu**, emerged from the reeds (again suggesting an original watery state as in many African and Egyptian creation myths.) He created all of nature from streams to mountains and forests, and then created people and cattle and taught the first people how to live.



# Zulu traditional religion today



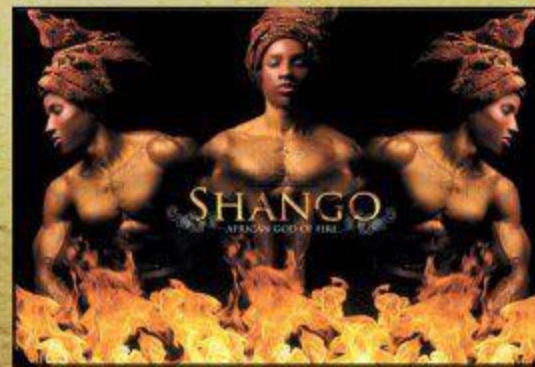
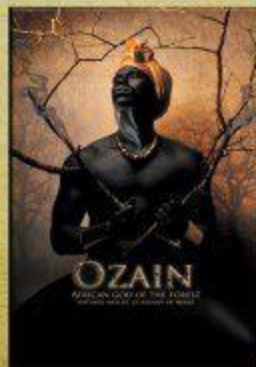
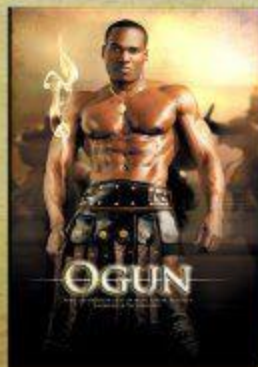
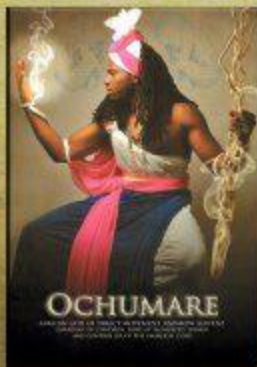
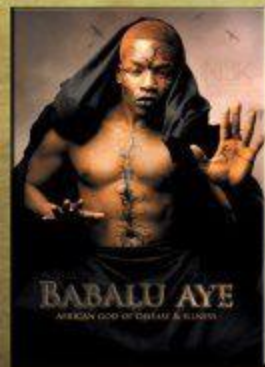
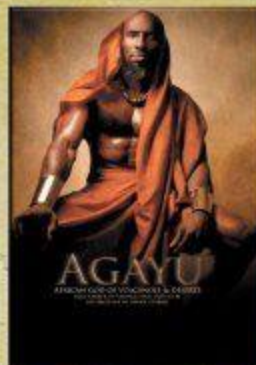
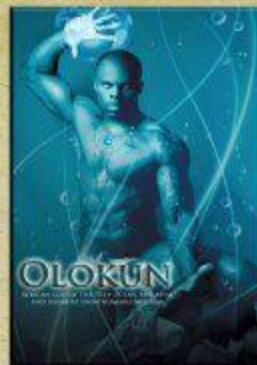
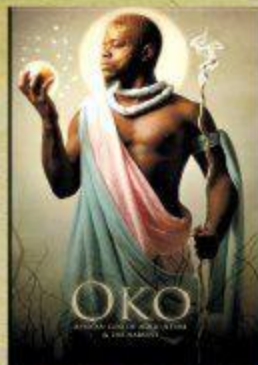
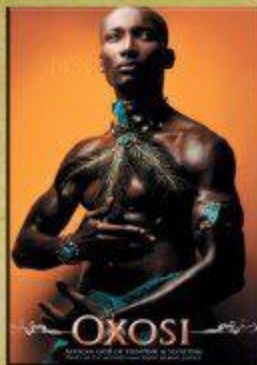
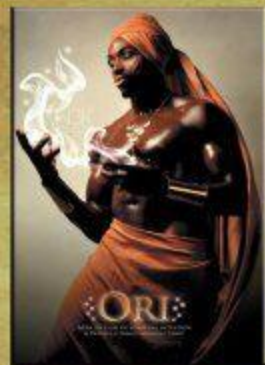
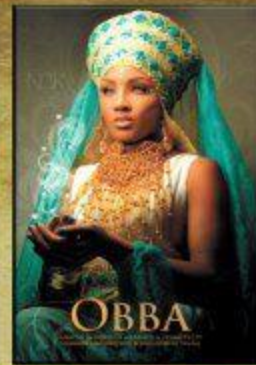
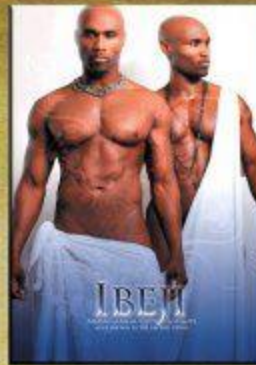
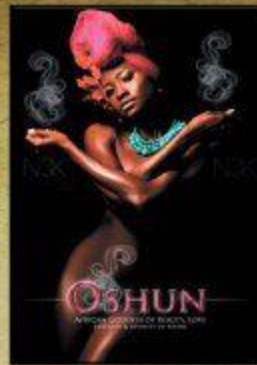
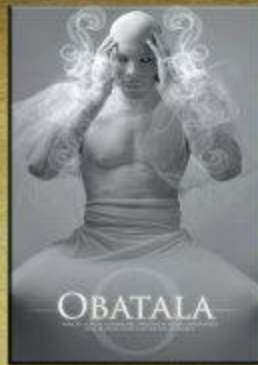
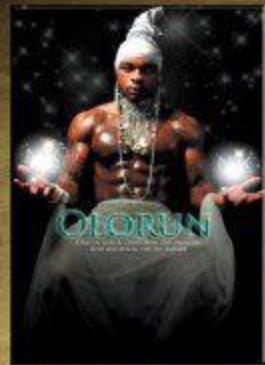


# Traditional African Creation Myths

- **In Yoruba myth:** The first being, Olurun, the Sky-god and Creator, lived in the sky, surrounded by lesser gods (Orisha). He created a huge chain and lowered it to the watery chaos below. He sent his son, Obtala, down the chain into the formless chaos with some seeds, some dirt and a chicken. From these humble ingredients, Obtala created earth, plant and animal life, and then the first kingdom, and the first humans. All of mankind are his descendants.

# Yoruba religion lives on today.

NOIRE3000|N3K STUDIOS PRESENTS... YORUBA AFRICAN ORISHAS



# Biblical Parallel

- "And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." **Genesis 1:2**
- In this Biblical account of creation, we find an original state of watery chaos, with a single being coming forward to bring about the world's creation, similar to what is described in Egyptian and African creation myths.



## Mother and child: Isis and Horus, Mary and Jesus



# Partial Timeline of African Religion

- **Ancient Egyptian Religion** begins ~ **3000 BCE** if not earlier
- **Christianity arrives in North Africa** in 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, thriving Christian communities by 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD
- End of Ancient Egyptian Religion 300-400 AD... **but other native African religions continue across Africa to present day**
- Major Christian figures in North Africa: **Clement** of Alexandria (150-215), **Origen** of Alexandria (184-234), **Athanasius** of Alexandria (293-373), **Tertullian** (Carthage) (160-225), **Cyril** of Alexandria (378-444), **St. Augustine** of Hippo (Algeria) (354-430)
- **Islam arrives** in North Africa ~ **650**



# Christianity comes to Africa



# Christianity first spread in Roman North Africa in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century



# Early Christianity in North Africa

- Christianity spread to North Africa by early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- Many early North African Christians were *ascetics*, called **Desert Fathers** for living in harsh conditions in the desert, trying to totally overcome sin, sex, their bodies, and Satan; to thus become like Christ.
- This was **the beginning of Christian monasticism**, sometimes called “the Gift of Egypt”
- <http://mubi.com/films/simon-of-the-desert> (filmmaker Luis Bunuel’s humorous view)
- As Christian communities developed, they often had a strongly anti-Roman character, as Rome persecuted Christians until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This was major factor in formation of a separate **Coptic Church** in **Egypt** and **Ethiopia**.
- Great early Christian theologians and “Church Fathers” such as **Clement, Origen, Tertullian** and **Saint Augustine** were all N. African, either from Egypt or Carthage.

# Theological Disputes within the African Church (1)

- There were many passionate theological disagreements among the Christians of North Africa that led to strife, even violence between Christians and finally caused the Coptic Church to become separate from the Catholic.
- **(1) Church *Holy* or *Catholic* ?**
- Many early N. Afr. Christians were very severe and fanatical, seeking to emulate Christ's holiness through monasticism and to imitate his death through martyrdom.
- Many rejected the idea of a *universal (catholic)* church, a church for everyone. They preferred a church of the holy elite *only*, a church of ***saints***.
- During periods of Roman persecution, many African Christians renounced their faith or agreed to participate in Roman rituals; many who did not were tortured or killed, becoming holy ***martyrs***.
- This led to conflict between those who compromised and those who held firm and suffered the consequences.

# Theological Disputes within the African Church (2)

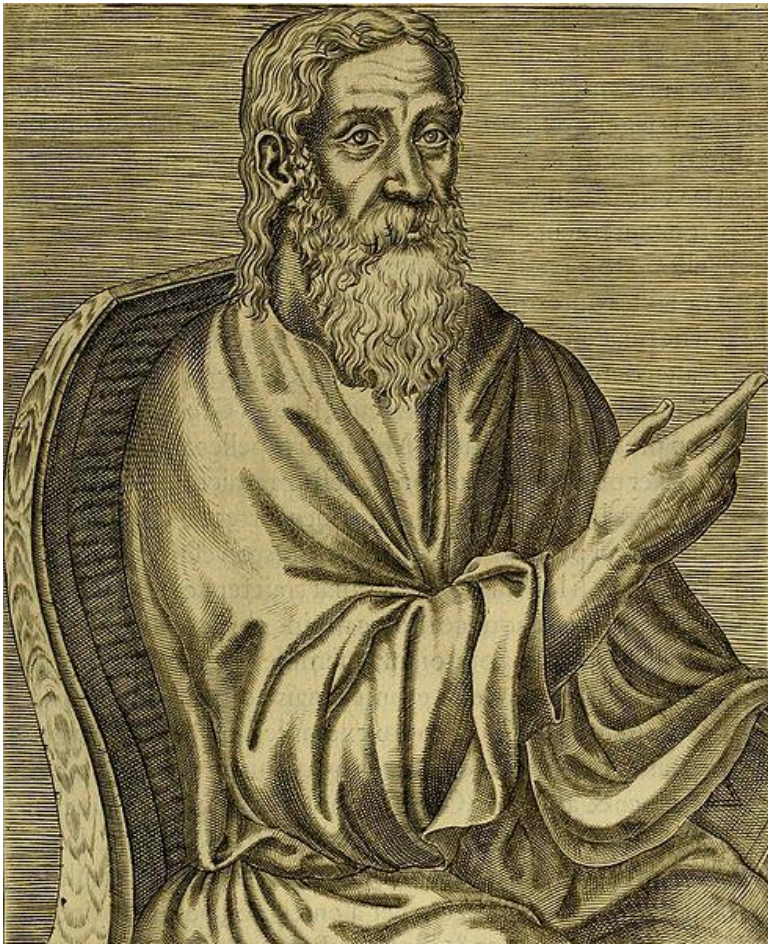
- **Christology:** If “the Word became Flesh” in Jesus, was Jesus human? divine? Both? Equal to God? Less than God? **HOW?** (*and don't get me started on explaining the Trinity...*)
- Jesus being born to a human mother in a physical body but also being God or the son of God raised difficult issues with different explanations.
- **Arianism:** God superior, Jesus inferior as he was created by God to live and die and be crucified. Rejected by Church which insisted Jesus=God.
- **Monophysitism:** Jesus has **divine and human forms but one nature.** Catholics rejected this doctrine but Coptics accepted it.



# Some of the rebel or “schismatic” Christian movements in N. Africa

- **Donatism:** a movement centered on opposition to allowing “lapsed” Christians back into Church. Named for its founder, Donatus (d. 311).
- This became powerful movement of those who wanted a pure “church of saints,” not a “school for sinners.”
- Broke away from main church and fought against it until early 600s, dividing Christian community and helping pave way for Muslim conquest.
- **Circumcellionism:** More radical form of Donatism. Named for the movement’s practice of surrounding (*encircling*) other Christians’ communities before attacking. Burned churches, raped nuns and gave Eucharist to dogs.
- Had political-economic dimension, as most members were poor peasants of Berber ethnicity, shut out of elite Roman society & resentful.
- Saw Roman Empire as Satanic and were happy to die and become martyrs.

# Clement of Alexandria (150-215)



- Early Christian theologian, a “Church Father,” who tried to reconcile Christian faith with Greek philosophy and classical culture. Much Christian theology grew from the attempt to blend the new faith with the old Greco-Roman philosophy, even though G-R philosophy grew out of pre-Christian, Pagan religion & culture.

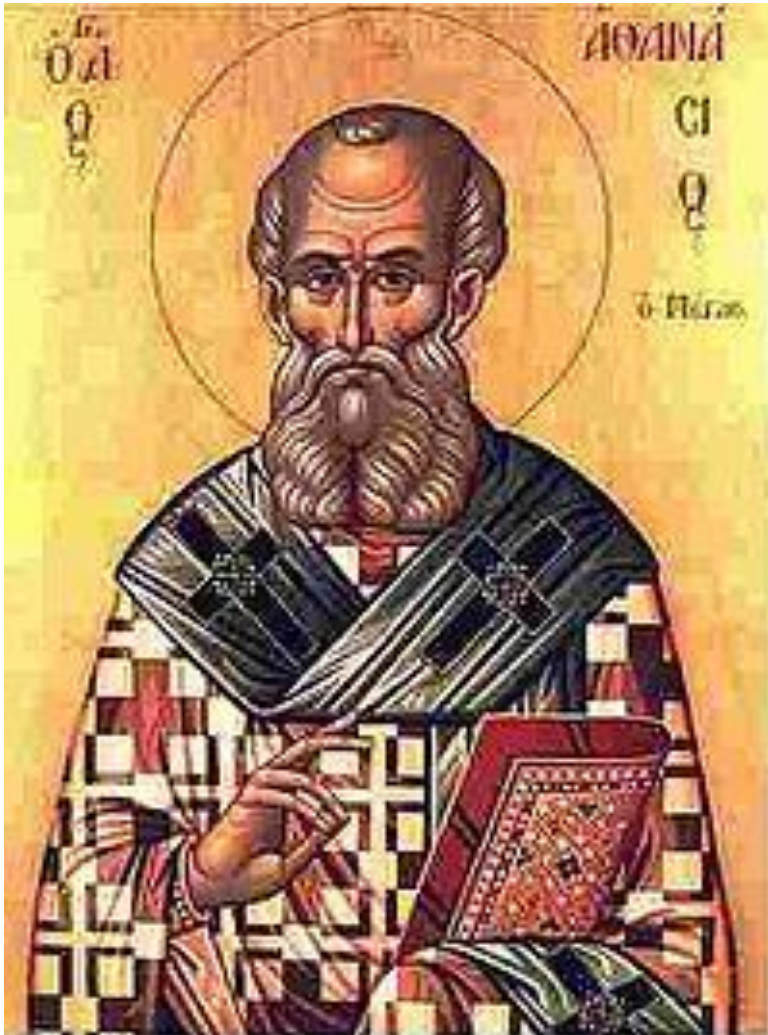
# Origen of Alexandria (184-234)



- Born in Alexandria in Christian family, his father died a martyr when O. was 17. He opened a school for Christians teaching both Biblical texts and G-R philosophy. Later, a Bishop.
- The greatest early Christian theologian. Allegorical interpretation, used Greco-Roman philo. to articulate doctrines of Trinity, nature of Jesus, sacredness of Mary, and Chr. interpretation of history.



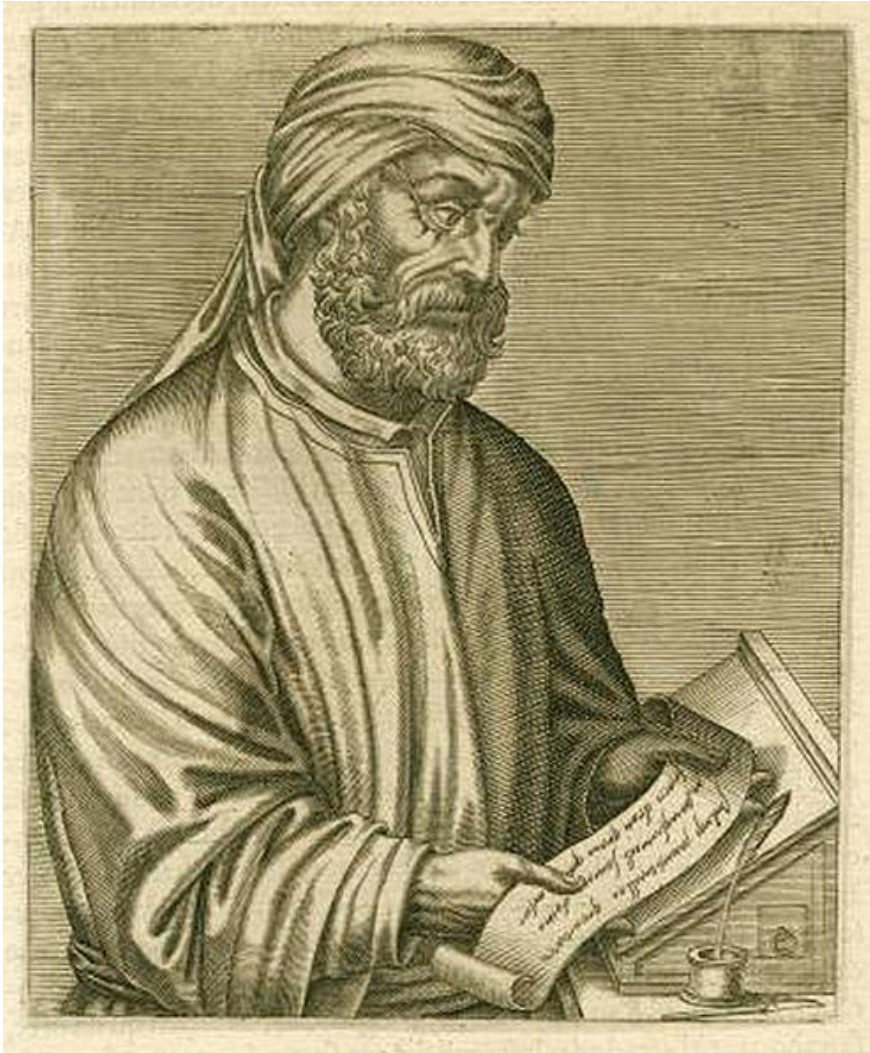
# Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373)



- Bishop and theologian, fought to suppress Arianism and defend unity of Trinity, and divinity of Christ as the incarnation of God on earth, enabling humanity to share in Christ's divinity through the Church's sacraments:  
**"God became man so that man might become God."**
- Defended Egyptian church against imperial control, thus pointing way to Coptic Church becoming completely independent from Rome.

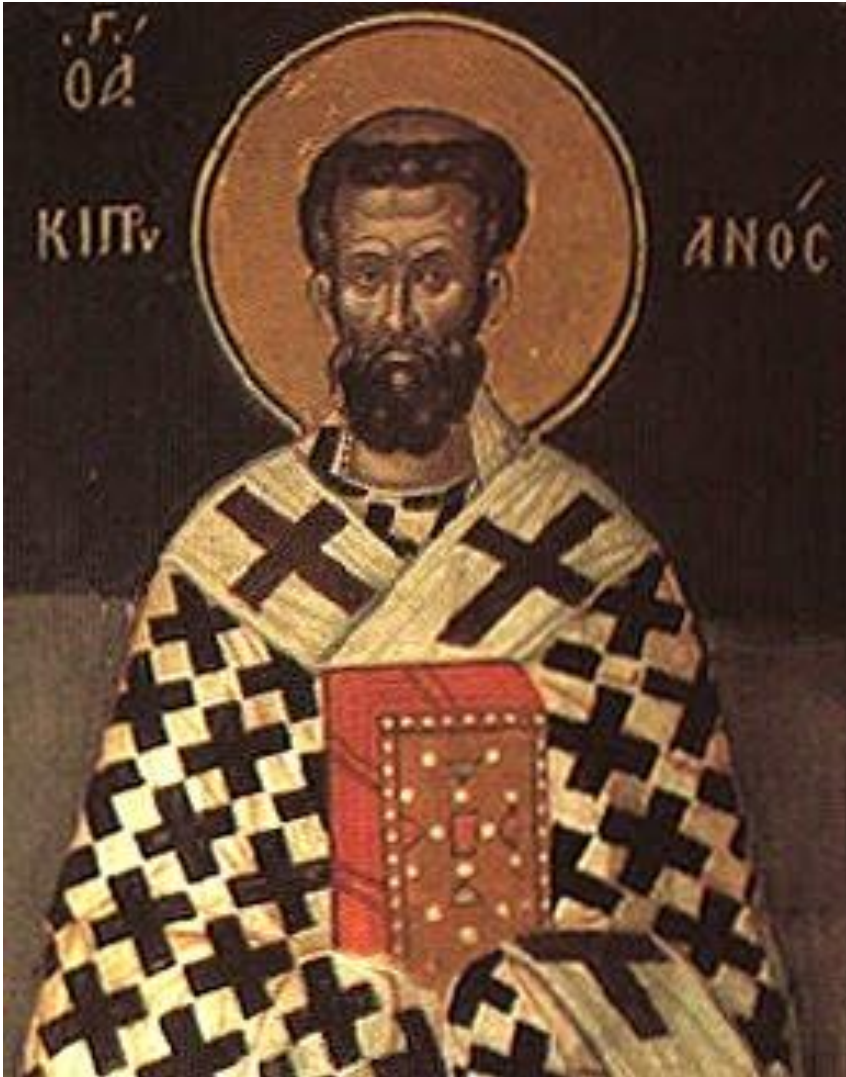


# Tertullian (Carthage) (160-225)



- From upper-class Roman Pagan family. Lawyer. Was attracted to the most strict, extreme and self-denying Christianity.
- For Mr. T., being Christian meant seeking to separate from ordinary Pagan society as much as possible and strive for absolute holiness.
- Praised martyrdom, declaring, **"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."**
- Finding the Church too moderate and compromising, T. joined the extreme sect of the *Montanists*.
- One of greatest Christian authors, writing in Latin.

# Cyprian (Carthage) (205-258)



- From wealthy Roman, Pagan family. Became Christian ~246, soon a Bishop. After persecution under Emperor Decian in 251, Cyprian had to deal w/split in the Church between those who cooperated w/ Pagan Roman authorities and those who maintained Christian faith.
- Advocated allowing “lapsed” Christians to be re-accepted after undergoing penance, and a 2<sup>nd</sup> baptism, but would not allow “lapsed” to become priests or bishops or administer sacraments. This angered other Christians.
- In new persecution under Emperor Valerian in 258, Cyprian was executed, became a martyr.



# Cyril of Alexandria (378-444)



- Bishop of Alexandria, played leading role in **Christological debates** about whether Christ was human, divine, or both; and if both, how?
- Insisted that Christ only had *one* nature, even if manifest in two forms (human and divine).
- This became basis of ***Monophysitism***, which was rejected by Church of Rome in Council of Chalcedon (451) but accepted by Coptic Church of Egypt and Ethiopia.

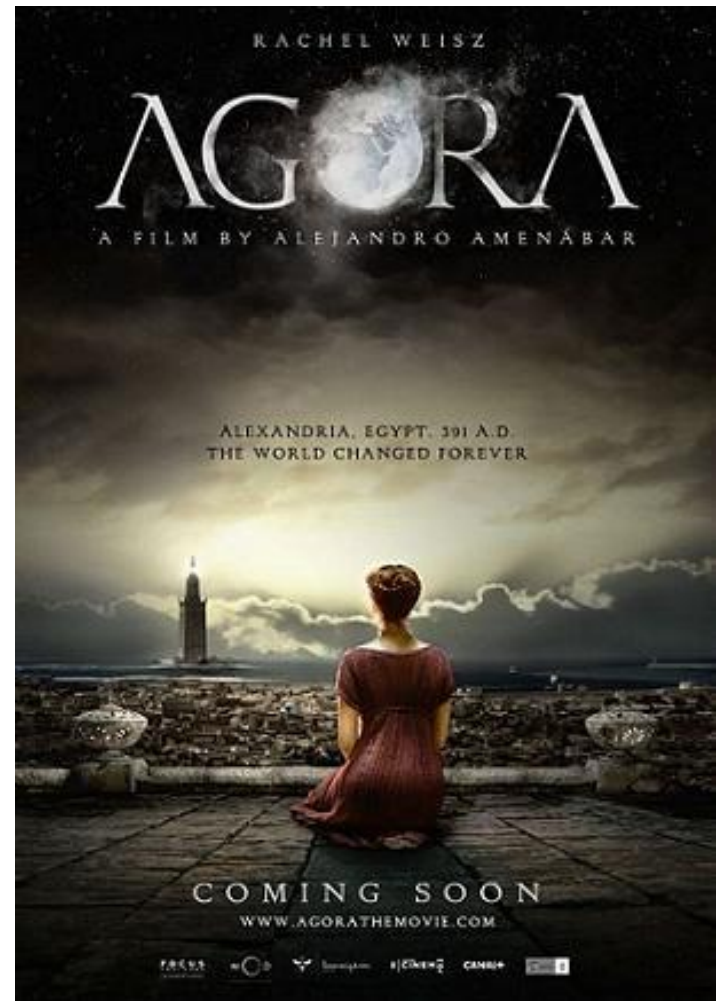
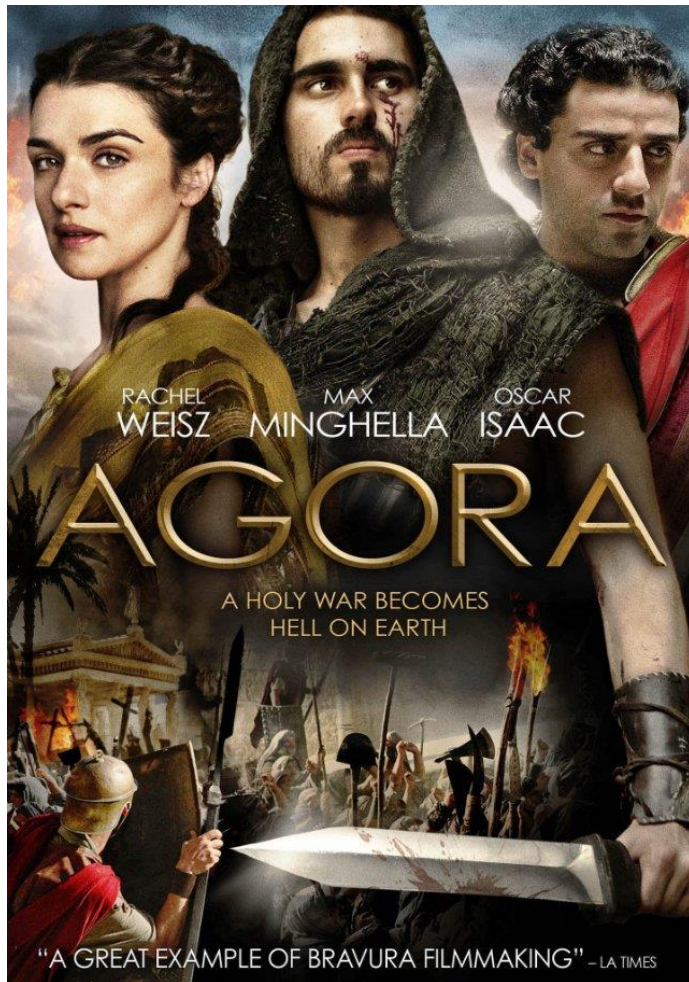
# Hypatia of Alexandra (370-415) : female Neoplatonist philosopher and scientist, killed by Christian mob



- Hypatia's death is an example of how Christianity gradually shifted from being a religion that had suffered persecution to one that practiced it against other religions.
- Some believe that her killers acted with the approval of Cyril of Alexandria.



# Film about Hypatia: *Agora* (2009)



# Augustine of Hippo (Algeria) (354-430)



- From upper-class family, became Christian at 32. Defended Church against various sects and schisms, accepted that sinful humans are imperfect, rejecting idea of spiritual perfection.
- Famous for *Autobiography* and *City of God*, which contrasts the perfect Kingdom of Christ, known through the Church, with the imperfect Kingdom of Man, represented by the Roman Empire.
- Contrasted Christian brotherly love vs. Pagan sensuality, cruelty and selfishness.

# Separation of **Coptic** from **Catholic** Church

- The term Coptic derives from Greek *Aigyptios* >> shortened as *Gypt* >> Arabicized as *Qibt* >> adapted to *Copt*, hence **Coptic**.
- Tension between the Egyptian branch of the Catholic church and the Roman- Byzantine branch had been going on for centuries.
- The tension was both **political** (Egyptians and Africans resented Roman domination) and **religious** (different views of nature of Jesus and God).
- In **451**, the Church **Council of Chalcedon** rejected the African *monophysite* view of Jesus and God. The Coptic church then decided to break away and become independent.



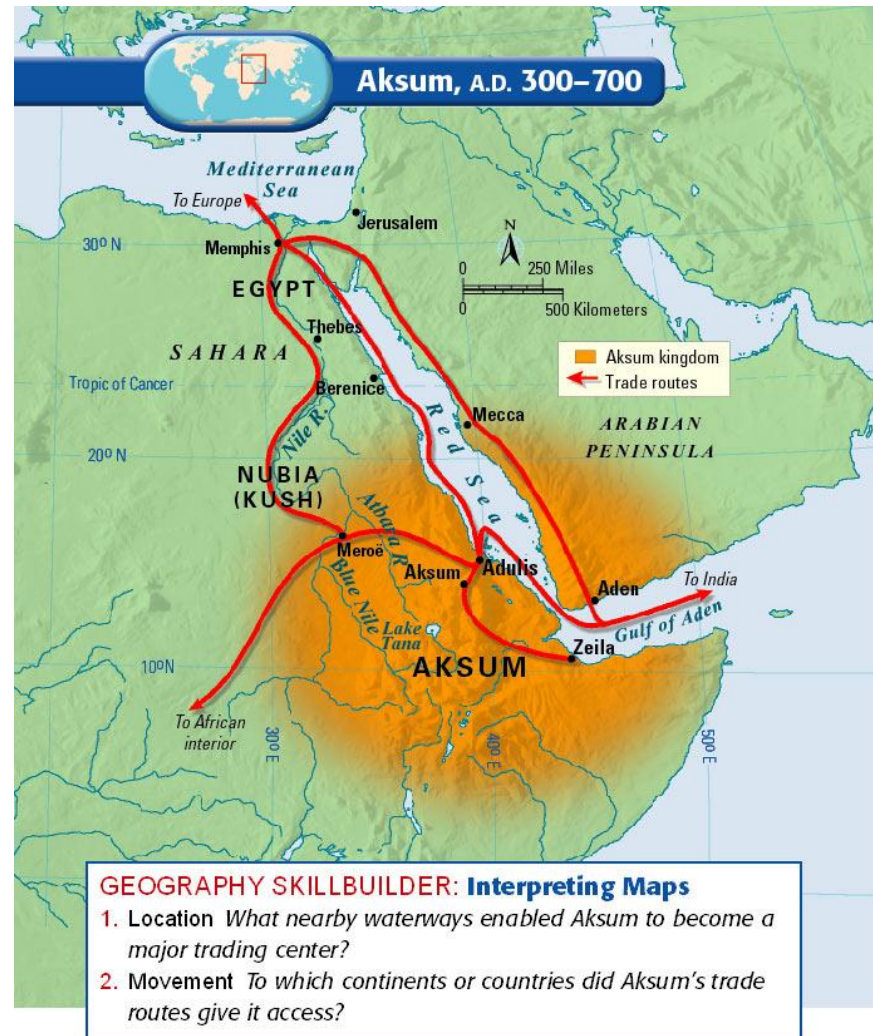
# Coptic Church in Ethiopia





# Christianity in Ethiopia (Axum) (1)

- Ethiopia, **Axum** in Roman times, had a sizable Jewish population before coming of Christianity in 4<sup>th</sup> century (same as in Egypt).
- King **Ezana** of Axum converted to Christianity in 4<sup>th</sup> century due to Egyptian missionary **Frumentius**, but religion only followed by the royal elite, not the common people of Axum



King Ezana (r. 330-356), first Christian ruler of Ethiopia/Aksum. Coin image and religious icon.





# Obelisk from Ancient Ethiopia, monument to King Ezana



# Christianity in Ethiopia (2)

- In 5<sup>th</sup> century, nine monks came from Syria, translated scriptures into **Ge'ez**, founded monasteries, spread the new religion widely
- The monks became revered as the **Nine Saints** of Ethiopia, monasteries multiplied and church became wealthy
- Ethiopia stayed w/the **Coptic Church** after the split at Council of Chalcedon in 451.
- At right, part of book of *Genesis* in **Ge'ez**, Semitic language related to Arabic and Hebrew

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ሆ፡ሀላባ፡መዋዕሉ፡  
ወጸቢሎ፡ለባ፡ለያዕቆብ፡እ  
ሰሙ፡አኑሃ፡አጓተ፡ኢተቀ፡ጎገራ፡  
ሊተ፡በኩ፡ጓግረ፡ዕስበኩ፡ሞ  
ጓተ፡ወእቱ፡ወቦቱ፡ለላባ፡ክል  
ሌ፡አዋልደ፡ሰማ፡ለእጓተ፡ተል

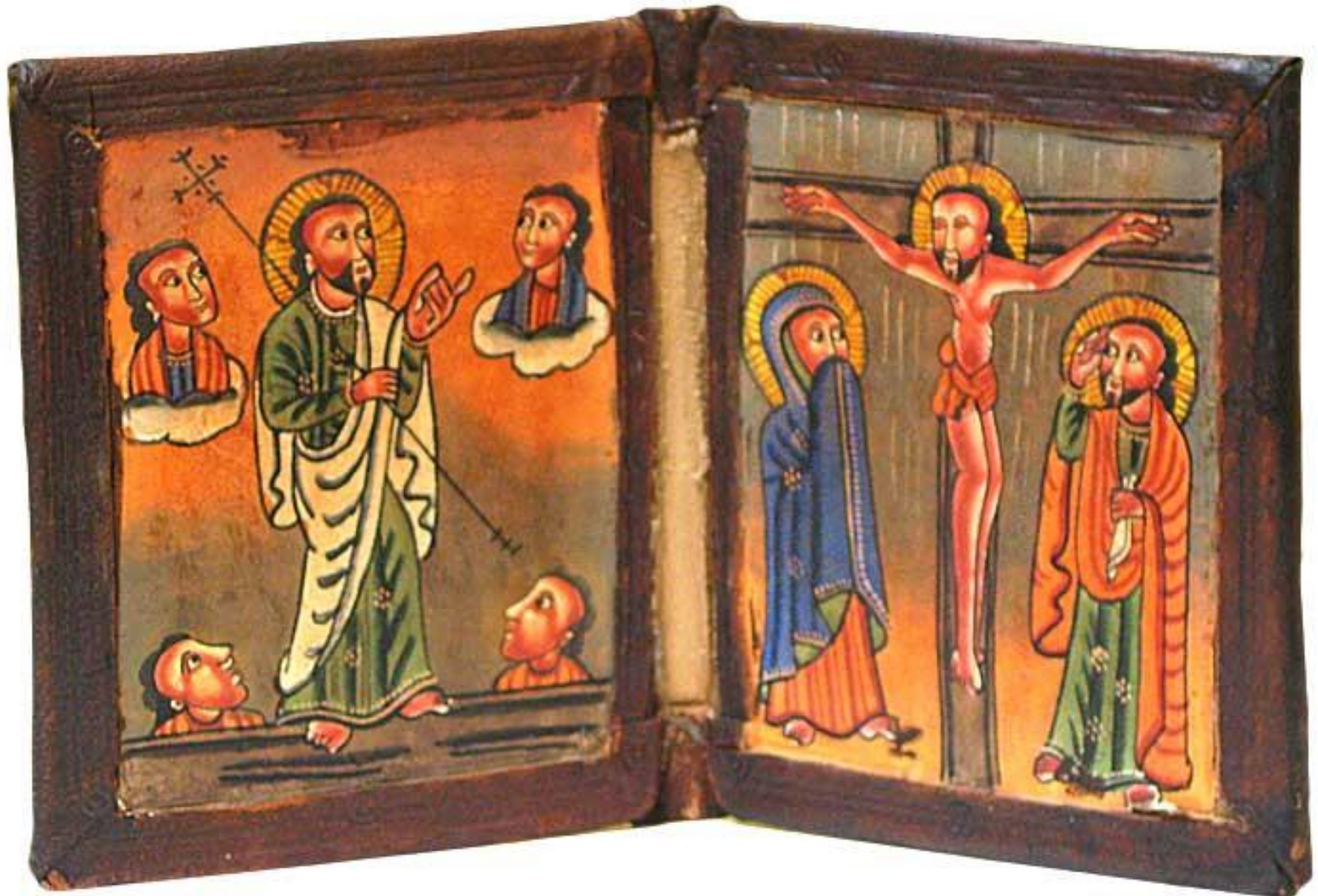


# Images of the Nine Saints of Ethiopia





# Ethiopian Icons



Ethiopian Icons: Mary as *theotokos* (Mother of God) is a favorite theme





# Kingdom of Sheva/Sheba/Saba, connecting Arabia and Northeast Africa in area of Ethiopia



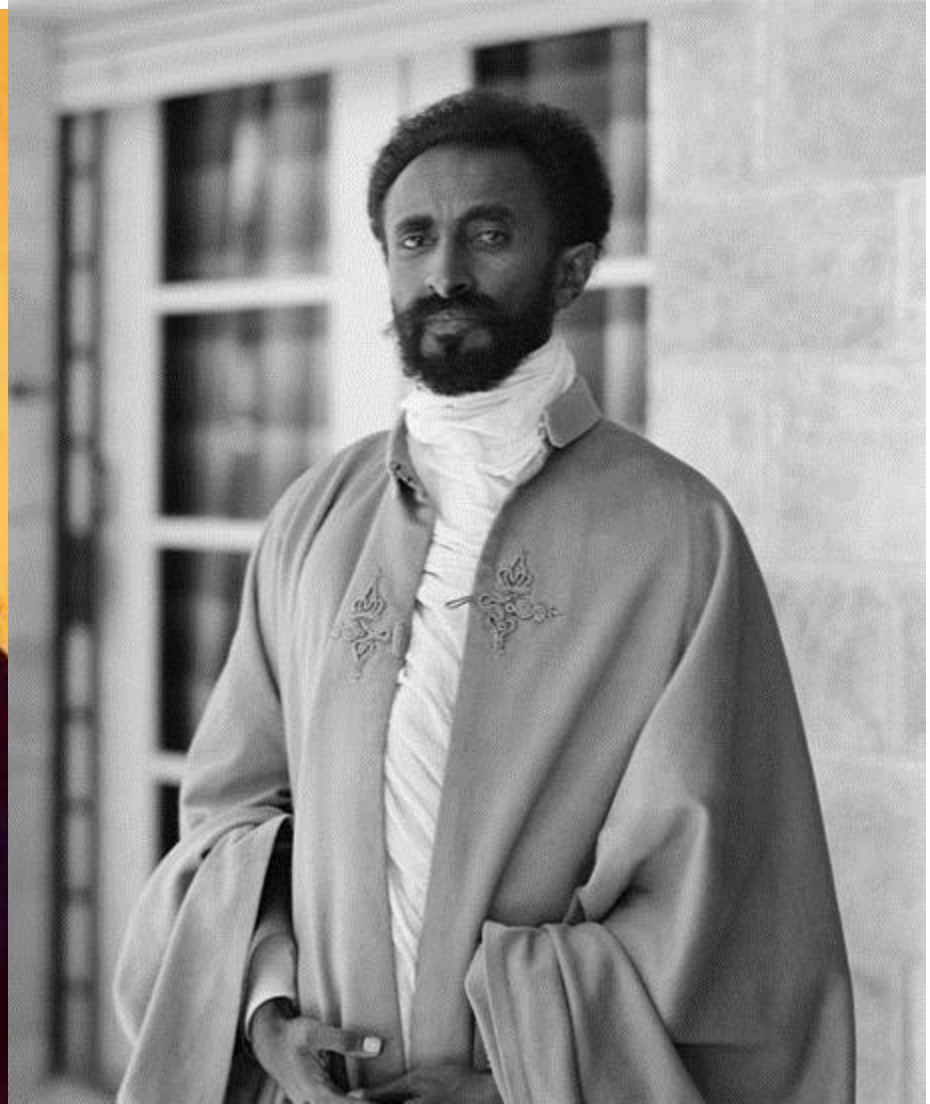
- Ethiopian Coptic Christianity also contains a tradition that King Solomon of Israel had a love-affair with the Queen of Sheba/Saba, a pre-Axum kingdom of Ethiopia, and that their child was King Menelik I, ancestor of all later kings up to Haile Selassie in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historians doubt this.
- It is also believed that Menelik brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.



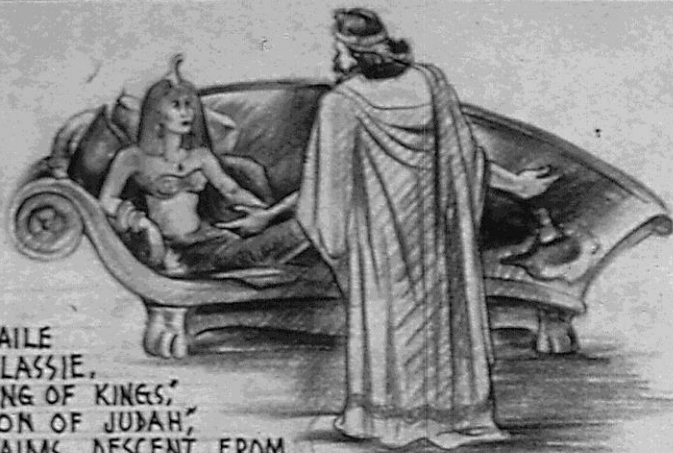
Ethiopian image of Queen of Sheba, whose kingdom is now usually referred to as *Saba*



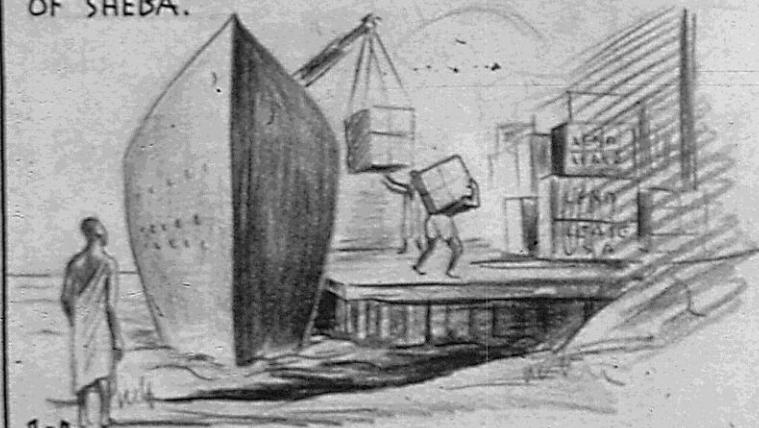
Haile Selassie (1892-1975), last Emperor of Ethiopia, believed by Rastafarians to be Messiah







HAILE  
SELASSIE,  
"KING OF KINGS,"  
"LION OF JUDAH,"  
CLAIMS DESCENT FROM  
SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN  
OF SHEBA.

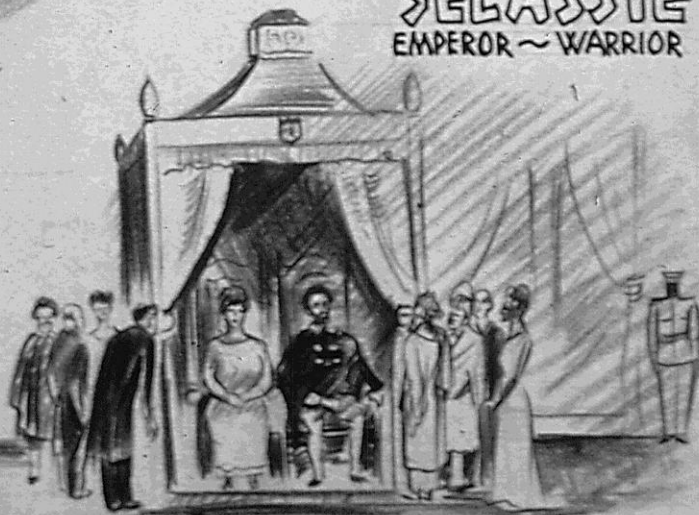


WELCOMING ETHIOPIA INTO THE  
UNITED NATIONS FAMILY, PRESIDENT  
ROOSEVELT ORDERED LEND-LEASE AID,  
EXTENDED TO THE BRAVE AFRICAN  
KINGDOM.

ETHIOPIA, FIRST NATION  
TO BE FREED FROM THE  
AXIS YOKE, HAILED THE RE-  
TURN OF HER EMPEROR, AND  
BECAME THE THIRTIETH MEMBER  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS.



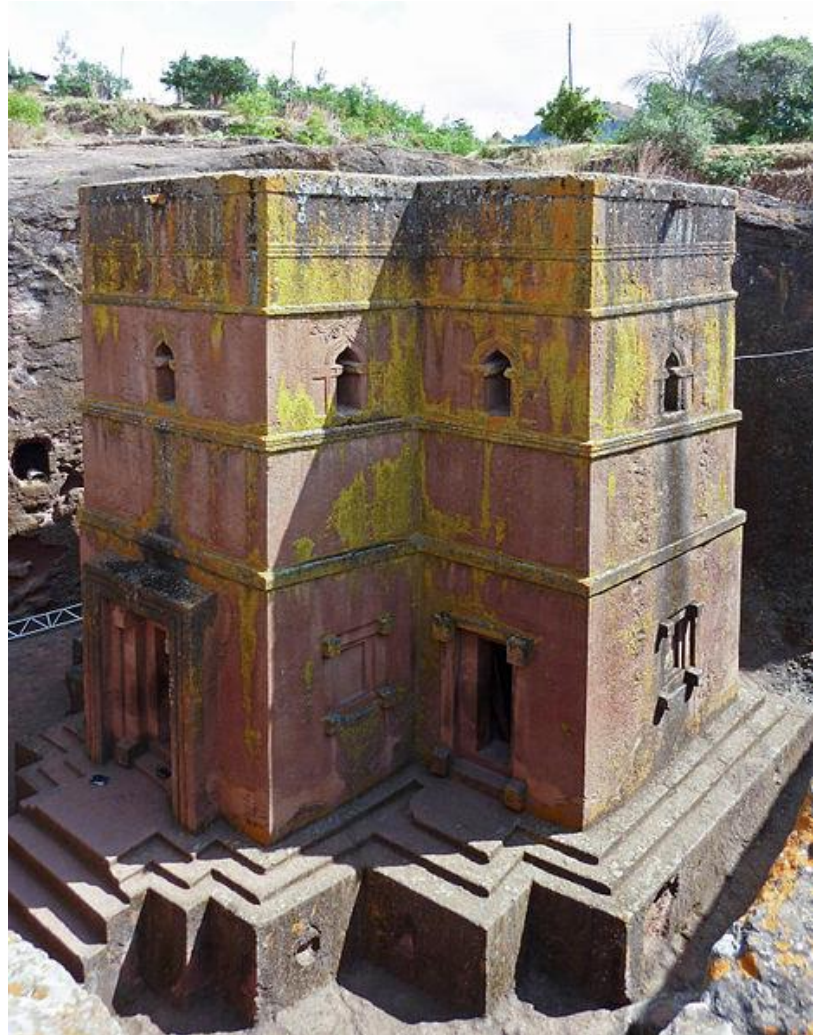
HAILE  
SELASSIE  
EMPEROR ~ WARRIOR



Alton  
OW

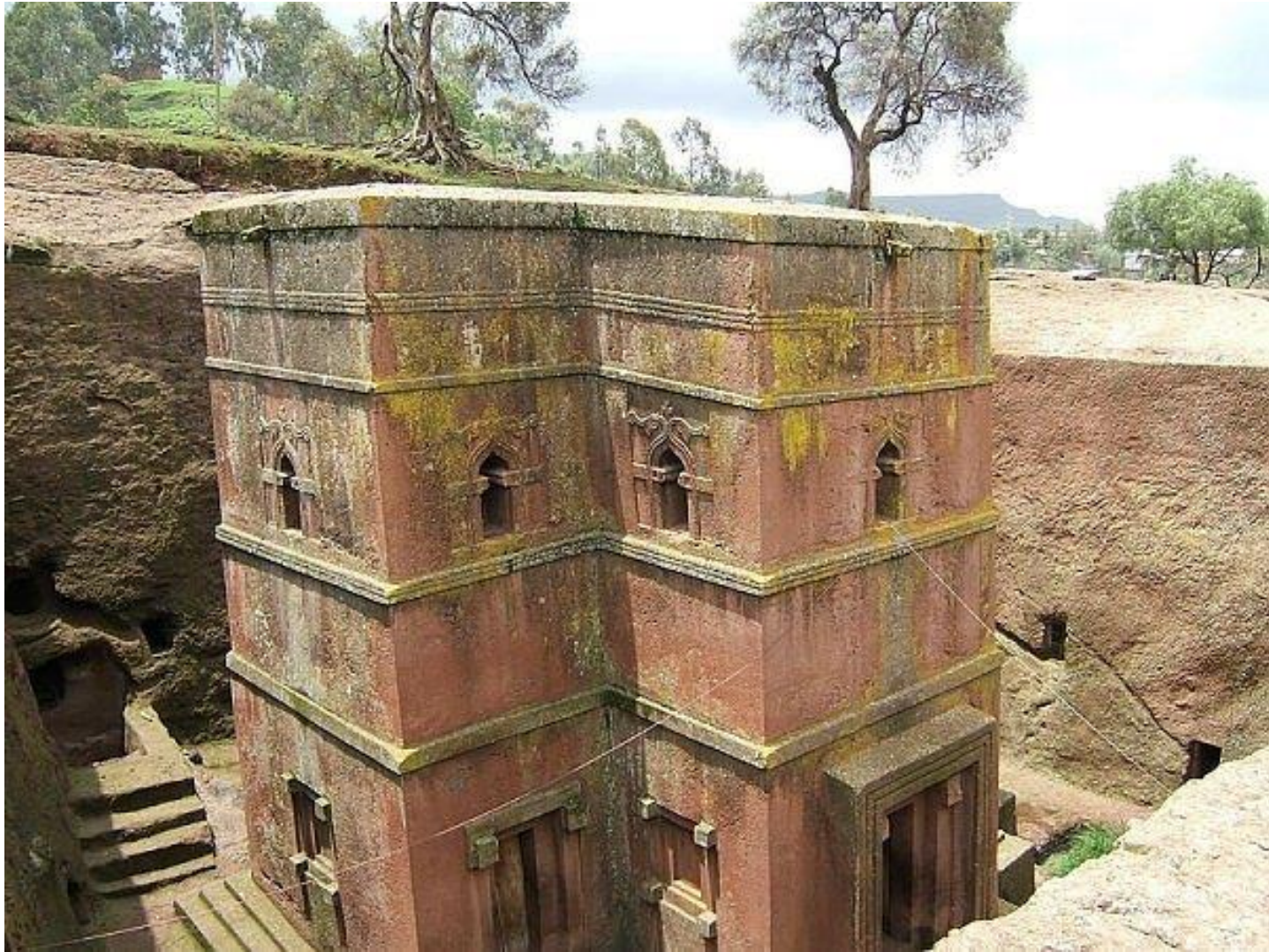
# Christianity in Ethiopia (3)

- A medieval Ethiopian kingdom, the **Zagwe Dynasty**, built fabulous stone-cut churches, carved out of huge blocks of stone and set in the ground, like towers placed in pits.
- Constructed around 1100, they may have been a tribute to Jerusalem in the Crusades.
- Ethiopia remained a Christian kingdom despite Muslim conquest of much of Africa in medieval period.



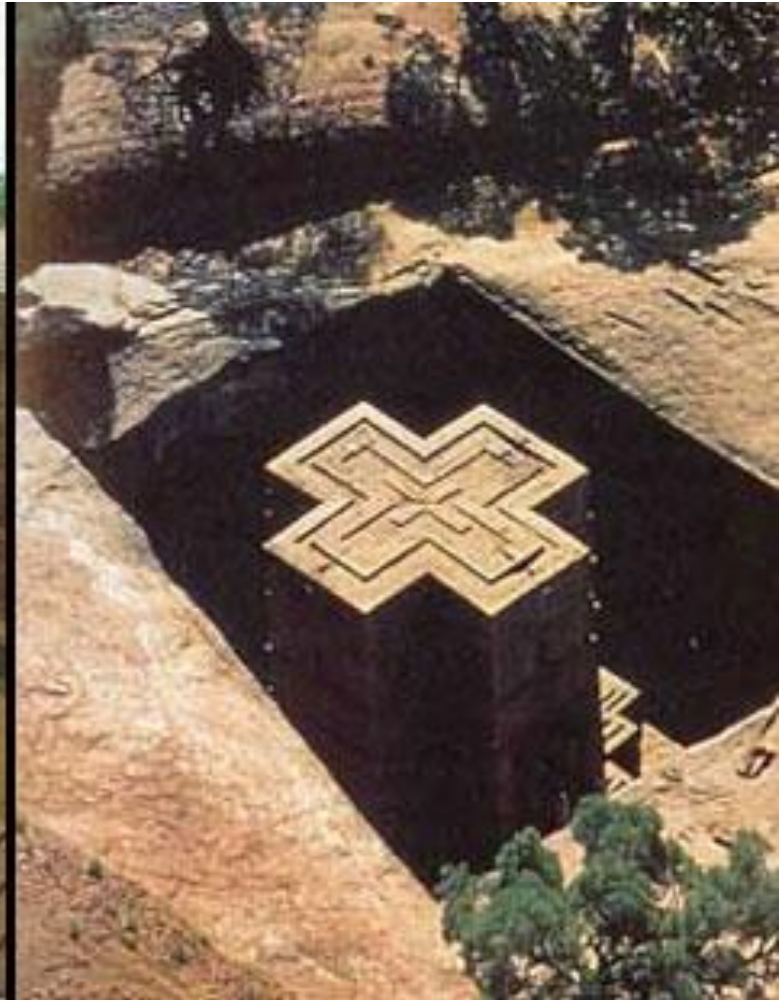


# Stone Churches of Ethiopia from the period of the Zagwe Dynasty 900-1270: *carved from the top down*





These churches are actually cross-shaped,  
viewed from above



# Cross-Shaped Stone Church in Ethiopia





# Contemporary Ethiopian Christian Art





# Ethiopian Christianity Today

