

# THE RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN THE THEOLOGICAL FORMATION OF SEMINARIANS TODAY

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## **Abstract**

Speaking on the revision of ecclesiastical studies, Vatican II recommended among other theological courses that seminarians “should also be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are more widely spread through individual areas” (*Optatam Totius* 16). She reasoned that this will help them better understand the elements of goodness and truth such religions possess and learn how to disprove the errors in them in the process of sharing the full light of the truth with those who lack it. Both Mbiti and Gyekye have noted that religion influences in a comprehensive way thoughts and actions of African life, fully determining practically every aspect of life including moral behaviour. The African lives in a religious universe in which all actions and thought have religious meaning and are inspired or influenced by a religious point of view. With African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islam as Nigeria’s three main religions, Nigeria is a typical religious plural society. Each of these religions has their values. These values have served as a guide and control of human behaviour, dictating right from wrong and this is the most important aspect of religion, that is, its capacity to shape honorable human personality and values being in accord with human society. Some of the human and religious values in traditional society include honesty, education, morality, brotherhood tie, respect for elders and fellow citizens, good name, community living and family loyalty. One of the most significant values that traditional Nigerians hold to be of great importance is the wisdom of its elders which manifests in proverbs-speaking. This paper

examines the relevance of the study of African Traditional Religion in contemporary Catholic theological formation houses. The method adopted is multi-dimensional - analytical, historical, phenomenological and theological. Our findings highlight the main reasons or benefits of the study, the traditional values to be integrated in theological formation; that our contextualization of the Christian faith has to be based on a good knowledge of pre-Christian traditional heritage or the knowledge of earlier religious tradition in our local environment; and that African Christian theology must be diverse based on different cultural background, social-economic and political diversity and the diverse strands of Christian missionaries that evangelized Africa. Our conclusion is that the African Christian theologian must engage in a serious dialogue with African traditional religion. He / She can no longer lay claim to exclusive truth and condemn the non-Christian religion as a mere worship of idols as some Pentecostals would do.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Traditional Values, African Christian Theology, Theological Formation

### **Introduction**

In this new era of evangelization advocated by the Catholic Church today, one of the basic questions that have to be addressed is: “How have the African seminaries, in general, and the Nigerian ones in particular, faced the challenges and adjusted to the inevitable changes in the formation of their priests?” (Ekwunife, 2011). According to him, the primary goal of formation in Catholic seminaries is to produce men who will be intellectually, socially and spiritually equipped to be effective instruments of evangelization after their ordination. The seminary is expected to train capable priests, who in response to God’s grace, can collaborate with their Bishops and superiors in serving God’s people throughout the world. The importance of formation was recently stressed by Pope Paul II in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy and the faithful so that the end products of Catholic priestly formation may become with the sacrament of Orders, “a living image of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church” (*Pastores Da Vobis* 42).

Speaking earlier on the revision of ecclesiastical studies, Vatican II recommended among other theological courses that seminarians “should be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are widely spread through individual areas” (*Optatam Totius* 16). She reasoned that this will help them better understand the elements of goodness and truth such religions possess and learn how to disprove the errors in them in the process of sharing the full light of the truth with those who lack them. In

addition Alexander Carter in his introduction to *Optatam Totius* has observed that the pastoral preparation must take into consideration the specific environment in which the young priest will begin his ministry (Abbot 1972, p. 436). Both J. Mbiti (1969) and B. Gyekye (1996) have noted that religion influences in a comprehensive way thoughts and actions of African life, fully determining practically every aspect of life including moral behaviour. The African lives in a religious universe in which all actions and thoughts have religious meaning and are inspired or influenced by a religious point of view (Obi 2013, p. 442).

With African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity as Nigeria's three main religions, Nigeria is a typical plural religious society. Each of these religions has its values. These values have served as a guide and control of human behaviour, dictating right from wrong and this is the most important aspect of religion – its capacity to shape honourable human personality and values being in accord with human society. Some of the human and religious values in traditional society include: honesty, education, morality, brotherhood tie, respect for elders and fellow citizens, good name, community living and family loyalty (Ebhomielen 2011, p. 131). One of the most significant values that traditional Nigerians cherish is the wisdom of its elders which manifests in proverb – speaking (Onimhawa & Adamu 2011, p. 25; Obi 2013, p. 443).

This paper examined the relevance of the study of African Traditional Religion in Catholic theological formation houses in lieu of Vatican II's earlier advice that Episcopal Conferences of each region are to adjust ecclesiastical courses to the pastoral requirement of a particular region. The method adopted is multidimensional – historical, analytic, phenomenological and theological.

### **Religions in Nigeria**

Historically, before the advent of Islam and Christianity the main religion was ATR. African Religion can be defined as “institutionalized patterns of beliefs and worship practiced by various African societies from time immemorial” (Metuh 1987, p. 51). The main tenet of this religion, based on the principle of hierarchy of beings, is made of five elements, namely, belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in ancestors, belief in spirits and the practice to magic and medicine (Idowu 1991, p. 137-202; Kanu 2015, p. 92-127). The African universe has physical and spiritual dimension. This means all beings can be said to belong to either two worlds- the visible world and the invisible world. There is no wall of demarcation between the two worlds as the two realms shade into each other (Metuh 1987, p. 51). Thus, there is no clear-cut distinction or opposition between the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual, the temporal and non-temporal, the sacred and the profane unlike the

dichotomy which is characteristic of Graeco-Christian worldview (Metuh 1987, p. 5). In spite of this sense of cosmic oneness that is essential to African religion, there are slight variations between West African worldview (made up of five elements), the worldview of Nilotic societies (in so far as their Supreme Being has prophets) and the worldview of the Bantu areas (who have three categories of spiritual beings instead of five). The implications of these variations for African Christology/African Theology ought to be noted and their import for priestly formation not to be disregarded.

However, with the introduction to Nigeria of Islam in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries through Kanem – Borno in the North East and the medieval empire of Mali in the South West and Christianity in the South, the centre could no longer hold, that is, the social order hitherto maintained through traditional religion caved in. Islam's emphasis on Allah's absoluteness, Sharia law, judgment day, its code of crime and punishment as well as its universalism, introduced elements of value confusion among the adherents of the old order in the rural communities of pre-colonial social institutions of the Hausa and Kanuri polities. For example, the *bori* or spirit possession cult of the Hausa, was one of the institutions of traditional social system that struggled for survival in the face of threatened extinction when it lost male converts to Islam and retained the support of women generally (Tamuno 1994,p.32). Though Islam accepted polygamy and its Sufi inspired tolerance of ritual, charms and magic, and some bits of syncretism, ancestor worship and reverence for associated spirits did not command acceptance by Islamic fundamentalists in attempts to accommodate spirits and *jinnns*. In these and other respects the theocracy of the traditional social order differed significantly from the concept associated with Islam, more so after the Jihad of 1864 led by Uthman dan Fodiye whose success established the Sokoto Caliphate. Thereafter, Islam's mission of purification was actively pursued by its clerics in the Fulani Hausa States (Obi 2013, p.444; Tamuno 1994, p. 33). The above instances portray the issue of contextualization in the history of Islam in Nigeria.

On its part, Christianity came to Nigeria in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century through the coastal areas of Badagry, Bonny, Calabar and the hinterland at Abeokuta, Onitsha and Warri after earlier attempts by the Portuguese failed to take root. The familiar Christian practices – Trinity, Salvation through Jesus Christ, the ten Commandments, forgiveness, judgment day, monogamy, abhorrence of idol worship and the like challenged the social order and its buttresses for group solidarity and crime control. The principle of individualism which Christianity directly encouraged also threatened the durability on social control systems and values built on traditional collective or communal approach (Tamuno 1994, p. 30; Obi

2013 p. 445). Besides, the notion of individual responsibility and accountability challenged the traditional belief and fear that serious crimes like abominations against earth goddess, would pollute an entire community if not expiated, began to be eroded seriously. Above all, other notions of the certainty of punishment prevalent under the traditional corpus belief system stood in danger of disintegration with the increasing pressure of Christian doctrine and practice. In short, the combined forces of Christianity, Islam and Western education, if not also the wide logic of colonization weakened the belief in the traditional social order, as E. B. Idowu acknowledged with regard to the Yoruba in 1962 (Tamuno 1994, p. 31; Idowu *Olodumare* 1996, p. 227-228; Obi 2013, 445). This experience found literary expression in literary works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1969). This analysis provides a sufficient background on the stress on the relevance of study of ATR in the formation of priests in Nigeria today.

### **Seminary Formation in Nigeria in Perspective**

In his brief history of Seminary formation in Eastern Nigeria written some 20 years ago, Ekwunife opined that seminary formation in Nigeria can be divided into the following three epochs: (i) the early beginning (1930-1960), (ii) the post independence period (1960-1980), and (iii) Modern period 1980 and beyond (Ekwunife 2011). Among the deficiencies he pointed out over the periods include: seminarians were isolated from their people, their traditional cultures and institutions; they were imbued with foreign cultures and manners; bias of the formators against anything African; seminarians were trained to be fluent in English and Latin but inarticulate in their own native language, ready to imitate their formators' foreign cultures and manners but unable to study their own culture where they were to work after ordination and lack of contextual orientation because the formators failed to take into consideration the cultural environment of the seminarians. Among the weaknesses in the second period of which the writer is a victim is the over emphasis on English and Latin as the official language of church and even teaching of philosophy in Latin using *Di Napoli* as the main text and wrong approach to cultural values. The 1970 Bigard Curriculum of Studies lists some 13 courses in philosophy and 13 in theology in addition to auxiliary subjects (Oburoto 2001, pp.75-76). With one course in *Igbo* philosophy and one course in comparative religion the deficiency in ATR is easily discernible (and had to be rectified later).

Even in the 1980s the negative attitude of both formators and seminarians towards the traditional religion and culture that sustained it was still rampart. Even though the formators were indigenous clergy men, "the quality of formation still lacked deep cultural orientation

which would encourage dialogue with African Traditional Religion and Culture” (Ekwunife 2011).

It is noteworthy that prior to Vatican II the Christian church had a rather negative attitude towards other religions and expected them to disappear with the introduction of Christianity in the places where they were practiced. But as the religions have continued to exist side by side with Christianity, the attitude of much of the Christian world towards them has changed from that of confrontation to that of dialogue. It is no longer theologically acceptable today, at least in the non-radical evangelical circles to look on other religions as satanic. Positive evaluations of religions vis-à-vis Christianity are being put forward by scholars who studied them (Ukpong 1989, p. 422; Pannikar 1999). The official Catholic position is reflected in the guidelines issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) which encourages the study of ATR, Islam and Interreligious Dialogue in the Seminaries and Houses of Formation in Sub-Saharan Africa (PCID 2004). But the question to be addressed is: “How far has this instruction been implemented in Seminaries throughout the country? It is still doubtful whether the study of ATR has found its way into the curriculum of junior seminaries in Nigeria or any other African country” (Ekwunife 2011).

In this regard the response to a survey in Africa of the content of what is taught in 61 major seminaries and 6 Catholic Universities and Institutes of Higher Learning with reference to ATR, Islam and Interreligious Dialogue by the PCID as of 2001 is apropos (instructive). A summary of the replies received from 47 major seminaries show that:

In 36 major Seminaries, ATR is taught as a course. In the rest of 11 Seminaries, ATR is taught under various titles – Inculturation, African thought, African spirituality, African philosophy etc.

In 35 major Seminaries, Islam is taught as a course. For others, no information has been given (it is presumed that it is not taught).

In 20 major seminaries some form of information is given in interreligious dialogue (PCID 2004, p. 10).

Of 6 the Catholic Universities and Institutes of Higher Learning consulted, four replied they have courses in ATR. In two of them Islam is taught as a course. None has a programme for teaching interreligious dialogue.

Based on the result of this survey, PCID tried to provide a common programme subject to local adaptations for teaching the courses provided and it is to the credit of the authorities of Seminary of All Saints, Uhie, Ekpoma that ATR has been mounted for those in year 600 and 700 level theology. However, it is disheartening that over the years some students do not take the course serious. It is embarrassing that some students are

unable to explain why the derogatory terms used by western investigators to describe our fore-fathers' religion are inappropriate. One is however, encouraged by the positive attitude displayed by the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Uromi, Most Rev. Dr Donatus Ogun who recently organized a Diocesan Delegate Assembly with focus on Burial Practices in Esanland which held Monday, 15<sup>th</sup> February to Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 at Brother Roman Catechetical and Renewal Centre, Ekpoma. It is hoped that such discourse will help understand and douse tensions on the burial rites in Esanland. This particularly shows the need to adjust academic curricula to the needs of the environment.

### **Rationale for the Study of ATR**

The students of any department of Religious Studies in Nigerian Universities have always met the embarrassing question from colleagues: "why are you studying religion? Are you preparing to be a pastor?" In like manner, some Christians in Africa may ask, "why study ATR? We have forsaken our old religion and have embraced the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is now our Lord and Saviour. What further need do we have to research ATR?" (Gehman, 1989, p.15).

Several scholars have taken up this challenge. According to Aderibigbe and Ayegboyin (2001) the all embracing reason why religion should be studied is its importance, significance and hold on human life. First, there is currency of religion as a human phenomenon. Secondly, the dominating presence, and existence and functions in society have come to be accepted so that there is no apology for its acceptance. Third, is its universal relevance. Religion has universal application that transcends demarcations of place, race, colour and time. Fourth, is the fear that it is impossible to find a replacing value for or to fill the vacuum of its absence (pp.20-31). Other reasons include the benefits of the study such as emancipation from ignorance, information and skill since one is exposed to the proper methods of data collection in the study of religion, and appreciation of one's and other peoples' religion.

For Gary Kessler so much of human history and culture remains a mystery if we cannot comprehend the role religion has played and continues to play in the development of human institutions, values and behaviour. In addition, study of religion especially religions of others helps us overcome our all-too-comfortable ethnocentric attitudes and achieve a more comparative perspective (Kessler 2006, p. 12). Moreover, the study of religion opens up a space in our busy lives where we can pause and reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives. It provides an occasion for us to think, in a comparative setting about what constitutes a good life. Finally, the study would prepare for a career in the field of

religious studies and other fields and to satisfy the requirement for general or liberal education (Kessler 2006, p. 13).

Similarly, different scholars have given reasons why African Traditional Religion should be studied. For example, Gehman offers six reasons, namely, we ought to study the traditional religion in Africa because it is one of the world's religions of a great people with a great past. ATR was formerly embraced by a whole continent. Second, ATR is the religious background of African people whom Christians seek to evangelize today. Therefore, in order to build bridges of communication with them, we must study the beliefs and practices of the traditional African. Thirdly, many professing Christians rely on ATR in times of crisis, particularly those looking for the fruit of the womb, power and money. Fourth, the Christian church in Africa needs to contextualize her faith so that it becomes truly rooted in the life of the people. The just concluded Catholic Diocese of Uromi Delegate Conference on funeral rites in Esanland is apropos here. The rise of African Independent Churches (AICS) owes its origin to failure of earlier 'missionary Christianity' in this regard. In the same token, the church of North Africa that produced famous theologians as Saints Augustine and Cyprian was wiped out, due in part to its non rootedness in the life of the indigenous people. Fifth, the revival of ATR in Ethiopianism brings a sense of urgency to the study. Sixth, ATR should be studied for its own sake (Gehman 1987, p. 15-22).

On his part, T. Quarcoopome gives some fundamental reasons for studying West African Traditional Religion (WATR). He asks the question: "Of what relevance then is the study of WATR on the contemporary scene?" In his view the objectives for the study of ATR or WATR are as follows:

to help the African to reconstruct his past in order to understand the present and effectively plan for the future: to help the African in his search for self determination and self-assertion; to make known the world view of the Africans so that non-Africans can understand the social and moral behaviour of the African; to make scientific comparison with other religions and finally to correct misconceptions about the Traditional Religion by Western Investigators and educated Africans (Quarcoopome 1987, pp.9-10).

Thus the basic aim of the study is not to glorify the African past but to present the truth with regard to what Africans authentically believe and authentically think about God and the supersensible world (Idowu 1973, p. 106). This will induce sympathetic understanding for the traditional faith.

Finally the PCID document earlier mentioned highlights the aims of the course on ATR as: (a) to awaken the interest of participants in

African traditional religion; (b) to prepare and dispose them for interreligious dialogue; (c) to help them appreciate the lasting values of this religion which are relevant to modern African quest for nation building; and (d) to reinforce their appreciation of the urgency of the Church's constant call for inculturation of the Christian faith in Africa (PCID 2004, p.10). Consequently it designed a programme that suits long term (two semesters) and short term (one semester) option depending on the local need. Hitherto Seminary of All Saints, Uhieles has chosen the two semester option.

While emphasizing the manifold reasons and relevance of the study, the difficulties besetting the study ought to be noted. These include the vast geography of Africa with the corresponding mistaken generalization about Africa, the influence of direct or indirect colonial indoctrination by the British and French colonial masters, the factor of death of custodians of the cultural and religious traditions; the myriads of language and dialectics in Africa. Nigeria alone has over 250 ethnic groups. Last but not the least, is the influence of other cultures and religions, western education and modernity. What this means is that the interpreter has to note that Africa is a continent of multitudes of nations, myriads of people, countless languages or dialectics and peoples at various levels of culture (Idowu 1973, p. 78-83).

### **African Values and Priestly Formation**

There are many African values of ATR which could be integrated in the holistic formation of Catholic priests. Among them could be: (i) the sense of the sacred, (ii) corporate existence, (iii) a sense of justice, (iv) sincerity in ones' commitment to a cause, and (v) good leadership (Ekwunife 2011). Others are the concept of *omenala*, respect for elders, use of language and traditional concept of mediation. We will illustrate with some of the lasting values of ATR for a modern nation building/priestly formation.

In ATR the sense of the sacred is very strong and important. Rudolf Otto (1958) did mention two dimensions of the sacred, the *mysterium tremendum*: it attracts and repels. In order to safeguard the distance we have taboos. We have already mentioned that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and profane, the invisible and the visible since the two shade into each other in African worldview. Consequently, whenever the harmony in one is destabilized, it affects the other and the services of the diviner are needed to restore the harmony. There are varieties of the sacred – God, divinities, ancestors, persons, places and objects based on their relationship to God and the world. For example, a masked person is sacred because it is related to the invisible reality, the ancestor. To unmask a masquerade is a taboo, an abomination that requires a ritual cleansing because we are expected to preserve the

respectful distance from the sacred without severing the relationship. In Africa the sacred is not only associated with power, it is affiliated with the highest values in human life such as honesty, justice, gentleness, patience and sincerity. A sacred person is expected to mirror these values. This is depicted in the Igbo concept and practice of *Ozo* title-taking in which the initiate is addressed as *Nze* – an epithet of truthfulness and justice. In the words of Ekei:

Initiation into *Ozo* makes the recipient “sacred” *Nze*. The group of *Ozo* titled men are therefore called ‘sacred group’ (*Ndi Nze*). The concept ‘*Nze*’ has both ethical and religious significance for the Igbo. Etymologically, ‘*Nze*’ is an abridged term of *Nze’-le*, that is, ‘separation’ or ‘apartness’ or sacrosanct. These concepts convey a mystical meaning to the recipient. In other words, he is by this title, ethically aloof, and ritually separated from ‘commoners’ or from ‘pollutions’ and ‘defilements’ (Ekei 2001, p. 4).

It is this symbol of justice that makes *Ozo* initiation to be linked with sense of Igbo morality.

The emphasis on the African sense of the sacred has far reaching effects in the formation of Catholic seminarians. It will create in them an attitude of deep respect for the things of God and anything associated with God. Among the sacred things is the human person. Hence crimes like murder, abortion, uprooting seed yams are *nso nla* abomination that can only be cleansed by Nri priests. Worship, covenant with divinities and others, oath-taking, sacrifice and prayer are among the means used to internalize the sense of the sacred and sacredness of the human person. Therefore stimulating the sense of the sacred in seminary formation will help respect the sacred of non-Christian religions.

Africans recognize life as life-in-community. There is the conviction that humankind of the past, present and future generations forms one community. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, the family are crucial in one’s estimation of oneself. Our nature as being-in-relation is a two-way relation with God and with our fellow human beings. Catholic seminarians in Africa need to emphasize the sense of community-living and values to cut across ethnic and social boundaries. The sense of life-in-community will help douse the tensions that sadly manifest between the parish priest and his curates/priests in residence.

However, this community living cannot thrive without a sense of justice. ATR is so concerned about justice such that anyone who negates the principle of justice will be severely punished not only by society but also the gods. This is expressed in the Igbo proverb *Egbe belu, ugo belu*

(live and let live). Again this is also aptly depicted in Igbo religion through the *Ofo- na- ogu* concept. The *Ofo* concept has been exposed by Clement Ejizu (1986) and the *Ogu* is aptly exposed by Stephen Egwin (2005). *Ofo* is the guarantor of truth, just judgement, just living and authority to rule as well as pray to the gods for oneself and others. *Ogu* stands for moral uprightness and innocence. The concept is well utilized in the dynamics of Igbo litigation. *Ofo* represents ancestral authority, sacred tradition and community and enforces justice while *Ogu* ascertains the innocence of the individual and determines whose side justice takes. The judicial system is based on the traditional moral code which is considered to be sacred tradition. The ancestral power to dispense justice is determined by innocence (*Ogu*) and judgement (*Ofo*) and operates in the form of punishing the guilty and vindicating the innocent (Egwin 2005, p. 195). A sense of justice has to be instilled in the formators and seminarians in the seminaries throughout Africa.

Among the good leadership qualities Arinze advocated that has to be inculcated in seminarians six African values stand out: “sense of the sacred, respect for life, sense of community, family spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred and symbolism in worship”. Idowu associated many of these African values with the Yoruba concept of ‘*Iwa*’, character. Indeed there is hardly any good textbook on ATR that does not reflect on some African moral values (Ekwunife 2011).

One of the most valuable culture of the African society is the concept of respect for elders and those in authority. Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age: the old man’s gray hairs earn him right to courtesy and politeness. Hence the dictum, “the words of the elders are words of wisdom” because of the experience they garnered over the years. Hence elders in Africa are respected for many reasons. An Igbo adage has it: “He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle”. The oracles are believed to give the infallible truths; these elders are believed to say the truth and their words and instructions are heeded to for the promotion of good behaviour among the youth. The church like the society and African traditional value teaches respect for elders and those in authority. This is because this group of individuals has been given the authority of leadership.

The African culture values language and proverbs, because in them they communicate and in them wisdom is passed in the process; the importance of both cannot just be overemphasized in the African cultural heritage. Moreover, for the African, if the individual is not able to communicate with the native language the individual ideologically, puts himself outside the community. Speaking a language in the African sense does not depend on the peripheral knowledge of the language but on the ability to express oneself adequately in the proverbs and idioms of the

language community. One is therefore happy that Seminary of All Saints, Uhiel academic curriculum allots some space for the vernacular.

Diagnosing the causes of affliction is a central preoccupation of African Religion (Magesa 2008, p. 190). There are people who have the power to “sniff out hidden sources of disorder”, who can advice on procedures to correct the situation. They are generally known as diviners. Laurenti Magesa (2008) mentions some of the values of divination. Since divination systems are “ways of knowing”, ATR presumes that true reasons for all events can be known although sufficient knowledge is seldom available through mundane means of inquiry (Magesa 2008, p. 192). Divination assists in knowing true reasons for events. Events are either positive or negative. In ATR when calamities befall a community, diviners are consulted to know the true reason behind the cause, and possible measures taking to avert the calamity are also sought. Divination ensures that decisions are made or the right course of action is carried out to address certain events or situations. Thus, divination helps Africans to gather the necessary information about events, the causes and possible solution (193). It aids right decision making in addressing calamity in a community.

Divination also helps to protect and secure the future. Hence at the beginning of the year, or at birth, diviners are consulted to ascertain what the year or destiny of a child holds. Such diviners will expose the good and bad aspects of the coming year and proffer ways to sustain the good ones and other ways of averting the bad ones usually by appeasing the gods through sacrifices as the case may be. This provides the background why today at the beginning of the year, prophecies are awaited from insightful men of God. The implication of this traditional value for seminary formation is that the equivalent gift of prophecy, of Davidic practice of inquiring from the Lord, ought to be paramount in the training of seminarians. Prayer of inquiry (*Iga na ajuju in divinatory terms*) is a major aspect of Davidic and prophetic spirituality as manifested in the life of prophet Josiah Oshitelu and Apostle Ayo Babalola (Oshitelu 2007, p. 71) and seminarians ought to imbibe this. In this regard we ought to note the challenge which traditional African concept of mediation poses to modern African Christianity. For, the traditional agents of mediation are twofold: invisible agents (divinities, ancestors, spirits) and visible agents (priests, diviners, medicine men, mediums, magicians, seers, kings, queens and elders). This shows a diversity of ministry and religious roles of religious specialists or cultic functionaries in traditional setting which has to be taken into consideration in the process of contextualizing the gospel. None of these religious specialists claim monopoly in religious affairs but collaborate with others (Obi

2006, p. 290). Thus collaborative ministry which is advocated today was already in vogue in traditional religion.

### **Implication of ATR for African Christian Theology**

In African Christianity, one of the main thrusts in the area of contextualization in which ATR has played a dominant part is in the area of Christology. J. Onaiyekan (2016) writing on the main trends in African Christology mentions four sources to include the Bible, the theological patrimony of the church, African traditional religious concepts and modern African situation (pp.54-58). Many African theologians have borrowed from the thought world of ATR to explicate the person of Christ. Such attempts include the East African theologian C. Nyamiti, who presents Jesus as the greatest of all ancestors taking a clue from East Africa where the veneration of ancestors plays a key role in the traditional life. Because of their kinship with their descendants, they are concerned about their welfare. Jesus fulfills all the Bantu expects of his ancestors in an eminent degree and can therefore be considered as an Ancestor, or more precisely “our Brother Ancestor” (Nyamiti 1985, p.33). B. Bujo toes the same line, from an ethical perspective. He describes Christ as a Proto-Ancestor (1981, p. 143; Onaiyekan 2016, p. 55). Kabasele adds to the concept of ancestor that of ‘Elder’ (Onaiyekan 1991,p.20). The famous healer and former Archbishop of Lusaka, Emmanuel Milingo also expressed similar thought about “Jesus the Ancestor” (Milingo 1984, p. 78).

Other African traditional concepts have been used to explicate the person of Christ such as the concept of “Kinsman”, the concept of “Chief” by Kabasele, the “Healer” by C. Kolier and K. Enang as we see also in Nigerian Pentecostal Charismatic circles. An unusual portrait of Jesus is that of the ‘Master of Initiation’ espoused by Bishop Sanon of Burkina Faso who takes us into the sacred groves of Burkinabe initiation ceremonies. He explains what it means to say that Jesus is ‘Master of initiation’, that is, the elder who guides towards perfection those who have been at the initiation rites. This symbolic approach is not completely new as some of the Greek Fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzen already spoke of Jesus as a *mystagogus*, a title derived from Greek religions and refers to the ‘leader of initiation rites. From a Yoruba religious perspective, J. Onaiyekan adds ‘Christ the Great *Orisha*’ because Yoruba traditional religion is almost exclusively concerned with the cult of the divinities called *Orisha* who act as agents and servants of the Supreme Being. *Orisha* is so much a characteristic of Yoruba religion that its followers are called *Aberisa*, “worshippers” of *Orisha*. Yoruba converts to Christianity often speak of giving up *Orisha* in order to accept Jesus

(Onaiyekan 1991, p.22; Onaiyekan 2016, pp. 39-40). On his part, Chris Manus (1993) also exposed a Christology of Christ as “the African King”.

Each of these portraits of Christ within an African setting and colour has its limits of application. For example, Christ is more than an Ancestor. His relationship with the Father is unique and different from that of any *Orisha* with the Supreme Being. Consequently our images cannot say it all although they do say something (Onaiyekan 2016, p.58). At least they do give us inkling as to the benefits of ATR in the study of African Christian Theology.

### **Conclusion**

The primary goal of formation in Catholic seminaries is to produce men who will be intellectually, socially and spiritually equipped to be effective instruments of evangelization after ordination. This pastoral preparation requires that seminarians be acquainted with religions practiced in their specific environment where they would work according to Vatican II. Since religion influences in a comprehensive way the thoughts and actions of African life, seminarians ought to be grafted in the tenets of African Religion which is one of the three religions practiced in the multiethnic culture of Nigeria.

This paper examined the relevance of ATR for future African priests. The reasons for studying religion in general and ATR in particular were highlighted using the views of different scholars. The difficulties besetting the study were also noted. Many African values which could be integrated in the holistic formation of Catholic priests include the sense of the sacred, community living, sense of justice, sincerity in one’s commitment to a cause, good leadership, respect for elders, and concept of traditional mediation which involves collaborative ministry. Finally, the implication of ATR as a source for African Christian Theology particularly with the understanding of the person of Christ in African setting were broached, such as “Christ as Ancestor”, “Chief”, “*Orisha*” and “Kinsman”. The limitations of some of these images notwithstanding, they do give us inkling as to the benefits of studying ATR in the exposition of Christian revelation. The study of both philosophy and theology in major seminaries in Africa needs to be culture bound. African traditional religion and culture ought to be the springboard of philosophical and theological studies in Africa. Perhaps one may not be far from the truth in saying that the deficiencies in most seminaries in Africa in the past are largely caused by the non-inclusion of timeless African traditional values in the curriculum of seminary formation.

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