

THE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RITES OF PASSAGE VIS-À-VIS THE CHRISTIAN RITES OF INITIATION

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Preamble:

Since the evolution of inculturation in the scope of theology, there has been a heightened consideration of the rich socio-cultural and religious values. The 'Ultimate Being' has lavishly embedded in the depths of the indigenes of the African soil. Evidently, the derogatory terms attributed to this continent and its peoples such as 'dark continent', 'primitives', 'pagans' are gradually going into oblivion. Scholars and theologians are daily toiling through research efforts to unveil those African rites and rituals, which are similar to the Christian religion. Undoubtedly they are toiling through the paths our saviour Jesus Christ carved out for humanity as Fr. Peter Schneiller has observed: "Inculturation makes us aware of the particularity of the incarnation. Jesus was a Jew, born into a particular culture, time and place. As he interacted with his culture, religious and secular, learning from it and criticizing it, so we must do the same."

Following that established paradigm by the Lord of lords, the papacy, with the stream of church councils and the thoughts of acknowledged theologians have placed a special focus on the numerous rites and rituals enshrined in the African cultures with the aim of bringing out their theological significances. The constitution on sacred Liturgy advocated for the revision of the Liturgy according to particular situations.² And a lot, including the change to vernacular liturgy from the initial Latin, and the incorporation of a handful of our symbols, rites, prayers and music rhythms have come our way resulting from the liturgical renewal that followed this new wave of inculturation. Pope Paul VI saw the effects of the Liturgical Renewal in this light and remarked that "...the Liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense, you may, and you must have an African Christianity."³ Pope John Paul II advocates respect, preservation and fostering of particular values and richness of our people's cultural heritage, placing us in a better position to evangelize them, to understand and apply the mystery of Christ nobly to their concrete daily African experience. To him "...it is a concrete question of bringing Christ into the very center of African life, and lifting up all African life in Christ. Thus not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ in the members of his body is himself African."⁴ But attaining or achieving this is not a mere amalgamation of two religious and cultural traditions. It is a search for what is already acceptable to God, or rather placed by God in the heart and life of the African person. We shall undertake a comparative analysis of African traditional rites of passage and

the rites of Christian initiation, deriving lessons concerning their nature, necessity, and a possible coming together of the celebration of these rites. As passage rites, Africans celebrate basically birth rites, puberty rites, marriage and death or burial rites. On the other hand the initiation rites of the Christian religion comprise of baptism, confirmation and holy Eucharist. What could be the similarities between these categories of rites? Could there be disagreeing relations between them? This is the concern of this write-up.

African Traditional Rites Of Passage.

A. The Concept Of Rite Of Passage.

No African, who has value for native socio-cultural and religious customs lives and dies without undergoing or celebrating significant ritual ceremonies in his life. Neither, does any traditional African community leave its members to pass through the waters of life and leave this world without these significant religious ceremonies. People, who for any reason miss out on these ritual customs, do not end up with a fulfilled life. Their life ends up not fulfilling its purpose and destiny. These ritual customs are celebrated at significant turning points in the life of the individual. Africans recognize that the lifespan of a person has some distant phases whose nature, challenges and responsibilities differ from those of the others. Each stage requires a maturity or development, a vital force, as it were, for meaningful survivals in it, which will not suffice for the status and responsibilities of the next. So the individual would need specific rituals to equip him for the challenges of each phase. Africans celebrate these rites with prayers, offerings or sacrifices. Some of these ritual forms can include mystic dances, performances with serpents, the granting of new names to the initiated, the loosening of the ties binding the neophytes to their former condition and environment and admitting them to the super-human realm. Van Gennep the distinguished Dutch scholar wisely describes these ceremonies as 'rites of passage'⁵. They could also be called transitional rites, that strips one of his old self or the former groups they belonged, initiating or ushering that particular person or group to a new phase of existence. The African is conceived to be on a journey to his destiny. These rites of passage facilitate or make for arrival to one's destiny. They serve as the initiation of the individual into the new phase of life. Van Gennep describes the dynamics of the effects of these initiation rites as separation, transition and incorporation.⁶

i). Separation:

This is their first stage among the important rites of passage. Simply expressed, it is a breaking away from the past. Better still, in the words of Fr. Ikenga Metuh:

The rites of separation, symbolically expresses that one had left or no longer belongs to a particular state, place or group or phase of life to which he formerly belonged and should no longer be associated with it...the rite of separation is expressed by going into seclusion...stripping of clothes...which express that a person has left behind one world or stage or life and is about to enter another.⁷

ii) Transition:

This is the middle stage when one has left his former stage and is on the threshold of entering into the next stage but has not yet entered or been incorporated.

iii) Incorporation:

It is the final phase in the scheme of their transitional stages. The rites associated with this final stage symbolically portray the fact that an aspirant has successfully reached the climax of his trip. During this moment, significant African rites and rituals like ceremonies, sacrifices and prayers are observed which in a spectacular way present and welcome an initiate into this phase of life.

b) Specific African Rites Of Passage

i) Birth Rites:

The coming into being of a new life in the African setting is a blessing highly sought for. It is among the prime reasons behind the contract of marriage among Africans. So childlessness is highly frowned at but conception brings great excitement and, the child in the womb is well to be protected and cared for, often by a series of rites before its actual birth. For the Tiv people of Benue State, a pregnant woman must for the sake of decency abstain from the consumption of some animals like the monkey, snail and pork. This measure is observed to safeguard the child from taking after these animals! They also observe certain rites during pregnancy. "Certain magical forces and emblems (ako mbo)...concerned with birth and fertility...are employed during a woman's pregnancy some useful medicine in addition to the performance of some rituals."⁸ After birth, a boy not yet at puberty buries its unbiblical cord left to the house⁹. Furthermore, the child is named according to the role he would play in life. Hence, care is observed regarding the naming of the child. Lastly, before the child begins to walk, a special meal is prepared of "locust beans...for the midwife, the mother of the nursing mother, the young boy who buried the umbilical cord and all the women present at the birth of the child."¹⁰

The Yorubas too have some elaborate rituals, rites and practices, some of which are in the form of taboos, to ensure the well-being of the child as he

passes from the realm of the unborn to birth into the world. J.O. Awolalu states that when a woman is pregnant:

*She abstains from salt, must not have extra-marital affairs with other men. In some, a man might not have sex with his pregnant woman hence he will be wretched and she have problem of delivery. She must not work about in the hot sun or in the night in order to prevent the spirit of abiku-born to die-children entering her womb.*¹¹

After the child's birth, an oracle is consulted on the third day to ascertain the particular past parent that has reincarnated in it. The oracle declares the divinity that will protect it in life, what the child will do in life, what taboos to be observed and what must be done to enable it have a happy destiny. Circumcision for the male children, and naming ceremonies follow few days later. The ceremony of naming children involves family elders making libation to the earth and the child's feet are touched with Ifa nuts.¹²

ii) Puberty Rites

Puberty is the significant time one advances from childhood to adulthood. Among Africans, puberty is ushered in by a lot of rites like the male circumcision. There could also be female circumcision-the cutting of some portions or the whole of the clitoris as a means of moderating inordinate sexual indulgence, which though is now becoming non-existent in many African cultures as missionaries and anthropologists heavily opposed it as it imposes suffering and danger to life, and temper with that of dignity brings young women.¹³ To Africans, the rite of circumcision, amongst other things, brings a child into a real adult, a full person, and introduces them into their sexual life. Because of the importance of circumcision, a lot of rites normally precede it as can be seen in the Igbo socio-cultural setting:

*Boys are usually initiated into some secret societies where they undergo special rites and learn the secrets of the societies. They have to be tested of bravery, which will initiate them into manhood. One of such societies is Mmuo.*¹⁴

Furthermore, Parrinder has explained that in Sierra Leone, among the Paro and Sande societies, puberty is always preceded by seclusion to puberty schools where instructions in tribal customs, behavioral patterns, religion and the mysteries of sex are learnt. Candidates also learn songs, dances symbolic of adult roles, and the value of chastity.¹⁵

iii) Marriage Rites:

Marriage is the necessary sequel to puberty, since at this phase of life, the adult is fully prepared for their marriage roles. Many different forms of

contract exist in Africa. But no form comes about without definite rites and rituals that declare the couple husband and wife. "The Benis have great emphasis on ancestors. Kola nuts are always taken to the girl's ancestors when she is betrothed, the dowry marks the end of service. At the end she goes into her new home. Two rules follow, she cleanses her husband's shrine and prayers are said on her behalf.¹⁶ Two things stand out in the marriage rites across all African customs. These rites are publicly celebrated and there is recourse to ancestral patronage for blessing and protection.

iv) **Death and Burial Rites**

Death and burial are the last in the series of these African rites of transition. Africans possess a firm belief in life hereafter, and death is a necessary channel, which brings the finite to the ancestral or the spirit world. Burials in Africa are accompanied by a variety of rites, ranging from forms of rituals to merriment and celebration. There is great celebration if the person is considered to have lived his full life span or fulfilled his earthly destiny. So the death and burial of old people, upright people, accomplished successful people attract happy celebration. One of the achievements considered is cultivation of large family. So the deaths of infants, children and youths are greatly regretted, and in most cases diviners are consulted and corresponding sanctions given to culprits. So the various rites and rituals usually befit the kind of death in question. Lying in state, paying last respect, and the offering of prayers are common. For accomplished people, some of the deceased possessions and buried with them, these include food stuff, clothes, shoes, some form of weapons, materials which the deceased would need in the next world.¹⁷

For those who were wicked, unrighteous, unaccomplished or young, such deceased, people believe are rejected by the ancestors and their ghosts wander and torment people.

Ray aptly captures the necessity of African rites of passage as cited by Awolalu: undergoing this transition rite,

...people are metaphysically and socially remade into 'new being with social rules. Newborn infants are remade into human persons, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husbands and wives, deceased people are made into kings... This remaking of man... involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new...¹⁸

We have seen already that the various rites of passage vary from one African group to another. It must hereby be noted that the turning points at the various phases of the initiation in the life of the people, may not have the same degree of religious importance in the life of another people. Whatever it means

for the initiate and the cultural community, there is a significance that cannot be ignored.

Christian Rites of Initiation

The Christian rites of Initiation are together the way a person is inducted into the Church - the new community of the people of God. These rites are the three sacraments of initiation, and they are the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist, which are celebrated in the community liturgy of Easter Vigil. According to the dictionary of the Liturgy:

Through Baptism the candidates become Christians, being formed into people of God adopted children of the father, with their sins forgiven. Through confirmation they become more perfectly the image of the Lord, since they are signed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, actually filled with the spirit that thus allows them to give witness to their faith.¹⁹

And through partaking in the Eucharist sacrifice at the table of the Lord, they share in intimate unity with the Lord and the people of God. Thus through the three sacraments, the recipients achieve Christian initiation and maturity, enabling them to fulfill their mission in the church and the world. The experience of the recipients of these rites of initiation is viewed as a spiritual journey of encounter with God and identification with the gospel way of life.²⁰

Like the African rite of Puberty which confers maturity on the initiate, the preparation of an adult person to undergo these rites of Christian initiation, follows a 'seclusion' period known as the Catechumenate; in which they are given by way of teaching the gospel's invitation to share in the life of God. The candidates, through study and prayer, undergo a conversion from within to the full incorporation into the Lord and his family of Christians. The experience and period of the catechumenate has been succinctly described as 'faith seeking understanding'. Also, like the trio dynamics of the African rites of passage seen above, the period of Catechumenate comprises election, purification and enlightenment. By these means, the church invites the candidate or receives his intention to be one of them, and as he hears the ways of the kingdom, he is gradually purged of sin and his old self and given a new awareness of himself and his new status in Christ Jesus (cf. Eph.2:11-13). The period of this initiation for adults lasts three years, during which one receives successively the sacrament of Baptism, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist.

The Individual Rites Of Christian Initiation

1) Baptism.

Baptism is the first Christian initiation rite that welcomes members into the Christian fold making them become Christ's faithful: "Baptism is the cleansing by water of all sins, it brings about a rebirth and sanctification in Christ which incorporate the person into the church"²¹. It gives the initiate a

new life, remitting the neophytes' guilt of original and personal sin, together with the punishment due to the sins. It gives the grace to live a supernatural life that tends towards holiness and complete union with God. It is god's most magnificent gift, in that it regenerates the initiate, infusing him with the grace of divine life. It grants them a share in Christ's priesthood. Therefore the baptized Christian is "a born again", a new man, a new creation, he or she assumes the roles of being a priest, a prophet and king, an agent bringing about the kingdom of God among men and within their hearts. The celebration of this transition rite, and its significance is symbolized by the use of candle, water, white cloth and oil all of which show an effect that occurs in the life of the Christian to make him the new person he is. For him old things have now passed away and new things have come "(1 Cor 5:17). For this person, he/she is in a new phase of life, experiencing a new kind of life.

ii) Confirmation

Confirmation is the sacrament of Christian maturity, which gives an adult member of the Church the responsibility of defending the Church and witnessing to Christ by his/her way of life.

This sacrament gives every confirmed Christian the power of the Holy Spirit to bear true witness (cf Acts. 1:8). It comes with the infusion of very many gifts, notable among which are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. The characteristics of the new emerging personality of the confirmed are boldness, courageous witness to his faith in the Lord and the demands of the gospel values. Such a Christian is eager to denounce injustice, fight evil, work to alleviate poverty and condemn social ills whenever the necessity arises. He will willingly be an instrument that brings others to the saving knowledge of Jesus. The confirmed Christian is by all standards an adult Christian, mature, fully initiated into the 'cult' of Christ, enjoying the liberating, ennobling, and enabling 'secrets' of the kingdom. He is henceforth qualified for functions and leadership in the Christian community. This sacrament too is celebrated with simple but distinct rituals that make it clear to the recipient that he is not only a new man in a very important phase of life but a full man in Christ.

III) THE HOLY EUCHARIST.

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist completes the Christian rites of initiation,

Those who have been raised to the dignity of the Royal Priesthood by baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord's own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist.²²

The Eucharist is seen as the celebration of the memorial of Christ our Lord, a recollection of and proclamation of the mighty, saving sacrificial work of

God, and an anticipation of the glorious return of our saviour. Thus the recipient participates in a deep religious and spiritual mystery, which edifies him. Quite practically, this sacrament unites the recipient intimately with the Lord. Partaking in this sacrament of communion and the special meal of the elect, in this sense becomes a "secret meal," that excludes the non-initiates. Celebrating and participating in the Eucharistic meal has been described as 'the summit and source of our Christian life' and calling in the Church.

The Significance of The Rites of Christian Initiation

These sacraments of Christian initiation put together bring all Christ's faithful to the full stature of Christ and they enable them to carry out the mission of evangelization both within and outside the Church. These three sacraments concretely introduce one into the spirit-filled life of the Christian community, which is God's people and Christ's body. Thus, these sacraments are not simply for individual salvation but also for the participation in the saving work of God in Christ through the Church. The sacraments give us the joy of experiencing the saving acts of God personally and feeling his presence in our souls. The sacraments are the real symbols of God's grace. They are the self-communication of God in the lives of the initiates.

The great import of these initiation rites of the Christian must be understood, and personally appropriated by the initiates, especially given that most Catholics are baptized as infants or as children. For this reason the reception of the remaining two are delayed for such kids till they are mature enough to appreciate these truths celebrated in the rites. In the case of adults, the three sacraments are received together during the annual celebration of Easter vigil following a suitable period of formation-the catechumenate. The importance of the dynamics of the rites; election (separation), conversion and enlightenment cannot be compromised if the initiation must be meaningful and effectual.

Evaluation

Going through this work, one discovers that both the traditional rites of passage and the Christian rites of initiation have a common dream; that of making one an adult. Both traditions view human life to consist of a spiritual journey with significant phases, each having its respective nature, status, dignities, challenges, duties and even dangers; and one needs the aid of external influence-vital forces, or graces, spiritual powers as it were; divine assistance and union with the divine to fulfill the vocation, that each phase holds and to overcome the dangers and difficulties in the phase. The inevitable end of this spiritual journey is the assessment of one availing himself of the spiritual assistance God offers unto one. These phases of life, though distinct from each other, are such that those that come early in the sequence prepare one for assuming the later ones. Certain roles in one's life and community cannot be undertaken unless one is duly initiated into the phase in question. These successive phases of life present the story of life as a vivid passage. It is

foolhardy for one to neglect the demands of these realities, in his religion and cultural tradition.

Secondly these rites and rituals of both traditions bear some semblance. They are strongly ritualistic, they are community based and spiritually oriented. While baptism will simulate naming ceremonies in many ways, puberty rites can be a good analogue of confirmation. Furthermore, it could be seen that each phase of life and initiation creates room for growth in the phase and eventually transcending the phase, the success of which process depends on the recipient's readiness to become something new²³. The rites of passage do not avail much if the recipient is merely passive and not integrating his experiences of the encounter with the supernatural. The elements of celebration, merriment and the sharing of meal and 'secret knowledge' [enlightenment] are common to the two traditions.

Conclusion.

With these separate traditions of passage shedding a common meaning to the reality of human life, could the rituals of one group suffice for a corresponding phase in the other tradition, or could these rites be synchronized together to serve the initiation of an individual in a given tradition? In answering these questions, the constitutional differences between the two religio-cultural traditions will help. The birth rites and naming ceremonies for example will not suffice for or replace baptism on the incidental conversion of a traditionalist to Christianity. Baptism must be in the formula and intention of uniting an individual to God, specifically through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. However, a positive message coming from traditional practice is necessary in this ritual to show the necessity of baptism for the new Christian.

Finally, we encourage objective study of traditional rites to draw from its riches into the understanding of Christian passage rites. No strategy is more timely for evangelizing our people today than this.

References

- 1 Peter S. A Handbook on Inculturation. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 48
- 2 Cf. Vat. II Constitution on sacred Liturgy, Nos. 37-40
- 3 Pope Paul VII as Quoted by Peter S. Op. Cit.pg.42
- 4.Pope John Paul II: The African Bishop's Challenge, An address to the Bishops of Kenya, given on May 7th 1980. Found in Origins, May 28th 1980, p.29
- 5.Parrinder G. West African Religions, (London: Epworth Press, 1978)95.