



**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
School of Theology and Ministry

***“MI NA KPA GLAGLA NU AKLUNON: WE WILL LEND A HAND TO GOD”***  
**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DOUBLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING**  
**IN BENIN AND NIGERIA**

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Christianity is blooming in Benin and Nigeria as evidenced by its rapid growth and expansion. If in 1970, only 18.1 percent of Beninese (that is 515, 000 people) were Christians, in 2020, the estimate of the percentage of Christians was 47.8 percent (that is 5, 505,000 people).<sup>1</sup> According to the same source, within the same period the Christian population in Nigeria has increased from 39.6 percent (that is 22, 694,000 people) to 46. 9 percent (95, 695, 000 people). With a growth rate of 4.85 in Benin and 2.92 in Nigeria, the dynamism of Christianity in those two West African countries is remarkable and undeniable.

However, beyond the statistics, which may give a superficial idea of the vitality of these relatively young Christian communities, Benin and Nigeria continue to deal with the phenomenon of religious hybridity. As is the case with many Africans, several Beninese and Nigerians may be counted during the census as believers of only one particular religion when they actually belong to more than one religious tradition.<sup>2</sup> Among the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon tribes, which are the focus

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<sup>1</sup> Center for the study of global Christianity, "Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020: Society, Religion, and Mission" Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 22 (June 2013) See <https://archive.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf> (Accessed 12 March, 2021). John Mbiti enumerates four reasons which can explain the growth of Christianity in Africa in general: the hard labor of missionaries, the work (agency) of African converts and preachers, the end of the colonial rule, the role of African religion as a substratum for the gospel. See John Mbiti, "The Future of Christianity In Africa," *CrossCurrents* 28, no. 4 (1978): 388–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24457944>. Beside the reasons given by Mbiti, other contributing factors to the growth of Christianity in Benin and Nigeria are the development of African Independent Churches, the arrival of the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches which attract many people because of their emphasis on wealth and spiritual warfare. In a setting in which there is a quest for protection against evil and misfortune in all their forms, the liberating message of Christ proclaimed by some of those Churches generally wins the heart of some Beninese and Nigerians. The important role played by the Roman Catholic Church in the success of the political transition in Benin in 1990 has reinforced the credibility of the Church and led some to join the Christian faith. The growth of Beninese and Nigerian population should also be taken in account when one considers the growth of the Christian population.

<sup>2</sup> Mbiti states that "many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register or be counted in census as adherents of only one religion." See John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1992), 33. In order to explain their adherence to double religious traditions, dual believers in Benin often use the expression that appears in the title of this thesis "*Mi na kpa glagla nu Aklunon*" or "*Mi na kpà gláglá nu Aklún*" which means in the context in which it is used "We will lend a hand to God." Some may also justify their choice by using the proverb: "Lift your load up to the knee, God will help you put it on your head." The logic is the same.

of this study, dual or double belonging is a living reality.<sup>3</sup> While they profess their faith in Christ, some Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians continue at the same time to maintain their ancestral beliefs and rituals. As noted by Christopher Ejizu: “certain traditional beliefs ... still persist in the minds of many professing Christians today. These show up in any serious life crisis in the lives of such Christians. They waste no time in seeking the traditional aids to solve such problems. Diviners and protective charm-makers still number among their clients a good percentage of Igbo baptised Christians.”<sup>4</sup> The same is true for a number of Yoruba and Fon Christians.

The dual affiliation of many Beninese and Nigerians to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR)<sup>5</sup> is perceived by the mainline Churches as a real challenge. That this

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<sup>3</sup> Double religious belonging, dual religious belonging and religious hybridity (a recent term) all refer to the same phenomenon, therefore these terms will be used interchangeably. In some cases, there is evidence that there are not only dual belonging but multiple religious belongings (ATR, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism or African Independent Churches). Given the fact that Pentecostalism or African Independent Churches are various Christian denominations which can be aligned under Christianity, this study will mostly talk of double religious belonging between Christianity and ATR instead of multiple belonging. It is also important to note that this research is mainly about the dual belonging as experienced by the Igbo from Nigeria, the Fon from Benin Republic, and the Yoruba from both Nigeria and Benin. Igbo Religion is the religious tradition of the Igbo people. The traditional religion of Yoruba is called *Orisha* (or *Orisa*) whereas *Vodun* is the religion of the Fon. Because of their similarities, those various forms have been subsumed under the term African Traditional Religion. But in order to avoid any generalization, they will sometimes be distinguished from each other in this work.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher I. Ejizu, “Continuity and discontinuity in African Traditional Religion: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 18, no. 36 (1984): 212.

<sup>5</sup> Most African scholars today prefer to use the singular, African Traditional Religion, rather than the plural because of the basic unity of those religions, and their similarities across cultures. Magesa asserts that there is only one African Religion which is expressed in various forms across the continent. See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), 24-27. See also Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* (London: Chapman, 1975), 1, or Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM, 1973), 103-104. See also E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon, 1974), 11. African Traditional Religion is a non-creedal religion which is viewed basically as a way of life. Although there may be some variants, there are many basic beliefs: 1. Sacred and profane are intertwined, therefore all elements in the cosmos are part of a whole. 2. There is a Supreme Being who creates and sustains the universe. 3. Existence of a hierarchy of beings: between the Supreme Being who is at the top and the human beings, there are many subordinated intermediaries such as the spirits-divinities who are the governors of the world, the ancestors who are intercessors, and the diviners who being “bilingual” can communicate both with the spiritual and the earthly world. 4. A disharmony between the different parts of the human being (moral, spiritual, social and physical part) leads to sickness or suffering. 5. Various ritual actions may help restoring the life force, and the harmony of the individual and the community. 6. Belief in a web of relationships between the ancestors, the living, the living-dead and those yet-to-be-born who form all together the community. See Aloysius Muzzanganda Lugira, *African Religion, World Religions* (New York: Facts on File, 1999), 11-13.

phenomenon of dual affiliation continues to haunt many priests and pastors is shown “by the vehemence with which the catechism rejected any traditional religious practice and all those Africans who in their blindness persisted in following that way of life.”<sup>6</sup> The quick generalization of any kind of double religious belonging between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) as syncretism has been a hindrance to a real and fruitful exploration of this issue in Benin and Nigeria. By moving beyond the derogatory term of syncretism, this thesis tries to explore some important questions about the way religious hybridity is expressed, lived and manifested in Benin and Nigeria. The main question of this thesis is: what is lacking in the way Christianity is presented in Benin and Nigeria so that some Igbo, Fon or Yoruba Christians continue to hold onto the African Traditional Religion? Other relevant questions will also help to explore the phenomenon of double religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria: what are the theological challenges and opportunities that double religious belonging presents for Christianity in Benin and Nigeria? How can Christianity deal with dual religious belonging? These are some of the guiding questions that will be answered in this thesis which argues that religious hybridity, as expressed in Benin and Nigeria, suggests a lack of sufficient pastoral care in the sphere of healing and the necessity of an in-depth inculturation and liberation. In-depth inculturation of the Church would allow for a comparative theological reflection on the possibility of recovering or integrating some cultural rituals or practices.

I will explore the phenomenon of dual belonging as it is experienced in Benin and Nigeria and analyze its complexity, emphasizing how it is not only a sociological phenomenon but also a theological issue. After describing the characteristics and causes of the phenomenon of double

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<sup>6</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 1.

belonging, I will also identify in the first chapter the theological challenges that lie beneath the issue of double belonging, focusing on Christological, ecclesiological and ethical questions. I will then explore in the second chapter the opportunities that double religious belonging may present for the Catholic Church, insisting on the need for an in-depth inculturation to which religious hybridity seems to point. Since the search for life in abundance represents a major reason that encourages double or multiple belonging in Benin and Nigeria, it is important to address issues related to the quest for the preservation of the vital force and liberation from anything that threatens the life force. The third chapter will tackle the important but delicate question of healing which represents a major issue for Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. Since the quest for abundant life that some Igbo, Fon and Yoruba are looking for by belonging to multiple religious traditions is threatened not only by illnesses or witchcrafts but mostly today by violence, divisions, injustices, and ecological problems, the fourth and final chapter will stress the need to promote care for the creation, reconciliation, justice and peace.



**CHAPTER I**  
**CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES OF DOUBLE RELIGIOUS**  
**BELONGING IN BENIN AND NIGERIA**

**Introduction**

This chapter explores the phenomenon of dual religious belonging as well as its various forms in the nations of Benin and Nigeria. Though double religious belonging encompasses many varieties, this thesis limits itself to the religious hybridity that happens between Christianity and African Traditional Religion.<sup>7</sup> After analyzing the characteristics and causes of double religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria, this chapter surveys the ecclesiological, Christological and ethical concerns that the issue of double religious belonging raises. It analyzes double religious belonging from the perspective of the religious institutions involved but also from the perspective of people and communities involved in order to appreciate how Beninese and Nigerian dual believers themselves perceive their double affiliation to two religious traditions.

**1. Double Religious Belonging in Beninese and Nigerian Christianity: Characteristics and Causes**

**1.1. Experience and Various Forms of Dual Religious Belonging**

Though religious hybridity has emerged recently in the West, the issue of double religious belonging is not new in Benin and Nigeria, especially among the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon. Double religious belonging is a common phenomenon not only in Benin and Nigeria but in African Christianity in general as revealed by its presence across the continent and the varieties of the

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<sup>7</sup> In Benin and Nigeria, besides the religious hybridity between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, there are other forms of double religious belonging such as *Chrislam* or the dual religious belonging to Christianity and Islam, and the dual loyalty to Islam and African Traditional Religion.

terms to describe it: “religious schizophrenia,” “religious concubinage,” “religious double-mindedness,” or “bipolarity of religious loyalties.”<sup>8</sup> Though the terms used may differ depending on particular emphasis, African theologians seem to basically refer to the phenomenon of religious hybridity which happens either through affiliation, participation, or belonging to two different religious traditions.

Scholars around the world acknowledge the complexity of this phenomenon which has various forms. The well-known expert on religious hybridity, Catherine Cornille, has distinguished five types of dual religious belonging: “cultural belonging, family belonging, occasional belonging, believing without belonging, and asymmetrical belonging.”<sup>9</sup> The “New Age syncretism” which has been labelled “‘believing without belonging’ (Grace Davie),”<sup>10</sup> is to be distinguished from the major forms of double belonging in Benin and Nigeria which are mainly cultural, familial, occasional, symmetrical, or asymmetrical.

Double religious belonging appears primarily in Benin and Nigeria as a cultural reality in which people find themselves. In fact, Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians are immersed in cultures that have already been shaped by African Religion. Born into cultures which were molded by the local religion that is also embedded in their consciousness and converted into Christianity,

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<sup>8</sup> The term “faith or religious schizophrenia” is from the South African Anglican bishop Desmond Tutu. See Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology?” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, edited by E. Fasholé-Luke (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1978), 366. In West Africa, Enyi Ben Udoh from Nigeria has called this phenomenon “religious double-mindedness,” whereas Cécé Kolié from Guinea identified it as “bipolarities of religious loyalties” (Kolié, 141). See Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988), 10; and Cécé Kolié “Jesus, the Healer?” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 141. The Kenyan theologian Mbiti has noticed the same phenomenon in Eastern Africa and has labelled it “religious concubinage.” See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 264.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas, 1st ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 325. To these five types should be added another one encountered in Benin and Nigeria which is the symmetrical belonging.

<sup>10</sup> This kind of double religious belonging has also been called “‘nebulous esoteric mysticism’ (Françoise Champion), and ‘Nietzschean neo-paganism’ (Claude Geffré).” See Peter C. Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church,” *Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (September 2003): 498.

Christians in Benin and Nigeria breathe in a double cultural and religious atmosphere. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator is right when he asserts that “like a tropical tree the leaves and branches of Christianity flourished, but the roots remained deeply anchored in the African way of life... To be a Christian in Africa is to accept a hyphenated and multipolar identity; it is to contain a plurality of identities.”<sup>11</sup> With their double heritage, Beninese and Nigerians are to some extent naturally and culturally dual believers. But this type of double religious belonging which can be perceived as cultural rather than a free decision needs to be differentiated from a voluntary dual affiliation to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

The latter is what has been labelled “asymmetrical belonging” which refers to the situation of people who are grounded in one religious tradition while also identifying themselves (though unequally) with another.<sup>12</sup> If asymmetrical belonging which has to do with people who identify themselves unequally with two different religious traditions is present in Benin and Nigeria, there is also a symmetrical belonging. In the latter, there is no dominant religion and both religious traditions are given the same respect and devotion. In order to become Christians, the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon were required during the missionary era to deny themselves by renouncing their past identities and the whole of their culture. They were compelled in various ways to choose between Christianity and their traditional religion.<sup>13</sup> Confronted by this dilemma, some Igbo, Yoruba and Fon have decided to practice a dual religious loyalty to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. This dual religious affiliation present among some Christians in Benin and Nigeria is

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<sup>11</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 164. In the same vein, Orobator perceives African Religion as the “soil or ground on which the latter [Christianity and Islam] are planted, the foundation that holds up their edifice, and the roots that anchor and nourish a reality.” Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” 327.

<sup>13</sup> In Benin for example, according to some historians, the basilica of Ouidah seems to be intentionally built in front of the temple of the pythons. Besides the idea of confrontation that it may suggest, it also symbolically and directly compels people to make a choice between Christianity and African Religion.

described by a song from Democratic Republic of Congo where the same reality is observed: “Christians, you unfortunate people! In the morning at mass, in the evening at the diviner’s! Amulet in your pocket, scapular around your neck!”<sup>14</sup> The fact that Christianity does not meet some of the needs of these people may explain the perpetuation of this religious hybridity. A revival of African Traditional Religion seems to encourage dual religious belonging among young Igbo, Yoruba and Fon in quest of their religious identity or/and spiritual security.<sup>15</sup> As Kang-San Tan rightly observed: “the tensions of liminality and inter-identity of dual belonging are hurriedly glossed over rather than given due space for analysis and synthesis. Over time (second or third generations), some ... Christians may begin to rediscover their past religious roots and may re-appropriate aspect of their past religious traditions.”<sup>16</sup>

If asymmetrical and symmetrical belonging continue to be present in Benin and Nigeria, the most prevalent double belonging in that part of the world is the occasional belonging which arises from existential situations. Generally, in times of trouble, many Igbo, Yoruba and Fon

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Marc Ela, “De l’Assistance à la Libération: Les Tâches de l’Eglise en Milieu Africain,” *Foi et Développement* 83, no. 1-2 (January-February 1981) : 2, quoted in Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa, Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011). Ela continues, saying that for a “great number of baptized people, conversion to the Gospel is a veritable ambiguous adventure.” See Ela quoted by Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> In 1993, the President of Benin Republic, Nicéphore Dieudonné Soglo organized the “festival Ouidah 92” which was meant to celebrate the religion *vodun*. After this international event which brought together scholars, officials, artists, practitioners of *vodun* from all over the world, the date of January 10 was decreed as a national and public holiday in Benin for the celebration of the *vodun*. Charles Alao notes that “in the last decade or so, support for traditional religion has enjoyed a noticeable upsurge . . . Newly emerged groups of people, mostly youths, have taken the resolve to revisit what they see as encroachment on the traditional beliefs by ‘foreign’ religion.” See Charles Abiodun Alao, “Islamic Radicalization and Violence in Nigeria,” in *Militancy and Violence in West Africa: Religion, Politics and Radicalization*, ed. James Gow, Funmi Olonisakin, and Ernst Dijkhoorn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 52. The rise of Afrocentrism, the search for identity both for local people and members of the African diaspora who are returning, the rediscovery of some of the values of African Traditional Religion and cultures through the medias, the need for valorization of some cultural traditions and moral values to counteract some western values can explain the revival of African Traditional Religion. See Kizito Chinedu Nweke “The Revival of African Spiritualities: A Religious Basis for a Sociopolitical Renaissance in Africa,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2020): 311-313.

<sup>16</sup> Kang-San Tan, “Dual Belonging: A Missiological Critique and Appreciation from an Asian Evangelical Perspective,” *Mission Studies* 27, no. 1 (2010): 25. Whereas Kang-San Tan’s observation is about Asian Christians, his insight applies to African Christians too, especially to Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Christians who were expected to have a clear and clean break from their past culture and faith. Even if some of them have rejected their past religious traditions, the following generation perhaps motivated by the quest for identity may get back to their initial roots.

Christians have recourse to the diviners for quick answers instead of acquiring or meditating on the virtues of faith and hope that Christian leaders often suggest. African Traditional Religion seems to be very embedded in people's DNA and emerges strongly in existential limit situations. Talking of the Igbo, Cardinal Francis Arinze underlines that: "in moments of difficulty in life, whether it is death or sickness, in his life-cycle event, birth of a child, matrimony, burials and funerals of relatives, building or constructing of a modern house, in trade as well as in socio-political life, the Igbo have not completely left the practice of traditional religion."<sup>17</sup> The absence of Christian leaders during these important moments and the inexistence of other alternatives able to satisfy the quest of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba may explain why these people continue to hold onto their traditional religion.

Far from being a practice observed only during the early evangelization period, double religious belonging is still present among some Christians today who prefer to rely on the tools of African Religion in order to address personal struggles or spiritual threats like witchcrafts. The testimony of Zinsou, a native of Benin, where people can join a Mass in the morning and visit their *vodun* (spirit-divinities cult) at night, is telling: "'Sundays when it delights me, I go to a church to pray. However, as soon as I feel threatened by a spell, I do not hesitate to ask for the services of my *Bokonon* [priest of the African Religion], to get me out of trouble.' Had it not been the quick intervention of my *Bokonon*, my three-year-old child would have passed away."<sup>18</sup> Here, religion is viewed as a commodity that one can use or turn to in particular circumstances according to one's

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Card. Arinze, "L'incarnazione del Vangelo nelle culture," *Studi Cattolica* no 290/91 (1985): 245 quoted by Charles Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage: The Prospects of Inculturation* (New York: P. Lang, 1992), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Ribouis, "Syncretisme Religieux au Bénin : Recto Verso d'une Vieille Pratique," *La Nouvelle Tribune* (Cotonou) 9 December 2013. See <https://lanouvelletribune.info/archives/benin/culture/17200-syncretisme-religieux-au-benin-recto-verso-d-une-vieille-pratique> (accessed 15 November 2020). The translation from French to English is done by the researcher.

need. Orobator makes the same point when he states that “while it is convenient for some Africans to profess a nominal adherence to Christianity, in times of socio-economic and cultural distress this superficial profession of Christian faith easily gives way to familiar traditional religious practices which Christianity claims to have superseded.”<sup>19</sup> Such religious belonging is similar to what Cornille has referred to as “occasional or serial multiple belonging, since the act of belonging to a particular religion tends to be circumscribed and limited by the duration of a particular need.”<sup>20</sup> If in general, this type of religious belonging disappears once the need is met, for some this may not always be the case. For many Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians who feel threatened by witchcraft and thus feel the need to be constantly protected, their occasional belonging can alter to an asymmetrical or even symmetrical belonging.

Last but not least is the double belonging which stems from dual family belonging. Children who originate from a family where members belong to Christianity and African Traditional Religion may sometimes be initiated to both religious traditions. But this kind of belonging, which is similar to the cultural belonging because it is also involuntary, will be less the focus of the present reflection.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity - 2012,” Santa Clara Lectures (2012), 6-7. See [https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc\\_lectures/1](https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc_lectures/1)

<sup>21</sup> Though family and cultural belonging are very helpful in grasping the cultural and social contexts of religious hybridity, this study however will not deal with them because these types of belonging are involuntary. One does not choose his family or cultural identity which may have been shaped by a double or multiple religious belonging. This study is more interested in deliberate choice of double religious belonging, even if these choices are influenced by external factors such as socio-economic or health conditions as is the case for occasional belonging.

## 1.2. Causes of Double Religious Belonging in Benin and Nigeria

### 1.2.1. *A Problematic Encounter with Christianity*

In the encounter between Christianity and other religions, Knitter has suggested four models or attitudes: replacement, fulfilment, mutuality, and acceptance.<sup>22</sup> The model of replacement seems to have mostly prevailed in Benin and Nigeria especially during the missionary era though recently other models have been promoted. This model which is still present among the Christian evangelicals states that “any recognition of the truth or saving power of other religions or religious figures is a slap in the face of God; it denigrates what God has done in Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> With the strong view that Christianity ought to supersede African Traditional Religion, *Vodun*, *Orisha* and Igbo Religion were all classified under the derogatory umbrella of animism which was deliberately associated with fetishism or idolatry. According to Orobator, this classification had two consequences: “first, it meant that Africans did not in fact have a religion... Second, as a result of the first point, early European missionaries justified their aggressive attempts to eradicate superstition, magic, paganism, and fetishism in Africa and to foist a new religion on Africans.”<sup>24</sup>

With this predominant model of replacement many Beninese and Nigerian traditional beliefs and rituals were simply dismissed and presented as either superstitious or irrational. The

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<sup>22</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 27. For the Nigerian theologian Enyi Ben Udoh, Christ “was presented as invalidating the history and institutions of a people in order to impose his rule upon them.” Udoh, *Guest Christology*, 64. Magesa explains how symbolically some of the conducts of missionaries follow the same perspective of replacement: “The actual destruction of African Religion’s symbols, instruments, and places of worship was very common as the preferred approach. When Churches were erected over indigenous sacred sanctuaries, it was not to confirm the value of the latter but to eliminate ‘idols’ and replace them with ‘higher’ forms of belief.” Magesa, “Christianity and African Religion,” 255.

<sup>24</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 14. Without any attempt to justify past errors, it is important to understand that the early missionaries were fed with the predominant theology of their epoch which is that of exclusivism and with the anthropological data of their eras which presented Africa in general as a “dark continent” without any religion. Moreover, in the context of colonization, mission was perceived as a transplantation of the European Church in Africa in order to redeem the souls of Africans.

blanket condemnation by missionaries of many practices and customs which are important in the social fabric of Igbo, Yoruba and Fon was regarded as harmful to the grounding of Christianity in Beninese and Nigerians' heart. The conflict of values which led to the dismissal of African practices is due, according to Robert Priest, to a difference between the moral conscience of the missionary and that of Africans which has been forged by different worldviews. Priest states that: "Preaching about good and evil in terms of missionary conscience rather than native conscience results in conversion and discipleship which bypasses native conscience and leads to converts accepting, relating to, and experiencing a new set of rules and norms – not through deep moral conviction, but as a new system of taboos."<sup>25</sup> Because Western practices were imposed upon Igbo, Yoruba and Fon, the Christian morality was often followed only externally and without deep conviction. Traditional practices were hidden from the sight of the missionaries and practiced in secret. This situation among many others has generated the current dual affiliation.

The Christianity preached in Benin and Nigeria was one which required alienation from the traditional values and heritage of the people, since to be converted was to renounce one's culture, to deny one's cultural heritage and the legacy of the ancestors.<sup>26</sup> The clear and clean break from African Traditional Religion to Christianity that missionaries<sup>27</sup> expected from Igbo, Yoruba

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<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Priest, "Missionary Elencities: Conscience and Culture," *Missiology* 22, no. 3 (1994): 305.

<sup>26</sup> Mission was perceived as "converting" local people whose cultures were defined as heathens. Such a view is different from the understanding of evangelization which means "bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity and through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new." Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Apostolic Exhortation*, no 18. See [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) (Accessed 12 March 2020). The goal of evangelization is not first of all to make converts but to proclaim the good news. Evangelization encompasses five components: witness of the Christian life, service of humanity, interreligious dialogue, explicit Gospel proclamation, and prayer and liturgical life.

<sup>27</sup> Christianity arrived in Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the Portuguese who built a chapel at Ouidah (South of Benin) in 1680 but this first evangelization was very sporadic. But it is only in 1861 with the French missionaries from the *Société des Missions Africaines, S.M.A.* of Lyon (France) that the foundation of the Church will be laid down. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries from the Roman Catholic Church were already present in Nigeria but their work did not last. The systematic evangelization of Nigeria will be done during the period 1841-1891. During this period, they were five principal missionary societies: "the Anglican Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), many of whose missionaries



and Fon often presented a serious danger for the harmony of the family, clan, or tribe of the latter. A radical conversion was viewed as a real threat to the harmony of the community, while a dual belonging experienced as a simple overlaying of two religions was perceived as a possibility. In cultures where “to be” means to live in harmony with one’s ancestors, a radical conversion was perceived negatively because it was seen as a complete rupture with the traditions and beliefs of the ancestors.<sup>28</sup> Breaking the bonds of the community by denying completely the traditions of the forefathers and foremothers was to be punished by the ancestors and therefore such a decision was a real struggle for some. In such a context, one should not be surprised that, as Sidibe Sempore points out, if the Christian had to choose, he would give preference to age-old customs, while still professing his faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

### 1.2.2. *The Assimilating Character of African Religion and Systems of Thought*

The phenomenon of double religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria is also due to the principle of multiplicity that characterized African religious systems of thought. Beninese and

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at this time were Germans; the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society; a committee of the English Methodist Conference; the Foreign Mission Committee of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland; the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States; and the Catholic Society of African Missions (the *Société des Missions Africaines, S.M.A.*) of France.” See J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891; the Making of a New Élite*, Ibadan History Series (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. xiii-xiv. After studying the different strategies of various missionaries in the Igbo land, Augustine Okwu concludes that most of the missionaries’ approach were dismissive of the Igbo cultures, leading to unsuccessful conversion. See Augustine S. Okwu, *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions 1857-1957: Conversion in Theory and Practice* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> In *Things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe, the hero Okonkwo complains: “He [The White man] came quietly and peaceably with his religion . . . Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart.” See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 176. Commenting the thoughts of Eboussi Boulaga, John Parratt writes: “Acceptance of Christianity . . . resulted in an historical dislocation, a rupture with the Africans’ sense of continuity with their past, and the shattering of their feeling of belonging to their ancestral culture... The convert has thus been extracted from all that makes him or her a true person, and fed only on dogmas that do not relate to experience.” The development of African Initiated Churches is a proof that one can be true Christian without having to renounce his culture. See John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 107–8.

<sup>29</sup> Sidibé Semporé, “Liberté chrétienne en contexte africain,” *Spiritus* 96 (September, 1984): 289.

Nigerians operate with a principle of multiplicity or what Aylward Shorter calls, a “two thought-systems at once” which are not viewed contradictory but rather complementary. This dual thought-systems that seems to have contributed to the double religious belonging in Africa in general is articulated by Shorter as follows:

At baptism, the African Christian repudiates remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook. He may be obliged to turn his back upon certain traditional practices which rightly or wrongly have been condemned by the Church, but he is not asked to recant a religious philosophy. Consequently, he returns to the forbidden practices on occasion with remarkable ease. Conversion to Christianity is for him sheer gain, an ‘extra’ for which he has opted. It is an overlay on his original religious culture. Apart from the superficial condemnations, Christianity has really had little to say about African Traditional Religion in the way of serious judgements of value. Consequently, the African Christian operates with two thought-systems at once, and both of them are closed to each other. Each is only superficially modified by the other.<sup>30</sup>

Conversion for some Igbo, Yoruba and Fon was just a transposition or a superposition of two religious worldviews perceived as structurally similar or complementary. But such a superposition can happen only in a cognitive system which makes it possible. Experienced first internally, dual belonging is located in the thought-systems of Beninese and Nigerians prone to multiplicity. As stated by Magesa: “it is the ‘both-and’ principle, or the principle of multiplicity, that underlies the African spiritual worldview.”<sup>31</sup> This cognitive inclination for multiplicity which pervades other dimensions and the quest for abundant life could explain the religious aspiration for “more.” In the Beninese and Nigerian worldviews, anything which contributes to the abundance of life and can help to increase the life-force is always welcomed whereas anything which is perceived as decreasing the life-force is rejected. Beninese and Nigerians’ quest for abundant life leads to the situation that “there is always room for more religions, always needs for

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<sup>30</sup> Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Magesa, “Christianity and African Religion,” 255. Because of their principle of multiplicity, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba religions are more flexible to incorporate rituals or symbols of other religions.

divine intervention.”<sup>32</sup> This religious insatiability encourages people to end up experiencing double and even triple belonging (double denominational religious belonging such as Catholic and Pentecost, and affiliation to African Religion).

### *1.2.3. A Disembodied and a Split Christianity Absent from Crisis-Moment*

The *kerygma* preached in Benin and Nigeria was and remains detached or remote from the context, experience, and needs of many Christians from mainstream Churches. For Appiah, “Jesus Christ seems to be a spiritual intellectual or philosophical entity in the missionary churches instead of being a dynamic personal reality in all life situations. Thus, he seems to be absent in general crisis situations of the African life.”<sup>33</sup> Fed with dogmas wrapped in Roman style, many Beninese and Nigerians have felt unsatisfied with the answers offered by Christianity. In fact, as Taylor observed: “Christ has been presented as the answer to the question a white man would ask, the solution to the needs the Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?”<sup>34</sup> In a Beninese and Nigerian settings where life is considered as a central value, the questions that Igbo, Yoruba and Fon are asking are mainly related to the struggles for the preservation of life.

In African anthropology characterized by the notion of vital force, the preservation of life is the “ultimate good.”<sup>35</sup> Life remains a sacred and central value which should be preserved at all

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<sup>32</sup> Udoh, *Guest Christology*, 256. This “excessive religious mood” of Beninese and Nigerian is expressed by the fact that “the more religious symbols he [or she] gathers, the more he [or she] wishes to have.” The logic is that the more religious symbols one has, the more spiritual power one can gain.

<sup>33</sup> See Kofi Appiah-Kubi, “Jesus Christ - Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives,” in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology*, ed. John Mbiti (Geneva: WCC, 1977), 55.

<sup>34</sup> John Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 16.

<sup>35</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 65.

cost. Therefore, anything which diminishes life such as misfortune is viewed either as evil or simply as a consequence of sins. In fact, “morality demands that these causes of disruption and affliction in human life, and their motivations, be identified ... and something be done about it.”<sup>36</sup> The first reflex of someone who encounters misfortune or who experiences difficulty is thus to have recourse to the diviners who may identify the cause of the misfortune and prescribe some remedies. The need to protect oneself or one’s family against the attacks of the evil spirits which are at the source of anything which diminishes the life-force may explain their attachment to the Vodun, *Orisha* or Igbo Religion. In times of crisis when people are disoriented and look desperately for answers, they find no other possibility than clinging to their former religion and ancestral practices which have provided them answers for centuries and seem to have shown a certain efficacy in the past.

This situation continues to be present today among many Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians since Christianity especially Catholicism continues to some extent to be absent in some crucial moments of people’s life. The Christ proclaimed in the Church remains either absent from their daily life or insufficient or not able to respond to their needs;<sup>37</sup> therefore, people seek other possibilities or explore other ways to solve their issue by combining two religions. Igbo, Yoruba and Fon have a hard time abandoning the African Traditional Religion not only because of its embeddedness in their cultures but also because of its pragmatic character. Ludovic Lado stresses that “African Religions are problem-solving sets of beliefs and rituals which promise immediate returns, whereas the mainstream Christian Churches insist on faith and hope.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> What is at stake here is not the power of Christ which is clear in the New Testament but rather his perception by some Igbo, Yoruba and Fon and the nature of their relationship with him.

<sup>38</sup> Ludovic Lado, “The Roman Catholic Church and African Religions: A Problematic Encounter,” *The Way* 45/3 (July 2006): 18. By using the term “mainstream Churches,” Lado seems to refer here to the mainline Churches. In Benin, according to the census, in 2013 Catholics represent the largest Christian religious denominations with 25.5 percent

## 2. Theological Assessment of the Challenges of Double Religious Belonging

A theological assessment of the challenges of double religious belonging ought to take into consideration both the subjective and objective aspects involved in such commitments. Cornille explains the interplay between these two dimensions by suggesting that membership to a particular religion requires a recognition by the institution (objective) and the individual's assent (subjective).<sup>39</sup> The theological assessment of double religious belonging is approached here first from the perspective of the Roman Catholic tradition and then from African Traditional Religion. As for the subjective dimension, the lived experience of some dual believers may be helpful in the theological evaluation.

### 2.1. The Objective Assent of Double Religious Belonging and its Challenges

#### 2.1.1. *Double Religious Belonging as an Issue for Roman Catholicism*

Double religious belonging in sub-Saharan Africa has been viewed by the hierarchical Church and by several theologians as a challenge. In *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI claims

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of the total Beninese population, the Methodists are 3.4 percent in the same proportion as other protestant groups (3.4 percent). The Celestial Church of Christ which is one of the biggest African Independent Church in Benin represents 6.7 percent whereas the evangelical and Pentecostal Churches and other Christian Churches are all together 9.5 percent of the population. See Insaie, *Synthèse des Analyses sur les Caractéristiques Socio-Culturelles et Economiques de la Population*, Tome 3 (Cotonou : Insaie, 2017), 12. According to Pew Research, Nigeria has more than 80,510,000 Christians. Among this Christian population, there are “60 million Protestants (broadly defined), about 20 million Catholics and more than 750,000 other Christians.” Nigeria has the largest number of Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa and the second largest population of Protestants in the world (after the United States). The growth of Pentecostal churches has been rapid in recent decades in the whole sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Pew Forum's analysis of CSGC data, “about eight-in-ten of the world's pentecostals reside either in sub-Saharan Africa (44%) or in the Americas (37%).” See Pew Research Center, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, 2011. <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, ed. Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2016), 144. The notion of assent may need further clarifications since it seems to indicate that membership is restricted to a certain category namely adults. How does one assent? At what age (minimum) does one have to assent? This clarification which aims to move beyond an adult-centric approach to membership does not however undermine the point made by Cornille about the subjective aspect of belonging.

that: “the problem of ‘dual affiliation’ – to Christianity and to the traditional African religions – remains a challenge” which needs to be removed through “profound catechesis and inculturation.”<sup>40</sup> But what are the challenges that the Catholic Church perceives in this dual affiliation? Why is it unacceptable or unintelligible from the Roman Catholic perspective?

#### 2.1.1.1. Dual Religious Affiliation as an Ecclesiological Problem

On the ecclesiological level, dual affiliation is perceived as a real challenge since it withholds a full faith commitment which is expected from the believer. In *The Comparative Study of Religions* published in 1958, Joachim Wach states that religious belonging requires a “total response of the total being (feeling, will, and intellect) to Ultimate Reality.”<sup>41</sup> This total surrender to the Ultimate that religion generally requires is realized through the mediation of beliefs, symbols, and practices proper to a particular religion and demands a personal commitment. For critics of dual belonging, the wholehearted commitment which is expected from a Christian is compromised when he or she belongs at the same time to another religion. But isn’t total surrender or wholehearted commitment an ideal toward which everyone strives rather than an achievable goal?

Paul Griffiths perceives religious belonging as a “monogamous affair.”<sup>42</sup> Using the analogy of conjugal fidelity, some theologians such as Griffiths and Cornille perceive the free choice and practice of two religious traditions as “religious adultery.” In response to Abraham Vélez de Cea

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<sup>40</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Africa Munus: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html) (Accessed 20 November 2020), no. 93.

<sup>41</sup> Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Colum Press, 1958), 32. This study was done before the Vatican council which was significant for the Catholic Church but also to some extent to other Churches as well.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 35. Such a view comes from a purely Western binary logic of either/or but the logic of multiplicity at play in the African thought does not perceive religion as something monogamic. In a setting where polygamy is allowed, perceiving religion as related to marriage or religious belonging as a “monogamic affair” does not stand.

who finds the analogy of conjugal fidelity as unhelpful and suggests rather to see religious commitment as one's relationship with each one's parent or children, Cornille asserts that while this "alternative metaphor may work from the perspective of the subject, it fails when understood from the perspective of the object of one's love and commitment: the religions themselves."<sup>43</sup>

Religion becomes a commodity based on the personal choice of the individual who picks whatever satisfies his/her need. Kenneth Tanaka claims that for dual believers, "the individual rather than the tradition becomes the primary standard for determining what is correct and important."<sup>44</sup> Critics of religious hybridity often point to a certain religious individualism related to dual belonging, a lack of total surrender and personal commitment. Cornille links the exclusive surrender required by various religions to the spiritual growth that they envision. In addition to the doctrinal and practical challenges involved in multiple belonging, spiritual growth is seen to require a gradual overcoming of one's own will and desire. For her then, "the selective and simultaneous belonging to various religions implies a discriminating and self-sufficient subject, that is precisely what needs to be left behind in the pursuit of the highest levels of spiritual and religious attainment."<sup>45</sup>

Several theologians such as Cornille suggest that by embracing two religious' traditions at the same time, the individual is split and torn between these two.<sup>46</sup> For example, how can an Igbo

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<sup>43</sup> Cornille, "Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging," 145. While Cornille's argument is true for Christianity, it may not be true for African Traditional Religion which is very inclusive and does not prohibit its members to belong to other religions.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Tanaka, "The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: An Examination of 'Privatized Religion,'" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007): 125.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

<sup>46</sup> If Cornille's view is based on the experience of some dual believers, such a split is not necessarily experienced by all dual believers. Such experience of split may vary depending on the level of dual belonging.

Christian believe both in the resurrection of Christ and reincarnation without being torn between these two since both have different implications for his/her life? In that perspective, the African Christian and Religionist may end up experiencing an inner tension and not being fully at home in either African Traditional Religion or Christianity. Talking of dual religious belonging in general, Jacques Dupuis goes a little further by stating that “even apart from any interior conflict that might arise in the individual, every religious faith constitutes an indivisible whole and calls for a total commitment of the person. It may easily seem a priori impossible that such an absolute engagement might be divided, as it were, between two objects.”<sup>47</sup>

If Christianity requires a full and personal commitment to Christ, it also demands an assent to the traditions of the Church handed down and preserved by the magisterium. But according to the Church, what double religious belonging undermines seems to be precisely the tradition and the religious assent of the believer (submission of the will and the mind) to the core teachings of his/her religion. In Christianity, these core teachings are contained in a nutshell in the creed through which Christians profess their belief in a One but Triune God. But are the belief systems between Christianity and African Traditional Religion compatible or incompatible, inclusive or exclusive?

#### 2.1.1.2. Doctrinal Inconsistency?

The question at stake is to whether or not the simultaneous practice of African Religion and Christianity leads to conflicting truth claims and to a certain inconsistency in teaching. By embracing both religions, is the dual believer dealing with two different objects of faith?

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<sup>47</sup> Dupuis Jacques, “Christianity and Religions: Complementarity and Convergence,” in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. C. Cornille (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 64.



#### 2.1.1.2.1. *The Concept of God: Transcendent or Immanent?*

In Africa, the belief in a unique God precedes the advent of Christianity in the continent. Though the African religious world is dominated by many spirit-divinities which actually are intermediaries, the belief in one absolute God is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa as attested to by oral and aural traditions that serve as collective wisdoms including many myths, proverbs, and names which refer to God as the Supreme and Absolute One.<sup>48</sup> As the Yoruba of Nigeria say: “be there one thousand four hundred divinities of the home; be there one thousand two hundred divinities of the marketplace; yet there is not one divinity to compare with *Olodumare*: *Olodumare* is the King Unique.”<sup>49</sup>

Several Theologians such as Mbiti and Idowu affirm the continuity between the God of African Traditional Religion and that of Christianity. This continuity which explains the success of Christianity in Africa is shown by the Bible translation in which vernacular names for God have been generally maintained. Lamin Sanneh finds insightful the use by Christianity of the vernacular names which carry with them a story but also a certain understanding of God. For Lamin Sanneh “African religions as conveyers of the names of God were in relevant aspects anticipations of Christianity; in the relevant cases Christian expansion and revival were limited to those societies

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<sup>48</sup> See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. In his study of more than three hundred tribes in Africa, Mbiti shows that for most Africans, if not all, the belief in a unique and Absolute God is established and unquestioned. Idowu agrees with Mbiti when he states that “Africa recognizes only one God, the Supreme, Universal God . . . one and the same God, the Creator of all the ends of the earth.” See Idowu Boladji, “The Study of Religion with special reference to African Traditional Religion,” *Orita*, 1 (June 1957): 12. See also Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1992), 18. The existence of a supreme God in African cultures was also confirmed by Pope Paul VI when he said that “a living sense of God as the supreme, personal and mystical Being, pervades the whole of African culture.” See Pope Paul VI, “*Letter Africarum Terrarum* to the hierarchy and the peoples of Africa in 1967,” in *The Christian Faith*, ed. Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, 7<sup>th</sup> revised and expanded ed. (New York: Alba House, 1996), 438.

<sup>49</sup> Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 22. *Olodumare* is the Yoruba name for the absolute God. In African Traditional Religion, the divinities are subordinate to the Supreme God from whom they derive their authority and existence.

that preserved the indigenous name for God. It suggests that theologically God has preceded the missionary in Africa, a fact that Bible translation clinched with decisive authority.”<sup>50</sup> In the southern part of Benin, the official name used in biblical translations and in the liturgy for God is nothing else than *Mawu* (unsurpassable; overstretching; immortal) which is the name given to the Supreme God by the Fon. The vernacular name for God in Yoruba, *Olodumare* (almighty, omnipotent) or *Olorûn* (owner of the sky) has also been retained in biblical translations. The same is true for the Igbo who have maintained the name *Chukwu* (Great spirit) in the official translations of the Bible. In Fon, Yoruba and Igbo, the names *Mawu*, *Olodumare* or *Olorûn*, and *Chukwu* generally go together with many attributes such as Creator, Unsurpassable, Immortal, goodness, etc. For the Yoruba, *Olodumare* is the “absolute perfection.”<sup>51</sup> *Mawu* is regarded as the Supreme and Unsurpassable Being.<sup>52</sup>

If the similarities between the attributes given to God in Igbo, Yoruba and Fon and those of the Christian God are striking and point to a certain continuity between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, the West African conception of God, however, seems to put an emphasis more on the transcendent dimension of God. In the Yoruba social model “focused on *orisa* [and which] is replicated in vodhun religion found in Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana and in the diaspora (Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba) ... *Olodumare* or *Olorun* (God) is a distant king. The *orisa*

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<sup>50</sup> Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans Pub, 2003), 32.

<sup>51</sup> “*Olodu* may be translated as ‘someone who is a supreme head’ or ‘one who ‘contains’ the fullness of excellent attributes.’ When the suffix *-mare* (‘unique’ or ‘perfect-in-itself’) is added, the name may be loosely translated as ‘one who is absolutely perfect’ or ‘absolute perfection.’” See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/deities-yoruba-and-fon-religions> (Accessed December 27, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> With the particle of negation “*ma*” and the radical “*wu*” which means “beyond”, the term *Mawu* means the one that cannot be surpassed or exceeded and it refers to a powerful being whose power is beyond the imaginable. *Mawu* is also referred to as an Immortal. In fact, whereas the particle “*ma*” remains invariable, the term “*Wu*” or “*hu*” however can mean also “to kill” or “to die.” In this perspective, *Mawu* may also mean literally “cannot be killed or cannot die,” but also “does not kill.” *Mawu* is then perceived as the Eternal Being (Immortal) who “does not kill” but instead gives life.

(deities) are God's sub-chiefs, while the *ebora* [spirits] are subordinates of the *orisa*.”<sup>53</sup> Though the Igbo use a more cosmic model in which *Chukwu*, the Supreme God, is surrounded by other deities in the sky and his wife *Ala* takes care of the deities of the land, it remains that *Chukwu* is perceived as a transcendent God.

In various languages of the Southern part of Benin (fon, mina, gɛ̀n), the different attributes given to God such as “*Mawu nuse katato*” (God Almighty), “*Mawu gã*” (Great God), “*Mawuto wu*” (God surpasses all) emphasize the transcendence of God. The same is true for the Igbo and the Yoruba for whom God is perceived as far reaching, as the “Wholly Other” with whom a personal relationship seems to be hardly conceivable. If for the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon, God seems a bit remote or distant and is only approachable through mediators, the Christian God however is more personal. In such a context, can one conclude with Cornille that if “one religion affirms the existence of a personal God and another religion denies it, one cannot logically claim to equally belong to the two religious’ traditions at the same time?”<sup>54</sup> In other words, can the doctrinal tension between a transcendent and impersonal God in African Religion and a personal God in Christianity who is both transcendent and immanent lead to a certain doctrinal inconsistency? It is noteworthy as Rose Drew points out that even in the Christian faith, there are variants of traditions which more readily underscore the transcendence of God rather than his immanence and *vice versa*.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, even though the Fon, Yoruba and Igbo emphasize the transcendence of God, there is

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<sup>53</sup> Elochukwu Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 64.

<sup>54</sup> Cornille, *Many Mansions?* 12 quoted by Rose Drew. “Christian and Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist: Can You Have a Multiple Religious Identity?” in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 257. Though Cornille is not addressing here African Religion and Christianity but making general principles, this conclusion can also be drawn from her argument.

<sup>55</sup> Rose Drew, “Christian and Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist: Can You Have a Multiple Religious Identity?” in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, vol. 1, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 257.

also an immanent dimension of God which is perceptible through various sayings which point to his omnipresence in people's life.<sup>56</sup>

The incompatibility in teaching between Christianity and African Traditional Religion resides not on the conception of God but on the doctrine of the Trinity, which constitutes the core of Christian faith, and Christology. If West African religionists are monotheists, Christians are not “mere monotheists” but Trinitarian monotheists.<sup>57</sup> In an Igbo, Yoruba and Fon's worldview where subordinationism and hierarchy play a fundamental role, the equality between the divine persons is unthinkable and can hardly be accepted. In a setting already characterized by monotheism and a hierarchy, the proclamation of Jesus' divinity and uniqueness becomes awkward. As Robert Hood stated, “It is not the Christian God who causes problems for Afro cultures; it is the Christian Christ.”<sup>58</sup> In such a setting, double belonging to both Christianity and African Religion seems problematic from a Christological perspective.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Among the Fon, the name *Mawu* is invoked in daily life at various moments of the day. For example, the Fon use the “*Mawu ni fòn mi*” which means “may God wake us up.” To boost the hope of someone who desires a change on his situation, the Fon may say “*Mawu na blo*” which literally means “God will do it” or “God will help.” God is perceived as involved in the world and is viewed as able to transform some situations. The same is true for Yoruba and Igbo. Elochukwu Uzuku talks of “distance-nearness, absence-presence” of the Igbo and West African God. See Akuma-Kalu Njoku and Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Interface Between Igbo Theology and Christianity* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2014), 86–106.

<sup>57</sup> Through his criticisms that Christians in their practical life are “mere monotheists,” Rahner regrets that the Trinity is generally left out. Rahner is drawing attention to the fact that our belief in the Trinity is at the core of our faith. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 10-11.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afrocultures and God-talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 145.

<sup>59</sup> Some double belongers understand Jesus as a *powerful* intermediary subordinated to the Supreme Being like the *vodun* or *orisha*. Commenting the words of Peel, Sanneh writes: “New churches among the Yoruba initially looked upon Jesus as the supreme *orisa*, the infallible guide and intermediary who guaranteed access to the mind and will of God... Yoruba religious anticipations of Christianity are so substantial that all that was missing were the institutional organs to replicate Christianity.” Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 220.

#### 2.1.1.2.2. *The Christological Issue*

Besides the question of the incompatibility between the teachings of the two religious' traditions to which one may belong, the very notion of belonging *equally* to two different traditions is problematic. As stated by Cornille, "commitment to the truth of one religion logically excludes recognition of the equal truth of others."<sup>60</sup> For Christians, the recognition of Jesus as the sole and unique savior of humanity excludes the recognition of other religious *soters*. The uniqueness and exclusiveness of Christ is stressed by some of the Christological titles given to Jesus such as "Lord," but is also backed by a strong scriptural language which presents Jesus as the "*one-and-only*" (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5; Acts 4:12; Jn. 1:14,14:6; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Heb. 9:12, etc.). Paul Knitter, a dual believer who is both Catholic Christian and Buddhist, however, interprets this uniqueness not as metaphysical but as the confessional language of a community. For Knitter, if New Testament Christologies are read in their "apocalyptic cultural context," in the "classicist culture of the period of the early Christians", and in the "context of survival of the community," then the "*one-and-only*" language applied to Jesus should be understood not as dogmatic language but as "language of confession and love."<sup>61</sup> The exclusivist statements are to be perceived not as philosophical or doctrinal but rather as oriented to an orthopraxis. Whereas his insights about the confessional language does not deny the uniqueness of Christ and does not put the other religious *soters* on equal foot to Jesus, Knitter insists however that the intent of the Christological language in the

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<sup>60</sup> Cornille, *Many Mansions?* 12 quoted by Rose Drew. "Christian and Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist: Can You Have a Multiple Religious Identity?" 257.

<sup>61</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1985), 183-84.

New Testament are not philosophical/theological but praxic or performative.<sup>62</sup> For Knitter, dual belonging fits very well into the pluralist framework.

Be this as it may, doctrinal truths-claims seem secondary for dual believers since for them basically all religions are not only complementary, but they are also all valid ways to attain the ultimate.<sup>63</sup> Such an argument has been rationalized by John Hick. Though they offer various conceptions of the Ultimate Real and various ways of experiencing and reaching the Real, the religions, according to Hick, are all different paths of salvation which he defined as the transformation from “self-centeredness to Reality centeredness.”<sup>64</sup> Though Hick does not deal specifically with the question of double religious belonging, one can infer from his argument that, for him, the incompatibility that may exist between the belief systems of a dual believer is only apparent and does not matter at all. What matters is the goal of all religions which is the transformation “from self-centeredness to Real centeredness.” But by picking and choosing what benefits him or her, isn’t the ego re-emerging here? It would be unfair to criticize Hick on an aspect that he did not openly deal with. Moreover, both Knitter and Hick are not dealing with African Traditional Religion but with the so-called “world religions.”

The attitude of embracing both African Traditional Religion and Christianity may lead to a certain superficiality in some cases and a lack of personal and spiritual investment.<sup>65</sup> Talking of some Igbo Christians, Onuora Nzekwu asserts: “Go among the grown-ups who profess Christianity.

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<sup>62</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996), 68–70.

<sup>63</sup> Adherents of dual belonging usually assume that all religions originate from the same Supreme being and have the same ultimate end. The question at stake is not so much about “equality of truth” but more about the practicality of those religions and their capacity to help one to make sense of the universe and life in general (meaning-making) and to pursue the community’s and one’s quest for abundant life.

<sup>64</sup> John Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>65</sup> Such an observation is also true for cultural or sociological Christians as well.

The moment they can afford it they become polygamists and take ozo and other traditional titles. When they think it will do them good, they consult fortune-tellers, make charms and wear them.”<sup>66</sup> Nzekwu’s statement leads one to examine the depth with which dual believers embrace the two religions. Julien Penoukou, a Beninese theologian, questions the personal knowledge and experience that the Christian dual believer has with Christ. For him, “a person who claims to believe in Christ, yet has recourse to other spiritual, cosmic, or metacosmic forces, has not yet succeeded in identifying who Jesus Christ is, that he or she may profess him radically.”<sup>67</sup> With a dual belonging to both African Traditional Religion and Christianity, the question at stake touches Christology in its ontological dimension since it has to do with the way the identity and person of Jesus Christ is understood and accepted. But in the Beninese and Nigerian context, it involves also the soteriological dimension of Christology since it seems that for Christ’s role and function (soteriological aspect), the Jesus presented in mainline Churches is perceived to have little relevance on people’s lives in times of trouble or not believed to be powerful enough.<sup>68</sup> The problem is not only theological but it can also be extended further to the area of worship since, as the Latin expression states it, *lex credendi lex orandi* and *vice-versa*. Belief shapes the way one worships but it also has implications on the way one lives.

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<sup>66</sup> Onuora Nzekwu, *Wand of the Noble Wood* (London: Heineman, 1961), 76. While Nzekwu’s remarks may be true in some cases, it seems to be a generalization which leaves aside the experience of holy Igbo women and men.

<sup>67</sup> Efoe Julien Penoukou, “Christology in the Village,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 27.

<sup>68</sup> A distinction should be made between the perception and the reality. The perception that many African Christians have may be related to the Christ presented to them by missionaries and even by the local Church today. When people struggle with misfortune, sickness, witchcraft, the mainline Churches generally regard those things as merely superstitious or recommend them only to cultivate virtues of hope and faith. The question at stake has to do also with the fact that many mainline Churches fail to present a liberating message of Christ. Unlike the Pentecostals, the mainline Churches emphasize less the ministries of healing and spiritual warfare. Therefore, their followers who are looking for something tangible believe that the Christ presented by these Churches “is not powerful enough” to deal with their situation or that this Christ does not intervene in the major cycle or challenge of their life.

### 2.1.1.3. The Ethical Dimension

Dual affiliation is also an ethical problem since, by belonging to two religious' traditions, the dual believer ends up using two moral frameworks which can sometimes be conflictual in terms of values. Van den Toren, who talks about a "double morality," explains that "because a religious universe will also encompass an ethic, they [dual believers] will therefore sense the claims of two different moral systems which sometimes may be irreconcilable."<sup>69</sup> The coexistence of two different ethical frameworks has significant impact for the individual as well as for the community. When troubles arise today in relatively young families, the pressure of the elders in the family and other relatives lead young adults to go back to African Traditional Religion to consult diviners or to combine both African Traditional Religion and Christianity. The dual believer may be pulled sometimes in various directions and torn between two ethical worldviews. This can lead to a certain ethical inconsistency in the individual but also at the communal level. Dual belonging is to thus to be considered in the individual but also on the level of the community.

There are situations in which the dual believer is forced to decide between following Christian ethics or African religion values. Generally, in times of limit-situations, several Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians turn to the moral system of African Traditional Religion rather than to Christian moral values. The case of Zinsou (which was described earlier) who claimed that he would have lost his son if he had not referred to the priest of the African Traditional Religion can serve as an illustration. Two competing moral systems are at play: on one side the Christian ethic and on the other the African morality. The recourse of Zinsou to the priest of the African Traditional Religion is not perceived by him as an immoral act but as a moral responsibility toward his child and toward

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<sup>69</sup> Benno Van Den Toren, "Teaching Ethics in the face of Africa's Moral Crisis: Reflections from a Guest," *Transformation* 30, 1 (January 2013), 4.



the whole community whose essential *ethos* is the promotion and perpetuation of life at all costs. For many dual belongers such as Zinsou, in limit-situations the moral appeal is not that “of the officially recognized Christian ethic, but the moral appeal of the unofficial traditional ethic.”<sup>70</sup> In order to ward off a misfortune, this unofficial traditional ethic may recommend to the Beninese and Nigerian to consult diviners and oracles, and to make propitiatory sacrifices to some lesser divinities. Such practices are rejected by Christianity. But the reality is that like the Yoruba and the Fon, “the modern Igbo of Nigeria, even when adhering to the Christian religion have preserved many features of Igbo traditional religion.”<sup>71</sup> Many Igbo, Yoruba and Fon continue to participate or to devote themselves to practices such as consultation of the oracles, sacrifices, levirate and many others repudiated by Christianity.

From the Roman Catholicism perspective, double-belonging is undesirable. The challenges are not only ethical but also for Christological, ecclesiological, etc. But how does African Traditional Religion view dual belonging?

### *2.1.2. Dual Belonging from African Traditional Religion's Perspective*

*Orisha*, *Vodun* and Igbo religion are all characterized by their flexibility, accommodating and assimilating character. In fact, “whereas Christianity operates out of a binary ‘either-or’ approach to life, basically excluding everyone and everything that might hold a different cognitive perspective, African Religion’s major concern is less with mere abstract notions (*noesis*) but with the values that impact concretely on human life. It is the ‘both-and’ principle, or the principle of

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<sup>70</sup> Van Den Toren, “Teaching Ethics in the face of Africa’s Moral Crisis,” 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ian Stevenson, “The Belief in Reincarnation among the Igbo of Nigeria,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 20, no. 1-2 (1985): 18.

multiplicity, that underlies the African spiritual worldview.”<sup>72</sup> If Christianity has a problem accepting a dual religious belonging, *Orisha*, *Vodun* and Igbo religion with their principle of multiplicity welcome double religious belonging without problem. It is important to stress that “in West Africa there is experience of mono-*orisa* or mono-*vodhun* in the cult of devotees; but there is no exclusion of other deities.”<sup>73</sup> One could consecrate himself/herself to one particular deity without excluding the other deities. The Igbo worldview is even more generous since in contradistinction to *Orisha* and *Vodun*, the Igbo world and thus its religion is not reducible to “one dimensional cult.”<sup>74</sup>

From an Igbo, Yoruba and Fon perspective, a commitment or a surrendering to one religion does not exclude participation in others. “The underlying ontological principle of duality and plurality... is the basis for understanding being and religion in this region... The aphorism ‘when something stands, another comes to stand beside it’”<sup>75</sup> grounds the possibility of double or multiple belonging in Benin and Nigeria. In fact, West African religions are characterized by their pragmatic dimension and eclectic aspect. This eclecticism is shown for example by the “Vodun’s ‘open-endedness,’” and its “willingness to embrace just about everything that has ever crossed its path over many centuries – peoples, spirits, histories, ideas, and faiths.”<sup>76</sup> With such an eclectic character which is also present in *Orisha* and Igbo religion, double or even multiple religious belonging seems to be encouraged. The fact that these religions are sometimes collection of various beliefs explains their propensity not to repudiate any double or multiple belonging. “A cult could

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<sup>72</sup> Magesa, “Christianity and African Religion,” 255.

<sup>73</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 108.

<sup>74</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Rush Dana, *Vodun in Coastal Benin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), 12.

be tried and found wanting, if it did not provide such benefits, and another one tried instead. Towns were ready to adopt new cults and divinities, and sometimes old ones were abandoned.”<sup>77</sup> In Igbo worldview for example, adopting Christianity alongside Igbo religions “meant adding another divinity to the spiritual powers to which they [Igbo people] looked for their protection.”<sup>78</sup>

The flexibility of *Orisha*, *Vodun* and Igbo religion has also to do with the fact that they do not have sacred scriptures and doctrines. They represent an assemblage of “beliefs and practices without orthodoxy, written rules, or official membership.”<sup>79</sup> *Orisha*, *Vodun* and Igbo religion are not religions of a creed with propositional and dogmatic statements that one has to assent to but rather ways of life. Unlike Christianity and Islam, which “maintain a strong penchant for making absolute claims on truth and salvation . . . , African Religion makes no such claims.”<sup>80</sup> From an objective perspective, a dual belonging is perfectly possible and welcomed in *Orisha*, *Vodun* and Igbo religion, as long as it contributes to the increase of the vital force.

## 2.2. The Subjective Aspect

The concept of double religious belonging is very complex since it encompasses various forms. Apart from the different forms mentioned above, the phenomenon of dual belonging can be described through three different models. Robert Schreiter explains that “in the first set,

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, “Seven Varieties of Ambiguity: Some Patterns of Igbo Response to Christian Missions,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 3, no. 3 (1970): 215. Professor Felix Iroko, a well-known historian in Benin, told his students (this researcher was one of them) that when the missionaries came to Benin, they were warmly welcomed by the traditional religious authorities. Afterwards, the missionaries were asked by some religious authorities (*vodun*) to show the symbol of the power of their religion. The missionaries presented them the cross. The religious authorities then took the cross presented by the missionaries and placed it in their pantheon in order to increase their power. For them, there is no conflict in mixing many religious symbols. The more (spiritual power) one has, the better it is. This is probably related to the African worldview and philosophy grounded on the life-force.

<sup>78</sup> Isichei, “Seven Varieties of Ambiguity,” 215.

<sup>79</sup> Dana, *Vodun in Coastal Benin*, quoted by Douglas J. Falen, “Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 46, no. 4 (2016): 455.

<sup>80</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 172.

Christianity and the other tradition are perceived as two distinct religious traditions, with both being practiced side by side. In the second set, Christianity is primary, with some selection of elements from a second tradition, which is nonetheless practiced separately from Christianity. In the third set, what constitutes religion in each of the systems becomes problematic as Christians try to remain faithful both to Christianity and to their national identity.”<sup>81</sup> Among the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Fon, these three models are present and appear to indicate also various levels of involvement. While some claims belong firmly to the two religious’ traditions, others argue simply for a religious participation while being anchored in a primary religion and many others claim to use the African traditional religion as a source of inspiration or a spirituality.

### 2.2.1. *A Radical Dual belonging: Involvement in Two Parallels Systems*

For those who follow rituals from both Christianity and African Traditional Religion, there is no contradiction between these two systems which functions side by side. “The Igbo will sacrifice to the Christian God and simultaneously to the local gods without embarrassment... Nobody worships ONE God, and sacrifices to one god only. Each god is granted its true courtesy.”<sup>82</sup> People who hold to two religious’ traditions affirm generally finding more assurance in combining multiple traditions. A common saying used by dual believers Fon in Benin, “*Mi na kpa glagla nu Aklunon*” or “*Mi na kpà gláglá nu Aklún*” – which means basically we will lend a hand to God – captures the logic behind the phenomenon of dual belonging. People justify their double belonging by suggesting that it is their way to “lend a hand to God.” A certain spiritual insecurity could also

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<sup>81</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 30th anniversary edition. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 170.

<sup>82</sup> Echeruo, “Religion, Imperialism, and the Question of World Order,” 19 quoted by Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 14.

explain this double allegiance to two different religious traditions. In a setting in which the quest for abundance of life is essential but always threatened by the existence of negative witchcrafts, any “power” which could help to combat evils is welcomed. It is not unusual to find traditional healers becoming radical dual believers.<sup>83</sup> In fact, “because healers treat both physical and supernatural ailments, and because treating witchcraft-illness often requires stronger witchcraft, healers are intimately involved in the search for new types of witchcraft.”<sup>84</sup> This quest could lead one to confess a dual loyalty to two traditions perceived as complementary.

For these dual believers, all religions are pathways to God. Since all religions lead to God, proponents of this kind of belonging assert that a dual affiliation to two religious traditions should not be seen as a problem. “In a world of struggle, one would be foolish to refuse any spiritual tool, no matter what its name or origin.”<sup>85</sup> Such pragmatic logic is at the roots of the radical dual belonging to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Salvation is perceived primarily in the here-and-now. And since for proponents of radical dual belonging who subscribe to a pluralistic theology of religions, all religious traditions are means for salvation, an assemblage of many beliefs is perceived as a smart move to help the individual. Ritual efficacy appears essential and more important than the notion of theological truth.

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<sup>83</sup> Some healers belong to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion. But in their quest to gain more supernatural power, healers or diviners can search for any means which may help them to attain their goal. Thus, recently, there have been also some religious imports from China and India. See Falen, “Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” 471.

<sup>84</sup> Falen, “Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” 467. Christianity is perceived by some as belonging to the “white people’s witchcraft” which is also made of many other things such as technology, etc. Christian rituals are perceived as having a power which could be added to the traditional healers’ power.

<sup>85</sup> Falen, “Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” 470.

### 2.2.2. *Moderate Dual Belonging: Religious Participation*

Since the profane and the sacred are intertwined in Benin and Nigeria, the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon may find themselves at different moments of their existence taking part in some traditional rituals which have a strong connection with African Traditional Religion. During the burial, some Fon Christians may accept that the hair and nails (*fìn kpô dâ kpô*) of the deceased be cut off for a special ceremony which has always been a source of contention with the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches. This ceremony is condemned by the Church because it involves generally some rituals which are deeply connected to the local religion. A Fon or a Yoruba woman at pregnancy may be required to consult the Ifa oracle to discover the taboos prescribed for the expectant mother or the destiny of her child.<sup>86</sup> An Igbo Christian may pay a visit to the healer for a diagnostic of the causes of his misfortune. In fact, if for the hierarchical Church, this dual practice is inconsistent with the Christian faith, people who are involved at this level do not generally see any contradiction with their faith since this is perceived as a participation which remains mainly a cultural demand.

For those for whom African religion provides some benefits at some moment of their existence, dual belonging remains unproblematic. They prefer the term participation to that of belonging since they argue to participate only to selected rituals but do not belong to African Traditional Religion. In the scholarly world, the concept “belonging” has also come under scrutiny by some theologians. Voss Roberts affirms that “belonging, a term of ownership, must also be

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<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder and Edwin Smith, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, 2014, 96–97.

interrogated for its explanatory power and its normative force.”<sup>87</sup> Instead of “belonging,” Roberts prefers the term identity which stresses the agency of the person involved and the “dynamism between religious subjects and their traditions.”<sup>88</sup> Jeannine Hill Fletcher suggests that like our cultural identity, our religious identity is dynamic and hybrid. For her, there is no such thing as a pure religious identity. Commenting on Fletcher, Knitter affirms that our religious identity “takes shape through an ongoing process of standing in one place and stepping into other places, of forming a sense of self and then expanding or correcting that sense as we meet other selves.”<sup>89</sup>

### 2.2.3. *A Soft Dual Belonging: African Traditional Religion viewed as Spirituality*

Orobator, an Igbo convert to Christianity asserts that “African Religion recognizes itself primarily as a way of life that is deeply embedded in the consciousness of people instead of being a religion in the same organized and reified sense in which Christianity and Islam are understood and studied as religions.”<sup>90</sup> As a way of life which is interwoven with the culture, African Traditional Religion can be firstly perceived as a spirituality from which one can draw insights that can inspire the Christian faith. Orobator acknowledges: “although I am a convert to Catholic Christianity, I continue to draw significant inspiration from my background in African Religion.”<sup>91</sup> For him, African Christians are always and already dual belongers. With strong conviction, Orobator claims, “I doubt that any African can claim to be solely and entirely Christian. To be a

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<sup>87</sup> Michelle Voss Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 54.

<sup>88</sup> Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple,” 56.

<sup>89</sup> Jeannine H. Fletcher, *Monopoly of Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005) commented by Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2017), 214.

<sup>90</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 79.

Christian in Africa is to accept a hyphenated and multipolar identity; it is to contain a plurality of identities.”<sup>92</sup>

Proud of his dual religious identity, Orobator disagrees with scholars who think that a dual belonging leads to a division or a religious schizophrenia. He claims: “I do not perceive myself as torn between two religious’ traditions. Neither do I accept the label of ‘faith schizophrenia’ or ‘religious double-mindedness’ that some theologians routinely foist on Africans who believe that God continues to speak through their ancestral way of life even as God reveals God’s self in Jesus Christ.”<sup>93</sup> Orobator’s objection to those derogatory terms for dual belonging is based on the fact that he believes that African religious belief should not be seen as working side by side with his Christian faith but rather as the “ground or sub-structure” of his religious consciousness.

Rather than condemning hyphenated identity, Orobator chooses “to interpret what others have derided as syncretistic proclivity as a healthy form of religious coexistence and tolerance, and therefore a resource in an era of violent and destructive fundamentalism, sectarianism, and extremism.”<sup>94</sup> For him, what has been labelled as syncretism is rather “a form of translation that requires creativity and innovativeness, and a firm commitment to diversity.”<sup>95</sup> But does this mixture of religious belief and practices lead to a tear or a split in the Igbo, Yoruba or Fon Christian?

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<sup>92</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 170. Orobator finds support for his argument in Pope Paul VI’s statement in which he claims that “the African, who becomes a Christian, does not disown himself [or herself], but takes up the age-old values of tradition ‘in spirit and in truth.’” Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 18. Orobator’s use of the term “hyphenated identity” can be confusing. Magesa distinction between hybrid identity and hyphenated identity can be helpful in order to understand that Orobator is arguing for the latter rather than the former. For Laurenti Magesa, “while hybrid identity claims to spiritually profess and socially and institutionally identify double or multiple faiths at one and the same time, hyphenated identity espouses only a single belonging. In hybrid identity, a person may claim to be both a Christian and an African religionist ... in hyphenated belonging, a person is Christian who may be inspired by African or Hindu religious values.” See Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 123.

<sup>93</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 18.

<sup>94</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 74.

<sup>95</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 165.



Orobator suggests that one sees hyphenated identity as an “experience of tension rather than division, of inspiration rather than despair. It is a quest for integration and harmony rather than an experience of alienation and conflict.”<sup>96</sup> He reiterates again and again that he does not perceive himself as torn or split between two religious’ traditions.<sup>97</sup> He thinks that it is rather a blessing to learn from these two traditions which continue to enrich his journey. Orobator argues that hyphenated identity is not to be seen as relativism. Orobator speaks of “an unmistakable relativity (I avoid the term “relativism”) about faith and belief in Africa.”<sup>98</sup> He argues that if no culture “can exhaust the mystery of salvation,” no religion can claim to have the “monopoly on truth.”<sup>99</sup>

### 2.3. Insights from an Assessment of Different Models of Double Religious Belonging

Double religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria can be grouped in three models. A theological assessment needs to take in accounting both the subjective and objective aspects of dual belonging but also the different models involved and their theological claims. Any theological assessment of the phenomenon of dual belonging ought to be nuanced, otherwise it runs the risk to be reductionist and overgeneralized.

A radical dual religious belonging is hardly endorsable because it raises many doctrinal issues and problems related to commitment and surrender. If for Cornille, single belonging is “necessary to attain the highest religious or spiritual goals of a religion,”<sup>100</sup> then being at the same time both Catholic and African traditional practitioner seems to jeopardize that goal from the Catholic

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<sup>96</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 18.

<sup>97</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 171.

<sup>99</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 172.

<sup>100</sup> Cornille, *Many Mansions?* 14-15 quoted by Rose Drew. “Christian and Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist,” 260.

perspective. Moreover, it may be hard to belong to both equally because the requirements of both religious traditions may make it difficult if not impossible for someone to be actually involved in both. Radical dual believers have generally argued for a unifying transcendent or ultimate reality that underlies all religions. Underlining such an assertion is a pluralist paradigm which seems to be rooted in the enlightenment. But according to Gavin D'Costa, "the enlightenment, in granting a type of equality to all religions, ended up denying public truth to any and all of them."<sup>101</sup> Though African Traditional religion is tolerant to radical dual believers who themselves do not find any incompatibility between the two systems, the Catholic Church because essentially of its Christology would discourage a radical dual religious belonging.

Moderate dual believers to African Traditional Religion and Christianity view their involvement in one of the religious traditions as participation rather than belonging. In fact, as explained by Schreier, "Christianity is practiced in its integrity, and selected elements from another system are also practiced. Often those elements are perceived by Christian leaders as incompatible and even contradictory to Christianity."<sup>102</sup> From a subjective perspective, Beninese and Nigerians involved at this level perceive their participation as temporary and limited. They view the two religions as complementary but asymmetrical. Such perception gives some hints about their unarticulated theology of religion which may be perceived as wider inclusivism. But beyond their perception of their dominant religion (Christianity) as prior and the African Religion as secondary and circumstantial, this kind of dual belonging summons a need for a serious theological reflection. In fact, double religious belonging generally arise from "a sense of insufficiency or lack in any one particular religion."<sup>103</sup> In that perspective, double religious

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<sup>101</sup> Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>102</sup> Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 170.

<sup>103</sup> Cornille, "Multiple Religious Belonging," 335.

belonging may be pointing to the importance of addressing some unmet needs in Christianity through an in-depth inculturation. The “relapse” to African Traditional Religion in times of crisis may indicate that Christianity somehow fails to provide meaning to those dual belongers. An appropriate inculturated pastoral response may help to address the situation of this category of dual belongers.

Soft dual religious belonging refers to what Kang-San Tan has called the “insider movement” or “the contextual model” of dual belonging which calls “for ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ without necessarily changing one’s religious identity.”<sup>104</sup> Loyalty to Christ does not imply renouncing to one’s culture. Orobator’s approach to hyphenated identity should be understood in this dynamic, and in the line of a convert to Christianity who reclaims the spiritual heritage of the Igbo Religion. The relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity is not that of a competition. But for Orobator, “African Religion plays a key role in defining the possibility for the existence of Christianity and Islam within the same epistemological domain or religious consciousness.”<sup>105</sup>

Proponents of this contextual model of dual religious belonging reclaim their traditions but also invite to a redefinition of the concept of religion which seems to be mostly a Western category. Voss Roberts argues that multiple religious belonging is viewed as problematic because of a certain understanding of religion based on propositional systems. “The definition most restrictive in terms of multiple belonging reduces religion to doctrinal systems, ‘fixed ‘presuppositions’ which can then be rationally adjudicated ‘by citation of the creeds or other [official] documents.’ On this account, religions are mutually incompatible if they do not articulate the same truth

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<sup>104</sup> Tan, “Dual Belonging,” 30.

<sup>105</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 67.

statements in the same way.”<sup>106</sup> Such a definition of religion seems to be unfitting for all religious traditions. African Traditional Religion is primarily a spirituality, a way of life from which one can draw insights for Christian faith. If to be an African Christian is to have a “hyphenated identity” since one’s Christian faith is based upon the bedrock of African Religion, such a dual religious belonging which seems more to be in consonance with the inculturation movement is perfectly acceptable even from a Roman Catholic perspective.<sup>107</sup> If God has spoken to our foremothers and forefathers as the Letter to the Hebrews (1:1) proclaims, reclaiming their spiritual heritage should not be forbidden but encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

Double religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria is expressed in various forms and experienced at various levels. Therefore, a general and a priori judgment or pronouncement on its suitability or validity does not seem to be helpful. The lived experience of dual believers needs to be understood and respected. An emphasis on the subjective dimension of double religious belonging shows that “the various strategies of negotiation of dual or multiple belonging have their own logic and efficacy and provide meaning for those who inhabit them. The question is whether they are also meaningful or coherent for the religions to which they claim to belong.”<sup>108</sup> From the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church, double religious belonging in general presents many theological challenges. If those challenges make it hard for the Church to endorse some models of dual religious belonging, it is striking that from the viewpoint of African Traditional Religion namely

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<sup>106</sup> Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple,” 53.

<sup>107</sup> Soft dual believers reclaim their cultural heritage which they perceive as a sub-structure or bedrock for their Christian faith. Retaining cultural aspects which can become bearers of the gospel is clearly related to inculturation which is the incarnation of the gospel in a particular culture.

<sup>108</sup> Cornille, “Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging,” 157.

*Orisha, Vodun* and Igbo Religion, double belonging in all its forms is tolerated and even encouraged.

Since many Igbo, Yoruba and Fon Christians are and continue to be dual believers, it is important to engage a reflection in order to meet those needs that dual believers are looking for and which may be lacking in Christianity. Cornille is right when she stresses that “while the claim to fully belong to more than one religion may not be entirely coherent, the continued desire to belong, and the struggle to come to terms with multiple loyalties might motivate religions to engage in a more systematic dialogue with the religion or religions to which many of their members seem to be drawn.”<sup>109</sup> Such dialogue can happen through a reevaluation of some rituals in African Traditional Religion which may be compatible with the Christian faith. Such process of inculturation will be the subject of our next chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> Cornille, 158.

## CHAPTER II

### DOUBLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INCULTURATION IN BENIN AND NIGERIA

#### Introduction

The previous chapter alerts us to the challenges that dual belonging raises. For the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, dual religious belonging remains a matter of concern as shown by the letter of the bishops of Onisha in Nigeria who observed with sorrow that most of their “Catholics do not find any incompatibility in plural belonging... Easily, airily, they slide out of one skin into another or rather by some miracle peculiar to themselves they comfortably wear both skins at once.”<sup>110</sup> The very existence of double or multiple religious belonging points to the enduring presence of unmet needs. If the neglect of some cultural practices essential to the social fabric of Igbo, Yoruba and Fon is one of the main reasons which accounts for dual belonging in Benin and Nigeria, is it then possible that inculturation could be one of the solutions or remedies to this phenomenon? This chapter attempts to respond to this question by examining double religious belonging as an invitation but also as an opportunity for inculturation in Benin and Nigeria. In a West African traditional religious setting where symbolism is important and where scriptural texts are generally lacking, rites or rituals are essential since they offer some clues to understand and to penetrate to the heart of the religious traditions and cultures. In this regard, transitional ancestral rites play a major role.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, since some of the transitional rites of passage are key moments when

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<sup>110</sup> Catholic Bishops of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province, *Put Out Into Deep Water*, (n.p., 1985), 11-12.

<sup>111</sup> Arnold Van Gennep who has done outstanding works on the issue of rituals divide rites of passages into three categories: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. He adds that though “a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated.” In that perspective, he suggests that rites of separation may be predominant in funerals, whereas rites of incorporation may be more important during marriages. As for transition rites, there may be significant during

Beninese and Nigerian Christians struggle to remain loyal only to Christianity, this chapter will explore whether some of those rites can be integrated to Christianity.

## **1. From Dual Religious Belonging to Inculturation**

The persistence of dual religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria raises many concerns among which is the question of inculturation. By rejecting essential elements of Fon, Yoruba and Igbo religious traditions, the Catholic Church has itself contributed to the advent of double religious belonging. The missed opportunity in the encounter between Christianity and other religions can be addressed through a genuine inculturation which requires a better understanding of the signs and codes of the local cultures.

### **1.1. A Semiotic Approach to Double Religious Belonging: A Perspective from the Receiving Culture**

In history, culture has been perceived from different perspectives: functionalistic, ecological and materialistic, structuralist, semiotic. A semiotic approach to culture perceives it “as a vast communication network, whereby both verbal and non-verbal messages are circulated along elaborate, interconnected pathways, which, together, create the systems of meaning.”<sup>112</sup> The semiotic approach highlights the importance of reading the signs, codes, or “cultural texts” of a particular culture. A particular emphasis is put on the description, the dynamic interactions of the signs and their meaning in the culture. From a semiotic perspective of culture, Schreiter perceives double religious belonging as springing out from an encounter between two cultures: the

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pregnancy and initiation. See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11. In this thesis, however, transitional rites will be used as synonymous of rites of passage.

<sup>112</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 57.

“receiving culture” and the “invading culture.” By starting from the perspective of the receiving culture rather than the invading culture, he suggests four models of understanding double religious belonging or dual religious systems:

In the first instance, *the encounter with the invading culture is incomplete...* A second perspective giving rise to dual systems is ... [when] *the presence of the invading culture actually enhances the value of the sign system of the local culture...* From a third perspective *the local culture accepts the sign system of the invading culture, but believes that there are still problems that the invading culture's sign does not adequately handle...* From a fourth perspective *the invading sign system and the local sign system are seen as dealing with two different things.*<sup>113</sup>

In the first model presented by Schreiter, dual belonging arises because of the failure of the signs systems to make a sufficient and serious contact with one another. Schreiter explains that in the first model, “the receiving culture does not feel that the invading culture’s sign system is addressing the same things that its own sign system addresses,” therefore the “invading sign system remains ‘foreign.’”<sup>114</sup>

In the second model, the receiving culture perceives the invading culture as impoverished in terms of signs systems and symbols.

Thus, it becomes a point of pride to keep the two sign systems separate, even while giving the necessary obeisance to the sign system of the invading culture. The traditional religion is seen as superior to that of Christianity, but the people have no choice but of maintain an outward adherence to Christianity... in such instances the perceived inferiority of the invading system ... actually enhances the status and strengthens the credibility of the local sign system.<sup>115</sup>

Among some Fon, Igbo and Yoruba converts who have been compelled to embrace the new religion, Christianity has remained purely superficial.<sup>116</sup> People pay lip service to the Western

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<sup>113</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 178–80.

<sup>114</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 178.

<sup>115</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 179.

<sup>116</sup> Talking of Christianity in Africa in general, Bishop Peter K. Sarpong of Kumasi (Ghana) quoted by Okolo states: “All this seems to be superficial. In fact, Christianity and Christian conviction are merely skin-deep” in African



Christ presented to them while deeply remaining attached to their traditional religion that they perceived as efficient and superior in some aspects. Compared to Christianity, the local culture is perceived by Igbo, Fon and Yoruba as having more symbols and signs which are deeply meaningful to them. Christianity has failed to penetrate their cultural worldview in order to root itself into their life.

In the third model, the sign system of the invading culture although helpful in some areas is deemed inappropriate when it comes to some issues which only the local sign system can help addressing. In order to address some immediate and concrete needs, some Fon, Igbo and Yoruba Christians prefer to see the diviner or the local traditional priest. The door for divination remains open and thus part of the old local sign system endures underneath the Christian faith. As mentioned by Schreiter, “the Christian deity may be all-powerful, but that deity does not relate to that dangerous section of bush outside the village as well as a local deity does. Hence the need to maintain relations with the local deity. Christianity can seem too abstract, too concerned with words, and not sufficiently able to meet the day-to-day needs... for that reason, certain aspects of the old system will perdure, even for centuries, alongside Christianity.”<sup>117</sup>

As for the fourth model, the invading sign system and the local sign system are perceived as addressing two different things. Such an understanding is generally held by radical dual believers. For them, Christianity and Fon, Yoruba or Igbo religion are meant to resolve two distinctive things and thus can work one on top of the other.

As summarized by Schreiter, “dual systems can be seen as arising from perceptions on the part of the receiving culture that the invading culture’s religious sign system is alien, inferior,

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people’s life and deliberation. See Chukwudum Okolo, *The African Synod: Hope for the Continent’s Liberation* (Eldoret: Amecea Gaba, 1994), 24.

<sup>117</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 179.

inadequate, or not to the point. Thus, the encounter never really takes place.”<sup>118</sup> Some tensions may appear especially when the receiving culture fears that their sign systems will be taken away by the invading system. Conflicts also arise when the authority or power of the guardians of the traditions are threatened. The Beninese case could serve as an illustration for this model. In fact, if Christianity was tolerated in Abomey (a city in Benin Republic), one of the cradles of the religion *vodun*, it seems to have not become entirely part of the culture. In 2011, the King of Abomey, His Majesty Dédjalagni Agoli-Agbo, and the traditional elites of Abomey strongly opposed the inculturated ritual of the funerals *Mèwihwèndô* initiated by the Catholic Church which was perceived by them as a threat to the cultural values of the kingdom.<sup>119</sup> The letter addressed by the King to the local chiefs shows their perception of a certain process of inculturation as a threat: “Considering the daily practices of the Catholic Church in some of our royal families through the ceremonies of *Mèwihwèndô*, the King and his court rise up against this parallel organization trampling on our ‘habits and customs.’ This initiative of Catholics is only intended to strip us of our ancestral values. That said, we cannot tolerate that those ceremonies of *Mèwihwèndô* be

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<sup>118</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 180.

<sup>119</sup> *Mèwihwèndô* which literally means “black furrow” is a movement of inculturation which was promoted in the 1970s by Mgr. Barthélemy Adoukonou (who became later Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture) and the late Mgr. Agboka, bishop of Abomey (Benin). Inspired by the Second Vatican Council, this circle which was extended to local representatives of cultures, religion and many intellectuals of Abomey took seriously the Fon rituals of passage and tried to integrate some of them to the Christian faith. They adopted some of the practices which are “christianized,” and modify others. For example, during the funeral rituals instead of filling the coffin of the dead with clothes and many other goods, *Mèwihwèndô* has instead opted to use those goods to help the family of the deceased or the needy. Instead of a duplication of the funerals (traditional and Catholics) which was costly for the families, the *Mèwihwèndô* suggested a more integrated model which restores the cultural substratum of funerals in milieu Fon and combines it with the catholic rituals. This integrated model was viewed as a threat by some leaders of the Fon tribes. Moreover, the conversion of important leaders such as *Daah* (fon title of lineage chiefs) Akanza who used to be a “great witch doctor” of *Sakpata vodun* and who was presented after his conversion as a reference of what it means to be “a fully Christian and fully African” sets up the conflict between the hierarchy Fon and the founders of *Mèwihwèndô*. Even within the Church, *Mèwihwèndô* was not welcomed by everyone. On April 16, 2006, Cardinal Bernardin Gantin from Benin Republic refers to *Mèwihwèndô* as a “form of interpretation, invention or more or less erroneous or aberrant presentation” of the Catholic liturgy. Running out of steam, the movement focuses more on theoretical researches today. See Gaetano Ciarica, “Rhétoriques et Pratiques de l’inculturation: Une Généalogie « morale » des Mémoires de l’Esclavage au Bénin,” *Gradhiva*, no. 8 (November 15, 2008): 28–47, <https://doi.org/10.4000/gradhiva.1170>.

organized in our respective communities/regions. The main objective is to safeguard, to preserve and promote our traditional values. Consequently, any traditional chief (*Daahs* or *Nanhs*) who authorized this negative practice on his territory will suffer the consequences.”<sup>120</sup> Despite the originality of the inculturation model of *Mèwihwèndô*, this practice was forbidden by the King. The receiving culture has been deaf sometimes to some of the inculturation processes that the Church has undertaken perhaps because of the prejudices and mistrust born from the earlier encounter between Christianity and vodun, and also because of the current perceived threat that Christianity’s sign systems may destroy the local sign system. The receiving culture is opened and flexible as long as it is in charge of the process of “receiving.” A feeling of “being stolen from” their heritage can lead to an open conflict.

The receiving culture’s perception and attitude has a lot to do with the way the invading culture had presented itself. The encounter has been usually characterized by a certain violence, distrust and an ecclesiology which has been “culturally alienating” for the receiving culture. A real and authentic re-encounter marked by mutual respect needs to take place. This re-encounter needs to start with Christianity looking back at its own history. If the history of religions shows that religious traditions borrow from each other and that Christianity itself has appropriated cultural aspects from various places (Greco-Roman world for example), then the Church should be opened to a mutual and frank exchange between Christian and Fon, Yoruba or Igbo religions. Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism needs also to reassess the way it views Fon, Yoruba or Igbo cultural and religious traditions which in the past were associated with fetishism and thus were denied positive salvific values. Since Fon, Yoruba or Igbo cultures have been shaped by African

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<sup>120</sup> See Letter of “S. M. Dada Dédjalagni’ adressé à l’attention de tout chef traditionnel (*Daahs* et *Nanhs* responsables de siège)” (November 18, 2011), quoted by Joël Noret, “Sur le dos des morts ?” *Terrain* 62 (March 2014). See <http://terrain.revues.org/15339> ; DOI : 10.4000/terrain.15339. The translation from French to English is done by the researcher.

Traditional Religion, it is important to clearly assert and reaffirm theologically their positive values for an authentic dialogue and inculturation.

### 1.2. A Contemporary Approach to Non-Christian Religions: Perspective from the Invading Culture

The encounter between Christianity and Fon, Yoruba or Igbo religions has been superficial because of how the latter religious traditions were perceived. Such perception has tainted the process of evangelization and inculturation. Michael Amaladoss rightly points out:

Cosmic religious symbols may be as much cultural as they are religious. So there is no problem in integrating them. What about symbols from other religious traditions? As long as other religions were considered as untrue and devilish, any integration of their symbols and rituals would have been unthinkable. But today we believe that the Spirit of God is present and active, not only in the human hearts of individuals, but also in other cultures and religions (RM 28). If this is so, this Spirit must be manifesting itself in their personal, social, and historical experience, in their scriptures and narratives, prayers, rituals, and symbols.<sup>121</sup>

Amaladoss' bold claim about the presence of the Spirit in the symbols of other religious traditions would have been perceived as heretical or at least suspicious before Vatican Council II.<sup>122</sup> In fact, Vatican II was truly a watershed event regarding the Church's assessment of the positive significance of Non-Christians religions. As summarized by the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians, the Council affirmed the presence in other religious traditions of “‘elements which are true and good’ [L.G., no. 16], ‘precious things, both religious and human’ [G.S., no. 92], ‘seeds of contemplation’ [A.G., no. 18], ‘elements of truth and grace’ [A.G., no. 9], ‘seeds of the Word’ [A.G., nos. 11 and 15], and ‘rays of that truth which illuminates all humankind’ [N.A., no.

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<sup>121</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters: Opportunities and Challenges* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 128.

<sup>122</sup> In some conservative circles, some may still continue to find Amaladoss' assertion problematic.

2]..”<sup>123</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 17 talked explicitly about the rites and customs which are not only saved from destruction but also brought to perfection. This paradigm shift in the Catholic Church which had led to the recognition of the presence of “rays of truth” in other religions and to the acknowledgment of the presence of the Spirit in the rituals and symbols of other religious traditions has also been the result of the works of several theologians.

Karl Rahner, a key figure in this major shift, was convinced that non-Christian religions contain some supernatural elements which mediate divine grace. Because of the supernatural elements that they contain “out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ,” other religions play a positive role in salvation history.<sup>124</sup> For Jacques Dupuis, the non-Christian religions continue to have “even today, a positive value in the order of salvation by virtue of the operative presence within them, and in some way through them, of the saving mystery of Jesus Christ.”<sup>125</sup> He disagrees with Rahner about the provisional and transitional aspect of non-Christian religions that the latter seems to argue for or to claim. Dupuis affirms instead that these religions still have an important value today. Since the covenant between God and Adam or Noah is not obsolete, then, the non-Christian religions which are all part of those irrevocable covenants are included in the single economy of salvation-revelation. For Dupuis, if God’s self-communication is addressed to every human being, then God must reach out to other religious traditions not through the Church as sacrament but through their own religious practices. Speaking of non-Christian religions, Dupuis asserts that “their religious practice is indeed what gives

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<sup>123</sup> Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians, “Dialogue and Mission: The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions,” no 26. See <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf> (Accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>124</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, trans. K-H & B. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 121 and 125.

<sup>125</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 132.

expression to their experience of God and of the mystery of Christ. It is the visible element, the sign, the sacrament of that experience. This practice expresses, sustains, supports, and contains – as it were – their encounter with God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>126</sup> But he does not rank the Catholic sacraments and the symbols or practices of other religions at the same level. Dupuis argues also for a complementarity, a “mutual enrichment and transformation” between Christianity and other religions though such complementarity remains asymmetrical.

Amaladoss, who owed a lot to his predecessors Rahner and Dupuis, perceives religions as means for the encounter between the divine and the human. Moving away from the fulfilment theory which has established a sharp distinction between natural religions and Christianity, Amaladoss states that “every religion is God reaching out to people in and through their context.”<sup>127</sup> The various religions are thus different paths through which God communicates and manifests himself to the human being. Amaladoss goes even further by stressing that “for every person the manner in which God reaches out to him is adequate for his salvation. But God’s manifestations, as his gifts and charisms . . . give the person or the community a particular mission (role) in history.”<sup>128</sup> For Beninese and Nigerians, Fon, Yoruba and Igbo religions among many others were the way through which God reaches out to their forefathers and foremothers. As such, those religious traditions are bearers of God’s grace.

The contemporary Catholic theology of religions which acknowledges the positive values contained in the traditional religions should normally encourage a movement of inculturation in

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<sup>126</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 188.

<sup>127</sup> He however clarifies that “the world is not a supermarket of religions . . . Religion is a matter of God’s call: a vocation.” Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990), 184.

<sup>128</sup> Michael Amaladoss, “The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, no. 3 &4 (1989): 283.

Benin and Nigeria but the process still remains slow. For Schreiter, “If the message of the gospel is genuinely heard in the local culture, that message must find a place among the most fundamental messages of that culture, with concomitant change in codes, signs, and the entire sign system... Christ can be found in culture, but making that discovery explicit will have consequences for the culture.”<sup>129</sup> Instead of being heard, the message of the gospel is to be found in the local culture. One is asked to seek those seeds which are already in the soil and to water them so that they can grow and become full. A genuine inculturation in Benin and Nigeria would need to penetrate into the entire sign system of the Fon, Yoruba or Igbo culture by discovering the presence of God’s revelation within those local signs. But what is inculturation?

## **2. Inculturation**

### **2.1. Moving away from “cosmetics” to the real “meaning” of inculturation<sup>130</sup>**

The notion of inculturation has often been misunderstood and amalgamated with some other related concepts such as localization, adaptation, indigenization, assimilation, acculturation, enculturation, etc. The concept of localization refers to the relationship that the universal Church maintains with the local Church. Cyril Orji points out that often such a model assumes that there is something that can be recognized as “true Christianity” and another that is “true local culture.”<sup>131</sup> Moreover, such an understanding perceives culture as something static. Such a classicist view of culture may in practice be a way of maintaining “a definitional control over the faith of the mission

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<sup>129</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 180.

<sup>130</sup> The researcher is borrowing the terms “cosmetics” and “meaning” from the original title of an article of Marcel Uwineza: “Beyond Cosmetics to Meaning: Challenges and Perspectives for Inculturation.” The title has later been changed to: “Inculturation in Africa: Challenges and Prospects,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* Year 4 (January 2020): 66-74.

<sup>131</sup> Cyril Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2017), 144.

or the former mission churches.”<sup>132</sup> Adaptation refers to a translation of some aspects of the Christian faith into local categories. The change of cultural outfit to the gospel is viewed by some “as implying compromise or concession or even adulteration.”<sup>133</sup> Indigenization highlights the importance of promoting indigenous theology, local cultures and local ministers. Not only is the term loaded with a historical connotation about the replacement of colonizers by neo-colonialist indigenous leadership, but also “indigenization carries the danger of ‘cultural romanticism (i.e., dreaming of a glorious past) and culturalism (i.e., considering indigenous culture as the determining norm of the process of the encounter between the Gospel and culture).”<sup>134</sup> Assimilation refers to the process by which one is forced to renounce parts of his cultural or religious identity in order to conform to a European Christianity packed in a Western or Roman style. Acculturation “means the encounter with a culture other than one’s own or the contact between cultures together with the ensuing changes.”<sup>135</sup> Acculturation leads to a certain tolerance but it unfortunately does not pay enough attention to the power relations. Enculturation refers to the process by which someone is inserted into his or her community’s culture. But whereas enculturation is grounded on the assumption that the one being enculturated does not already have a prior culture before his insertion, inculturation however assumes that the individual already has a culture before his or her encounter with the Christian culture.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Fiona Bowie, “The Inculturation Debate in Africa,” *Studies in World Christianity* 5 (1999): 68 quoted by Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation*, 144.

<sup>133</sup> Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation*, 151.

<sup>134</sup> Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation*, 156.

<sup>135</sup> Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982), 7.

<sup>136</sup> Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation*, 157.



Inculturation is a complex phenomenon which is theologically grounded on the mystery of incarnation and the Paschal mystery. For Pedro Arrupe, inculturation is “the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular local cultural context, in such a way that the experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies a culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation.’”<sup>137</sup> Arrupe’s explanation of this concept suggests the necessity to move from a certain superficiality to the enfleshment of the gospel in the local culture. This idea of enfleshment or incarnation is also present in the definition given by the International Theological Commission which views inculturation as “the Church’s efforts to make the message of Christ penetrate a given socio-cultural milieu, calling the latter to grow according to all its particular values, as long as these are compatible with the Gospel. The term ‘inculturation’ includes the notion of growth, of the mutual enrichment of persons and groups, rendered possible by the encounter of the gospel with a social milieu.”<sup>138</sup> By viewing incarnation as the Church’s effort, the agency of local people in this process of inculturation seems to be sidelined or not given enough emphasis. In his various works, Lamin Sanneh has stressed the involvement of local peoples in Africa in this early process of inculturation.<sup>139</sup> The definition of the International Theological Commission has the merit however of stressing the reciprocity and mutual enrichment between the gospel and the cultures. Inculturation is to be viewed as a two-way process which enriches both the culture and the gospel.

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<sup>137</sup> Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation,” *AR* 17 (1978): 230. See [https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1978\\_arrupeinculturationsociety/](https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1978_arrupeinculturationsociety/) (Accessed 20 January 2021)

<sup>138</sup> International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation* (Vatican: 1988), no 11. See [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1988\\_fede-inculturazione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html) (accessed 22 January 2021)

<sup>139</sup> Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations Pillars of World Christianity*, Oxford Studies in World Christianity (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 285.

Chibuko alludes to the same idea when he states that “the Christian faith, requires a receptive ground, fertilised and nourished by the cultural values and the genius of the people. Between the Christian faith and culture there should be a mutual interaction and reciprocal assimilation. No one part should be subjected to remain only on the receiving end or left in a state of inactivity or anonymity. The special emphasis of inculturation is openness of culture to Christianity and vice versa.”<sup>140</sup>

## 2.2. Double Religious Belonging and Inculturation

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI points out that “the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.”<sup>141</sup> Such a split is perceptible in the phenomenon of double religious belonging. Evangelization today requires a listening to a culture which is not static but dynamic. In order to avoid the widening gap between gospel and culture, evangelization ought to tackle more deeply the question of double belonging from an inculturation perspective. Unfortunately, the process of inculturation has been very slow in Benin and Nigeria. Whereas the African Independent Churches have incorporated various elements of the cultural and religious element in their communities, the process of inculturation in African mainline Churches has not gone beyond the attribution of a social title (ancestor, elder brother) or a job description (healer, liberator, king, and many others) to the African Christ. While those attempts should also be encouraged, they seem however to not have succeeded in firmly rooting the faith in Benin and Nigeria. As Cecil McGarry suggests: “Christianity exists when people believe; and it becomes deeply rooted when it touches people and their lives where and as they

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<sup>140</sup> Patrick Chukwudezie Chibuko, *Paschal Mystery of Christ: Foundation for Liturgical Inculturation in Africa*, (New York: P. Lang, 1999), 117–18.

<sup>141</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 20.

are... faith can only find its expression and life within cultures.”<sup>142</sup> Double religious belonging will continue to prosper in Benin and Nigeria if the Christian faith does not penetrate the African way of life. As stated by Magesa, “the refusal of inculturating the Gospel message slows down the ‘enrooting’ of the Church in the African continent, causing the Church and the faith to remain a ‘potted plant,’ forever living in a foreign soil.”<sup>143</sup> Inculturation becomes one of the important ways of rooting the gospel in Benin and Nigeria and addressing double religious belonging.

### **3. Addressing Double Religious Belonging through the Inculturation of Rituals of Passage**

#### **3.1. Forms of Rituals in Benin and Nigeria and the Importance of Transitional Rites**

Mbiti defines rite or ritual as “a means of communicating something of religious significance, through word, symbol and action... the ritual word is powerful since it is spoken in seriousness and solemnity, and it is repeated every time that ritual is done.”<sup>144</sup> The symbolic character of ritual and their fixed patterns appear important for the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. In Africa in general and in Benin and Nigeria in particular, rituals and rites are generally connected to life. As suggested by Kabasele Lumbala, the rite appears as “a vehicle containing human life in its completeness and at the same time enables individual human beings to ‘accomplish’ transcendence.”<sup>145</sup> In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba traditions which are opened to transcendence and in which life as a cardinal value is revered, rituals are highly valued.

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<sup>142</sup> Cecil McGarry, “Preface” in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, ed. John M. Walligo (Kampala: St Paul Publications Africa, 1986), 9.

<sup>143</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 10.

<sup>144</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 131.

<sup>145</sup> François Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 4.

Michael Amaladoss distinguishes three kinds of rituals: the first ones are “need-based and cater to the ordinary problems and tensions of life. At this level people do not seem to have any problem in crossing religious boundaries... Other rituals mark the relation of an individual to a social group at important moments of his/her life. These are called *rites de passage*. These are so closely related to a community’s identity and integration that no one who does not belong to that community seeks to practice them. A third kind are rituals of transcendence that relate a person-in-community to the Ultimate. These are celebrations of praise, thanksgiving and intercession.”<sup>146</sup>

All three categories of ritual can be found in Benin and Nigeria where there is a wide range of rituals. The need-based rituals which are organized around sacred objects and places are generally motivated among the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba by the quest for security and healing. The rites of passage are spread throughout the life of the individual from conception till death. James Cox offers an overview of some of those rituals of passage: “(1) prenatal rituals (e.g., rituals to confirm pregnancy, for fetal growth, and for safe delivery); (2) naming rituals; (3) pre-pubertal and pubertal initiation rituals for the entrance into adulthood; (4) betrothal and marriage; (5) initiation into prestige-bestowing adult associations; (6) rituals elevating individuals to high office or to priestly functions; and (7) funeral.”<sup>147</sup> Those rituals which correspond to different life-cycles are called by Mbiti as “personal rituals”<sup>148</sup> though they draw the attention and participation of the community. Those rituals are to be distinguished from the rituals of transcendence which are

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<sup>146</sup> Michael Amaladoss, “Double Religious Belonging and Liminality: An Antropho-Theological Reflection” (unpublished).

<sup>147</sup> James Cox, “Rites of passage: African Rites,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 7804-7806, Vol. 11 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). *Gale eBooks* (accessed January 23), 2021). [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424502648/GVRL?u=mmln\\_m\\_bostcoll&sid=GVRL&xid=7b921](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424502648/GVRL?u=mmln_m_bostcoll&sid=GVRL&xid=7b921)

<sup>148</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 132.

addressed to deities and are performed generally around the shrines at specific moments or when the situation requires.

The rites of passage will be of particular interest in dealing with dual belonging and stressing the importance of inculturation. Rites of passages or transitional rites are important in the symbolic expression of a culture. As stated by Schreiter, “rites of passage (surrounding birth, puberty, marriage, change of leadership, death) are rich culture texts” which express the symbols, codes, actions, language of a group.<sup>149</sup> If Christianity wants to implant itself into the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba soul, then it needs to get at the core of those cultures by examining their rituals of passage. Charles Onuh explains the overriding character of the transitional rites by stating that “they are considered the necessary wave-lengths in the transmission of Igbo culture. By their means, an entrance is gained into the heart of Igbo culture. If the Christian faith must have a meaning for the people, it must have to penetrate this heart of culture as a fertile seed, in order to germinate and flourish in the transformation of the traditional modal structure of the Igbos.”<sup>150</sup>

Given the place of the rituals of passage or transitional rites in Igbo, Fon or Yoruba cultures, the importance of inculturating them cannot be overstated. Inculturation of rites should not be seen as a burden or a challenge. In fact, if some of the Christian rituals used today have been borrowed from the Jewish and the Greco-Roman culture, then inculturating some of the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba rituals should not be feared.

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<sup>149</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 72. Schreiter indicates that “texts can be verbal and nonverbal, visual, auditory, and tactile, simple and highly complex.”

<sup>150</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 140.

### 3.2. Double Belonging and Life-Crisis Rituals: The Necessity of Inculturation of the Rites of Passage

As in many cultures, among the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba, important stages of life are celebrated through traditional rites of passage. Life-crisis rituals which mark major steps in the life of an individual are important in the social fabric and in the incorporation of the individual into the group. It is generally through these significant transitional rites (birth-puberty-marriage and death) that some cultural and religious conceptions are transmitted from generation to generation in order to ensure the harmony and the perpetuation of the community. The “rites of passage flow from the community and in each transitional rite a strong sense of communitarian solidarity can be identified.”<sup>151</sup> Such rites define the identity of the person and his or her belonging to the group. In the Fon worldview, for example a person who has not gone through the rite of “*Agbassá-yiyi*” is viewed as a stranger, an individual without roots who shows an inner, social and religious disharmony.<sup>152</sup> Since the ritual of “*Agbassá-yiyi*” is meant to provide or structure this harmony with oneself and the larger community, when someone in the society shows signs of instability, the Fon will promptly ask: “*E ka yì àgbassa n’i à ?*” : “Has he gone through the rite of *Agbassá-yiyi*?” or “*E ka kosun n’i à ?*” : “Was the rite of *Sunkúnkún* done for him ?”<sup>153</sup> The incorporation into the community is essential for the Fon as well as for the Igbo, and Yoruba. In such cultures in

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<sup>151</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 168.

<sup>152</sup> “*Agbassá-yiyi*” is the rite through which the child is brought to the living room (*Agbassá*) of the representative of the eponymous Ancestor. This ceremony ratifies the official recognition and integration of the new born child to the extended and larger family. See Barthelemy Zinzindohoue, “Traditional Religion in Africa: The Vodun phenomenon in Benin,” in *Christianity in Dialogue with African Traditional Religion and Culture*, ed. Isizoh Chidi Denis (Rome: Ceedee Publications, 2001): 137-168.

<sup>153</sup> *Sunkúnkún* which literally means “whistling to the lady of the nights” is the rite of presentation of the newborn to the moon, of naming and outing or exit of the child. See Zinzindohoue, “Traditional Religion in Africa,” 137-168.

which the notion of community and harmony are essential, inculturation needs to focus on such transitional rites.

In the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba worldviews in which sacred and profane are intertwined, transitional rites are not merely cultural but also religious. This explains the draw of dual belonging for many. Michael Amaladoss points out that: “various studies of popular religiosity in different continents have shown that, side by side with the official and approved liturgies of the Churches, people invoke other powers often spirits and ancestors in times of need for protection from danger, for healing from physical, mental and social maladies and for establishing favorable relations with the powers of nature and society. Such rituals seem prevalent at times of the rites of passage in individual and social life.”<sup>154</sup> In Benin and Nigeria, those transitional stages represent generally “pressure moments” for the Igbo, Yoruba but also Fon Christians since it is generally during those crisis moments that a relapse into African Traditional Religion happens. Onuh states that “about seventy-five per cent of the cultural problems confronting Christianity in Igboland is centred on the rites and ceremonies connected with the crises moments of life. During these moments of crises, the Igbo Christian finds himself drifting between the double roles of trying to be loyal to his traditional foundations, as well as standing for the Christian cause, whose demands he tries to meet up as long as, and only if the traditional community and its cultural obligations do not stand on his way.”<sup>155</sup> The Oracle *Ifa* is generally solicited in those moments of passage in order to ensure a good and smooth transition from one stage to the other. Divination and sacrifices follow generally the consultation of the oracle among the Igbo, Yoruba and Fon. Fearing an eventual retaliation or

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<sup>154</sup> See Amaladoss, “Double Religious Belonging and Liminality,” (unpublished).

<sup>155</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 140.

pressured by relatives and influent members of the tribes, many Christians end up taking part of those practices of divination and sacrifice directly or indirectly.

In order to provide some answers to the issue of double belonging, a genuine inculturation engaging those rites of passage and ceremonies is needed. Onuh alludes to the same idea when he said that: “One strongly believes that unless an inroad is made into the culture through these nerve centres and stress moments, by gainfully employing them in the process of the inculturation of the faith, the double and parallel-roads existence will continue to characterize Igbo Christianity.”<sup>156</sup> Inculturation of the rites of passage appears then as one of the important ways of dealing with the question of double religious belonging.

#### **4. Rites of Passage as the Interface between African Traditional Religion and Christianity: Applied Inculturation for the Birth Rites**

##### **4.1. The importance of Birth rites**

For Igbo, Fon and Yoruba, birth rites are a constellation of many rituals which also include the pre-natal or pregnancy rites. Rituals of inception are essential as shown by the various rites performed at this early stage of life.<sup>157</sup> The emphasis on inception could also be justified by many psychological researches which show how one’s life is influenced by what happens at the early age. It is also precisely at the early age that some of the traditional ceremonies are performed in order to incorporate the child in the cultural and religious tradition of his or her ancestors. Since the “double allegiance of the Igbo Christian is more noticeable and rampant at the early rites of

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<sup>156</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 140.

<sup>157</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 179.



childhood,”<sup>158</sup> inculturation needs to take the child seriously and the inception as well. In fact, baptism and the traditional birth rites share many characteristics in common. Through traditional rituals of inception, the child is inserted in the family. Baptism fulfills the same role by introducing and incorporating the child in the family of God and attributing membership to the Christian community.

## 4.2. The Pregnancy Rites

### 4.2.1. *The Traditional Ritual in Benin and Nigeria*

In cultures in which life is a cardinal value, women are particularly under an intense pressure of the family and the society to bear a child. Such a psychological pressure to get offspring, especially a male child could lead the Fon, Yoruba or Igbo woman in particular and the couple in general to revert to African Traditional religious practices. Though alleviated once the woman gets pregnant, this pressure does not disappear immediately because the woman still needs to ensure by all means that the embryo will develop normally. The pregnancy period becomes then a moment of high anxiety and insecurity during which the woman may find herself compelled to consult the diviner and offering sacrifices in order to ensure that the child would be well. Cardinal Arinze explains that “to realize the urgency, spontaneity and earnestness of such sacrifices for children it will help to bear in mind that for the Ibos, marriage without children has completely lost its meaning. The Ibo woman could well say with Rachel: ‘Thou must need give me children, or it will be my death.’ (Gen 30:1)”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 179.

<sup>159</sup> Igbo and Ibo referred both to the same tribe. See Francis Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, 40, quoted by Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 184. Christianity’s transformative contribution to such a situation can be to help childless families to rediscover the spiritual vocation and fruitfulness of being childless. By emphasizing this, the Church will alleviate the burden and pressures that childless women have to go through. Perhaps a whole theology of childless families can emerge. The Church can help childless couples to find a meaning to their situation. In the

The practice among the Fon is generally to offer kola nuts and pepper to the family divinity and then to consult the *Ifa* oracle in the third month of pregnancy. Such a consultation is done in order to find out the taboos the expectant mother needs to observe. The pregnant woman offers “fowls and red and white maize paste to the diviner, in exchange for a charm to ensure a good birth.”<sup>160</sup> Similarly a “Yoruba woman at pregnancy sacrifices to her own and her husband’s gods, and consult the *Ifa* oracle.”<sup>161</sup> For the Igbo, it is the husband who offers a fowl to the earth deity, Ala. A month later, a dog is sacrificed and “then waved round the woman’s head to protect her by its influence. The woman wears protective anklets, and in some places smears her body with chalk.”<sup>162</sup>

The diviner plays a significant role in those moment of insecurity when he may provide through his rituals, assurance, counseling and comfort to his or her client. In fact, “in such precarious and therefore dangerous period, any type of haphazard ritual would not give the Igbo the psychological satisfaction needed. The ritual should be one that registers in the nerve centre of the source of anxiety and insecurity.”<sup>163</sup> Well aware of the anxiety that pregnancy may generate for the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba woman, the traditional priest or the diviner engages in a personal conversation with her. The individualized attention that the diviner pays to the needs of the pregnant woman and the personalization of the rituals performed in order to ensure the fetal growth and safe delivery provide a certain security to the woman. Onuh suggests that “any ritual which

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same line, in a patriarchal society which still values the male child, the Church should accompany mothers of only daughters who are unjustly blamed for not having a male child. The Church may need also to form consciences about the gift that each child regarding of his/her gender represents. Perhaps, the preparation for marriage could also put an emphasis on the availability of couples to receive each child (male or female) as a gift.

<sup>160</sup> Parrinder and Smith, *West African Religion*, 96.

<sup>161</sup> Parrinder and Smith, *West African Religion*, 97.

<sup>162</sup> Parrinder and Smith, *West African Religion*, 97–98.

<sup>163</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 184.

pays attention to the individuals and the factors involved, and shows interest in these individuals, would definitely capture the devotion and the allegiance of the Igbo. [Unfortunately] an observation of the Christian ritual shows for instance the blessing of a pregnant woman, done in a very haphazard, disinterested and impersonal manner, that leaves the pregnant woman in doubt of its authenticity... That is why she goes home and consults a diviner who, even though he uses useless means, yet convincingly restores confidence in the woman.”<sup>164</sup> For pragmatic reasons, some expectant women who are Christians accept joyfully the blessings provided by the Church but prefer having recourse to the diviner who seems to be more efficient in their eyes and provide them a certain *cura personalis* that they need.

#### 4.2.2. *Enriching our Catholic Blessing of Pregnancy Ritual*

The Catholic ritual of the blessing of parents before childbirth is performed at any time during the pregnancy. In the shorter version, after the sign of the cross and the introductory word, a Scripture passage is read either from “Samuel 1:19-20, 24-2:1 (The birth of Samuel), Luke 1:39-45 (The baby leapt in my womb for joy), Luke 1:26-38 (You shall conceive and bear a son) or Luke 2:1-14 (She gave birth to her firstborn son).”<sup>165</sup> The minister who is either a priest, a deacon or a lay then concludes the ritual with the following prayer:

Gracious Father, your Word, spoken in love, created the human family and, in the fullness of time, your son, conceived in love, restored it to your friendship. Hear the prayers of N. and N., who await the birth of their child. Calm their fears when they are anxious. Watch over and support these parents and bring their child into this world safely and in good health, so that as members of your family

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<sup>164</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 186.

<sup>165</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/persons/blessing-parents-before-childbirth> (Accessed 25 January 2021).

Such a ritual can be adapted and be more inclusive of women by incorporating passages which value not only the male child but also the female child as being both a divine blessing. Otherwise, the current ritual may unconsciously contribute in Benin and Nigeria to a reinforcement of a culture which gives preeminence to the male child.

they may praise you and glorify you through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen!<sup>166</sup>

It is noteworthy that though this prayer acknowledges the anxiety that parents may go through and asks the Lord to appease their fear, it remains vague and general. The standardized character of this prayer makes it impersonal. The Catholic ritual which in general follows a certain structure can be contrasted with traditional rituals in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba religious traditions which are flexible and personalized. Unlike Christian rituals characterized by their simplicity, brevity and precision in their structure with general application to all the similar cases, the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba rituals are fluid, spontaneous and exuberant.<sup>167</sup> Instead of a brief ritual that should be followed with a certain rigidity, a certain flexibility, spontaneity and exuberance would be expected in Benin and Nigeria, otherwise the ritual will be perceived as pale and anemic. A Fon, Igbo or Yoruba ritual for pregnancy need not “be a stereo-typed general type of ritual, but should be so elastic in order to give adequate attention and a real human touch to the psychological situation of the pregnant woman.”<sup>168</sup> The personalization of the prayer should go beyond the mention of the names of the couple (N. and N.) as it appears in this Catholic ritual.

The personalized character needs to be grounded in the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy or the feelings and challenges experienced by the couple and especially by the expectant mother. In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba religious traditions where rituals are not viewed as one-size-fits-all but are really personalized, the diviner or the performer of the ritual generally listens attentively to their client and the rituals to be performed are generally based on the personal story narrated by

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<sup>166</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/persons/blessing-parents-before-childbirth> (Accessed 25 January 2021).

<sup>167</sup> Patrick Chukwudezie Chibuko, *Liturgy for Life: Introduction to Practical Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2005), 33–34.

<sup>168</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 186.

the client and the interpretations of the information received from the spirits. Learning from the diviners' methods of personalization of their rites, the Catholic ritual of blessing can "be preceded by a sort of dialogue with the pregnant woman, the findings of which could be incorporated and utilized in the ritual, hence room should be made for spontaneous prayer in the ritual. It would not be out of place to include in such a ritual a sort of physical contact with the woman by way of a symbolic blessing and sprinkling of her womb with holy water."<sup>169</sup> In cultures in which the bodily gestures are important, a physical contact can psychologically make a difference.

Rituals in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba settings are full of symbolism which celebrate abundant life. Most of the symbols and prayers during the ritual of pregnancy are related to the cardinal value of life. An example of prayer said by the senior elder of the wife's kindred during the pregnancy rites is as follows: "We have come here to perform the rites *Aja nkita*. We have planted an *ogirisi* tree, in order that the child born to this woman may flourish like the *ogirisi* tree. We have set gravel from the riverbed besides the tree in order that, as gravel remains when the river dries up, so may this woman's child remain alive after the waters of childbirth have broken"<sup>170</sup> Such a prayer stresses the importance of flourishing in life and longevity.

Prayers are generally accompanied by some offerings which also carry a deep significance for local peoples because of their correlation with life. For example, the offering of kola symbolizes a long life. Because of the meaning that these symbols bear, the Church should make room for these offerings valued in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba traditions. The offerings of fowls, kola nuts or pepper which have more resonance to Igbo, Fon and Yoruba should be allowed in order to encapsulate the full meaning of the ritual of pregnancy.

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<sup>169</sup> Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage*, 186.

<sup>170</sup> C. K. Meek, *Law and Authority in A Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oxford University, 1937), 286.

### 4.3. Naming and Exit Rites

#### 4.3.1. *The Traditional Rites in Benin and Nigeria*

The new born child represents an enigma that the community wants to decrypt by consulting the *Ifa* oracle.<sup>171</sup> Rituals are performed in order to decipher, to interpret the codes imprinted on the child and that he or she carries. These rituals are meant to reveal the identity of the child. The name conferred on the child is part of this process which gives him or her an identity. “A Fon child is named on the eighth day, when its head is shaved, a fowl sacrificed, its blood poured out and the flesh eaten. Usually the mother does not go out of her house till the new moon, when the village ‘moon glorifier’ comes with a little brush which he puts on the roof after brushing the yard, sounds a little horn and calls on the mother to suckle her child when the moon appears.”<sup>172</sup> With the symbolism of the moon, the child is actually introduced to the universe and presented as a cosmic being. The naming of the child emphasizes his or her welcoming into the family. The child is also brought to the market place (*axiyiyi*) which is a public place full of diverse people in order to introduce him or her to the larger human community. The market symbolizes also the place where the interrelationship with different beings (individuals, ancestors, divinities who own the market) is perceptible.

The naming rite which is also essential for the Yoruba intervenes in general on the eighth day. Many factors such as the marks of resemblance that the child may have with past parents, the circumstances and time of his/her birth or even the day of the week are considered in the choice of the name in the Yoruba world. The naming ceremony begins with a prayer led by the elder in the

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<sup>171</sup> Sillon Noir, *Une Expérience Africaine d’Inculturation* (Cotonou : QIC, 1992), 63.

<sup>172</sup> Parrinder and Smith, *West African Religion*, 96-97.

family. The baby is then introduced to the community and named. The presider calls out his name and blesses the child with various materials or local elements. Honey, which symbolizes the sweetness of life is put on the lips of the child by wishing his life to be sweet as honey. Kola nut is offered to the child to expel any kind of misfortune and wish him prosperity, and bitter kola which symbolizes longevity is put on his tongue. Alligator pepper refers to fruitfulness and thus to the descendance of the child. Because of its “ability to survive, fish is also offered with the intention that the child may survive under any condition of life.”<sup>173</sup> Salt, water, palm oil and white cloth are also offered with the respective prayers:

This is salt, take and taste...life is sweet o, bad people cannot enter salt house. It has never been heard of that salt lost its taste; your life will not be tasteless or saltless....

This is water... take and taste, water for bath, water for drinking. Eat and drink with people on the land of the living. If you drink this water, God will not allow it to ruin your stomach, if you bathe with it, our creator will not allow it to scratch your body, take and drink and live long, and water disaster will not take you away...

Oil is the blood of soap. This is red oil, take and taste. Honour respect, glory and peace of life will not elude you. All that makes life enjoyable, God will give to you...

This is white cloth, our forefathers called white cloth, “the cloth of the gods”. It is an example of good behavior. God will not allow people to stain you. The enemy will not have power over you.<sup>174</sup>

The naming ceremony among the Yoruba is similar to some extent to that of the Igbo. With the Igbo, the “diviner may declare that the child should bear the name of a departed relative as reincarnating his influence and he is taken to the grave where a goat is sacrificed and waved round his head.”<sup>175</sup> If the diviner intervenes at different moment of this process, the naming ritual, is performed by the traditional head of the extended family, the *Okpala*. After the breaking of the kola nuts, the *Okpala* offers some spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving to *Chukwu* (God), to the

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<sup>173</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, “An Igwebuiké Approach to the Study of African Traditional Naming Ceremony and Baptism,” *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 11, no. 1 (October 3, 2019): 36. See <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jrhr/article/view/190036>.

<sup>174</sup> Kanu, “An Igwebuiké Approach to the Study of African Traditional Naming Ceremony and Baptism,” 34-37.

<sup>175</sup> Parrinder and Smith, *West African Religion*, 98.

earth deity *Ala*, to the ancestors and all the good spirits of the community. Holding the baby in his hands, he welcomes him/her into the family by addressing him these words:

‘In the names of the our fore-fathers and the family (he mentions the family name of the parents of the child) and those gathered here, I welcome you to our family and to the community. In our world people are identified by names, hence we have come to give you a name by which you will be identified.’ Some water is poured on the roof and allowed to drop on the child. The child’s hand is made to touch a hoe and a farm-knife. Then the *okpala* raises him in the air toward the sky four times and says: ‘My son (daughter), grow up strong. You will withstand the wetness of the rain and the heat of the sun. Listen to what your mother tells you and listen to what your father tells you. Take a hoe and knife and go to farm for so do we earn our living.’ The child is given a name.<sup>176</sup>

The imposition of the name marks the incorporation of the child in the community and in the *umuna* or the extended family. The child is introduced to the life in the human community where one has to work in order earn his or her living and where one encounters ups and downs. The officiating elder puts a bit of honey and alligator pepper and bitter kola in the mouth of the child by telling the child: “This is to let you know that the earth is a pleasant place to live in. it could also be bitter living in it. May you be able to accept it as a part of what it means to live humanly. Our prayer however is that you do not experience the bitterness of life.”<sup>177</sup> If honey symbolizes the sweetness of life, alligator pepper and bitter kola refer to the bitterness of life.

The ritual of naming is followed later by the outing ceremony which is a public presentation of the child. As for the Fon and Yoruba, the outing ceremony among the Igbo is meant to “publicize the new birth as well as the eventual public acclamation and reception of mother and child.”<sup>178</sup> The outing ceremony is also associated with thanksgiving. Hence, during that period, the woman

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<sup>176</sup> This prayer is not a standardized prayer but just an example of prayers offered in the Igbo world. Cyprian C. Anyanwu, *The Rites of Initiation in Christian Liturgy and in Igbo Traditional Society: Towards the Inculturation of Christian Liturgy in Igbo Land* (New York: P. Lang, 2004), 242.

<sup>177</sup> B. Ray, *African Religion, Symbol, Ritual and Community* (New Jersey, 1937), 91 quoted by Anyanwu, *The Rites of Initiation in Christian Liturgy and in Igbo Traditional Society*, 246.

<sup>178</sup> Anyanwu, *The Rites of Initiation in Christian Liturgy and in Igbo Traditional Society*, 242.



basically performs rites of thanksgiving to God and to other divinities. Some libations and sacrifices are done, with food, and killing of animals whose blood are poured on the altar.

#### *4.3.2. Similarities between Baptism and the Traditional Ritual of Naming and Outing*

The parallelism between the naming and outing ritual in Igbo, Yoruba and Fon traditions and the Christian ritual of baptism is striking. “Central to both traditions is the core mystery of dying to live; Passover from one state of life to another and more superior life; a transition from old status to a new status of life. The newborn is separated through the rites of birth from asexual world or from the world preceding human society to become incorporated into the new world of human society.”<sup>179</sup>

Both the naming of the child and baptism are meant to introduce the child into the community. Whereas the traditional birth rituals incorporate the child in the extended family, the baptism seals his or her incorporation into the Church. The extended family in Benin and Nigeria is not restricted to the living but it also includes the ancestors and other departed and also those yet to be born. Such a relationship could be compared to the baptized relationship with the mystical body of Christ which embraces not only the living but also the dead, the Church of heaven and the pilgrim Church on earth. In Beninese and Nigerian culture, in which communion and relationship are important, if baptism is presented as “a bond of solidarity that ties the people together in union among themselves and with the church and Christ, through charity,” the Igbos but also the Yoruba and Fon “will understand baptism and other Christian sacraments as containing a vocation to build

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<sup>179</sup> Chibuko, *Paschal Mystery of Christ*, 118.

up a community of participation, a community of communion and mutual interpersonal help through exchange of prayer and assistance.”<sup>180</sup>

The ritual of baptism as well as the birth rituals make use of many symbols. Whereas in Igbo, Fon or Yoruba religions, many symbolic items such as honey, sugar, bitter kola, kola nut, salt, water, palm oil, liquor, alligator pepper are used, in baptism symbols like water, oil of chrism and catechumen, white garment, candles, are present. Both rituals have in common the use of water, white garment and oil.

Both rituals make use of water. In the Catholic Church, the pouring of water on the head symbolizes the incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ. In Igbo traditions, as mentioned by Cyprian Chima Uzoma Anyanwu “the act of pouring the water on the roof and allowing it to drop on the child is not only a recognition of water as a source of death and new life, but also an insertion of the child into the seasons of the year (rainy and dry season). The child is wished a survival of these seasons. The wetness from the water is a symbolic dying to the former state of being before the pouring of the water. The drying up of the water is a sort of resurrection, a coming to life again in a new state of existence. it is worthy of note that the water used in this ritual exercise is believed to be uncontaminated and clean ...”<sup>181</sup> The water has also a cleansing effect. If the water of baptism is meant to cleanse one from his sins, the water used during the birth rites is for purification. Besides the water, oil and white garments are used in both traditions.

In Baptism, two kinds of oil are used during the administration of this sacrament: the oil of the Catechumens and the Sacred Chrism. After the prayer of exorcism, the celebrant applies the

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<sup>180</sup> Vincent de Paul Mbah, “Igbo Child Initiation and Christian Baptism: A Case Study in Inculturation” (PhD diss., Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 1993), 211.

<sup>181</sup> Anyanwu, *The Rites of Initiation in Christian Liturgy and in Igbo Traditional Society*, 242.

oil of the catechumens to the chest of the child. The oil of the catechumens symbolizes salvation and the strength of Christ which protects the child. After the pouring of water on the head, the celebrant anoints the child with sacred Chrism on the crown of the head. The sacred Chrism represents the participation of the child in the royal priesthood of Christ. In the Yoruba tribe, the oil used during the naming ceremony symbolizes honor, glory, and respect which can be related to royalty as well. One of the formulas used by the Yoruba and quoted earlier goes as followed: “Oil is the blood of soap. This is red oil, take and taste. Honour respect, glory and peace of life will not elude you. All that makes life enjoyable, God will give to you.”<sup>182</sup> The idea of exorcism which in the Catholic ritual is attached to the use of the oil of the catechumens is also present within the Yoruba tradition but it is expressed with another symbolism. In fact, during the naming ceremony, kolanut represent the symbolic element used to expel the evil and any kind of misfortune.

Another common symbol used both in Yoruba and Christian rituals is the white garment. As the white garment is placed on the child, the celebrant says: “N., you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. May this white garment be a sign to you of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring it unstained into eternal life.”<sup>183</sup> If for Christians, the white garment signifies that one has been clothed with Christ, and thus has become a new creation, for the Yoruba, the white cloth is regarded as “the cloth of the gods.” Because of its connection with the gods, the wearing of the white cloth is accompanied by a prayer which assures the child that no hostile force or enemy will have power over him.

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<sup>182</sup> Kanu, “An Igwebuiké Approach to the Study of African Traditional Naming Ceremony and Baptism,” 36.

<sup>183</sup> USCCB, *The Order of Baptism of Children* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2020), 93.

In the Catholic ritual, a lighted candle is used. Parents and godparents are entrusted the candle to remind them of their responsibility to help the child to grow in faith. Though the use of the candle is not present in Yoruba traditions, the whole community is entrusted with the responsibility of raising the child in the life of the community on cultural and moral aspects. “Each individual in the society feels the guilt of omission if he fails to direct, guide or correct any child drifting from the normal course of the community life.”<sup>184</sup>

The Ephatha or Prayers Over the Ears and Mouth which is now optional was meant to give the power to the child to bear witness to Christ. The priest was supposed to touch child’s ears and mouth with his thumb by saying: “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.”<sup>185</sup> Such ritual has its parallel in Yoruba birth rituals where the elder touches the tongue with different food as quoted earlier. These similarities between the Christian ritual of baptism and the traditional rites of naming offer openings for inculturation. The two rituals can enrich each other.

#### *4.3.3. Expanding our Catholic Rites of Baptism*

The practice in many places in Benin and Nigeria is to do both the traditional ritual and the Christian ritual of Baptism. Though such a practice may have its advantage, the challenge remains that by observing those two parallel rituals the chance of double belonging increases. Instead of a duplication of the traditional ritual and the infant baptism, a unique and integrated ritual could be envisioned. Though both the traditional rituals and Christian baptism stress the incorporation of

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<sup>184</sup> Mbah, “Igbo Child Initiation and Christian Baptism,” 213.

<sup>185</sup> <https://www.bedfordcatholic.org/documents/2015/5/RiteOfBaptism.pdf> (Accessed on 28 January 2021).

the individual into the community, the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba culturally put more emphasis on the naming rituals. With that reality in mind, instead of using only the scriptural passages related to baptism (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 1:9-11; Mk 10:13-16; Jn 3:1-6) in the integrated ritual, readings which stress the naming ritual in Scriptures could be rather used. In the Old Testament, one could use the birth and naming of Moses in Exodus 2:1-10, the naming and offering of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1:19-28. In the New Testament, the naming ritual of John the Baptist in Luke 1:59-66, or the naming and presentation of Jesus in the Temple described in Luke 2:21-28 could be read. For the girls, some passages such as the naming by Job of his daughters (Job 42: 14-15) can be used. The passage states that “the first daughter he [Job] named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.”

In order to stress the importance of the naming tradition during the integrated ritual, Patrick Chibuko has suggested that the child be named with at least three names: “a. by the grand parents: a name of their choice or week day; b. by the parents themselves name of their choice; c. by the priest a saint’s name or theocentric name. As each name is mentioned water is poured on the head with the name of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity: for instance, first, the grand parents say, I (We) call you Somtoo; then the presider says, *in the name of the Father* and water is poured: Second, the parents, I (We) call you Som adina; then the presider, *and of the Son*, and third, the presider, Peter or Chukwuma *and of the Holy Spirit*.”<sup>186</sup> Given the importance of names in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba traditions, the suggestion of Chibuko is reasonable. In fact, for people in Benin and Nigeria, names have generally a connection with the past, the present and the future. The

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<sup>186</sup> Patrick Chukwudezie Chibuko, *Liturgical Inculturation: An Authentic African Response* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO, Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2002), 132-33.

connection with the past has to do with the practice of naming the child after an ancestor who is believed to be coming back. As for the link with the present, the circumstances during which a child is born may also define the name given to him. The link with the future is expressed by the fact that the name given to the child captures generally the destiny of the child, the project of his or her life.

Chibuko has suggested the following integrated model which can be explored:<sup>187</sup>

- i. Invocation of the Holy Spirit
- ii. Brief introduction of the celebration
  - *a ceremony that incorporates the neonate into the membership of the civil and Christian society.*
- iii. Rite of Welcoming in Igbo Assembly with specially greetings
- iv. Opening Prayer by the Priest, or designated person
- v. Scripture Reading...
- vi. Brief homily
  - *the theology of the sacrament and the cultural dimension of the celebration*
- vii. Hymn of joy or worship songs – *to digest the Word*
- viii. Renunciation of the devil and local evil forces and Profession of faith
- ix. Naming of the child with at least three names... [and baptism with water]
- x. Another hymn of appreciation of the name
- xi. Anointing with the oil of Chrism – *giving its signification*
- xii. Clothing and Light – *giving their signification*
- xiii. Words of encouragement from any of the participants
- xiv. Words of appreciation by the parents of the neonate
- xv. Prayers of benediction on the child in the form of *Igo ofo*
- xvi. Prayers of benediction on the parents, doctors and nurses and those who helped to bring the child into the world and on all present
- xvii. Presentation of gifts to the new born babe by the guests
- xviii. Final blessings
- xix. Light Refreshment

Such a structure has the advantage of integrating from the beginning to the end both the Christian and the cultural dimensions. This integrated ritual incorporates the child to both the community and the Church as shown by the mention of civil and Christian membership. An

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<sup>187</sup> Chibuko, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 243.

important place is given to the larger community in the ritual. Besides the extended family, benedictions are extended to the doctors and nurses and to all those who have contributed to bring the child into the world. Particular attention is also given to the celebratory aspect of the rituals with the stress on songs and hymns of joy.

However, the use of the oil of the catechumens accompanied by the prayer of exorcism which is highly valued by Igbo, Fon and Yoruba is lacking in this integrated model. The possibility of including some of the local symbols could be envisioned. Room should also be made during the ritual to the recitation of the child's genealogy, a practice which is common in Benin and Nigeria. Given the place of ancestors in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cultures, a reference to the ancestors of the child is needed. This integrated model should be perceived as a structure which is flexible and can be accommodated.

## **Conclusion**

The existence of double religious belonging is an indicator of the split between the gospel and the various cultures in Benin and Nigeria. The persistence of dual religious belonging stresses the necessity and urgency of inculturation. Double religious belonging can be seen to some extent as an opportunity for emphasizing and doing an intensive work of inculturation. Schreiter rightly states that "dual religious systems raise the question for Christian of how serious we really are about contextualization,"<sup>188</sup> or inculturation. Since the rituals of passage are key-moments of the transmission of cultural and religious traditions and also crucial moments during which the risk of double belonging is heightened, the Church should accelerate the process of inculturation of those rituals if it aims also to deal with the rampant dual belonging in Benin and Nigeria. Among the

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<sup>188</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 172.

transitional rituals in Igbo, Yoruba or Fon lands are the birth rituals which should be given an important place in the process of inculturation. Concrete ways of enriching the Christian ritual of baptism with the birth rituals have been suggested. However, if inculturation is a good start, in order to address the question of dual belonging, one has to go beyond a liturgical inculturation. At the roots of dual belonging is not only the question of integration of one's culture with one's faith but also and mostly the quest for abundant life. One cannot deal properly with dual belonging in Benin and Nigeria without looking at issues related to the broader search for abundant life such as healing and social harmony. This task will be undertaken in the next chapter.



# CHAPTER III

## DOUBLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING AND THE QUEST FOR ABUNDANT LIFE: THE ISSUE OF HEALING

### Introduction

Double religious belonging “tends to arise from a sense of insufficiency or lack in any one particular religion... [it] points to a certain hiatus within a particular tradition or to areas which do not offer satisfactory insight or experience.”<sup>189</sup> Besides the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba cultural elements lacking in the Christian rituals as stressed by the previous chapter, what else is missing in Beninese and Nigerian Christianity that double religious believers are looking for? Which areas of Christianity – at least the way it is presented – do not seem to provide sufficient or satisfactory answers to some Christians in Benin or Nigeria? By answering these questions, this chapter stresses that in Benin and Nigeria religious hybridity is rooted in the search for abundant life, the need for people to preserve their life-force (their existential needs, their lives and the life of the community) against anything which threatens their quest for fullness of life. The chapter insists on the necessity of a ministry of healing and accompaniment of people especially in times of crisis or periods of grief and loss.

### 1. Double Religious Belonging and the Quest for Abundant Life

#### 1.1. The Quest for Abundant Life

The worldview of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cannot be truly apprehended without a reference to the concept of life which is at the core of African cultural and religious thoughts. In *Bantu*

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<sup>189</sup> Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” 335.

*Philosophy* which has become a classic in African Philosophy, Placide Tempels argues that African philosophy is centered around the concept of vital force.<sup>190</sup> The theologian Vincent Mulago suggests also that a central concept in African thoughts and way of life is the *ntu* which he defines as a life-force.<sup>191</sup> If vital force represents a central category through which Igbo, Fon and Yoruba decipher their world, this life-force is also at the core of their deep quest. The vital force is believed to be an important power that can increase through participation in the life of the community<sup>192</sup> or decrease because of evil forces. But this life-force can also be manipulated for good or evil by specialists such as diviners or sorcerers. As many Africans, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba consider that “the greatest disasters possible follow the lessening of life force. Illnesses, suffering, disappointments, exhaustion, injustice, oppression, and any kind of failure or misfortune are all regarded as loss of power. So, everything possible is done to avoid its loss and to promote its increase.”<sup>193</sup> To attain the fullness of life is a major goal for Igbo, Yoruba and Fon religious traditions as shown for example by their prayers which generally are petitions related to longevity, protection against afflictions, abundance, procreation and harmony for the perpetuation of the community, etc. This goal towards which moral life, spirituality, religious rituals and other dimensions of life are oriented is one of the highest values for people from Benin and Nigeria.

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<sup>190</sup> Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1951).

<sup>191</sup> See Vincent Mulago, *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1965).

<sup>192</sup> Community here refers to those living or dead and those yet-to-be-born. But it also includes the cosmic world and thus entails to all lives. In order to keep that life force, connection with the cosmic world is needed. The quest for “more religion” not less can also be explained by the search for more spiritual power or simply the desire to increase one vital force.

<sup>193</sup> Allan Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World: Religious Dis/Continuity in African Pentecostalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 114. Allan Anderson is a British Theologian who has done many researches on Global Pentecostalism. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1991) are among several books that he published.

Jean Masamba ma Mpolo notes that “the affirmation, the preservation and reinforcement of life dominate the theological thinking, social thoughts and health systems of the African traditional people. To live in the African traditional context is to participate in the protection of life, the survival of the family and the continuity of the community.”<sup>194</sup> To ensure fullness of life, one needs to live in harmony with the community, nature, ancestors, spirits and God. Any wrongdoing cannot remain without consequences either for the perpetrator or his or her community. These “consequences come in the form of calamities... all kinds of anti-life phenomena that may emerge in society, whether they are personal, social, physical, psychological or natural. These calamities may be generically categorised as affliction, usually perceived as illness or disease.”<sup>195</sup> The imbalance caused by a wrongdoing needs to be addressed in order to restore the harmony of the community and the world since a failure to do so may lead to a bigger disaster. A proper diagnosis of the cause of any disharmony is thus required. Such an inquiry leads generally to divination and the intervention of the *dibia*, *babalawo* or *Bokonon* (diviner in Igbo, Yoruba or Fon language respectively). Once the malevolent cause, which can be either natural or supranatural, is determined, rituals, prayers, sacrifices, traditional medicine are used to restore the harmony.<sup>196</sup>

Living in a worldview characterized by the search for abundant life and the need for a restoration of a balanced and harmonious universe through divinations and sacrifices, Igbo, Yoruba or Fon Christians can be attracted to African Traditional Religion’s pragmatic offer which

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<sup>194</sup> Jean Masamba ma Mpolo, “Spirituality and Counselling for Liberation: The context and Praxis of African Pastoral Activities and Psychology,” in *Voices from Africa on Pastoral Care*, ed. by Karl Federschmidt, Klaus Temme, Helmut Weiss (Düsseldorf: SIPCC, 2013), 10.

<sup>195</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 158–59.

<sup>196</sup> Magesa is right when he said: “the logic of the moral/ethical orientation of African Religion is unmistakable: wherever and whenever there is a diminishment or a destruction of the force of life, something must be done to restore it; whenever there is a breach of order in the universe as established by God through the ancestors, humanity must see to it that harmony is restored.” See Magesa, *African Religion*, 175

seems to resonate with their cultural quest. Their inner quest to protect their life and the life of their family against any evil eye and the desire to preserve or restore the harmony of the community can lead some Christians to accept some “protective rituals, magical recipes and charms... [which] are aimed at immunizing potential victims against witchcraft, evil spirits, bad luck, infertility, thieves, and forestalling failure in life’s ventures and at promoting recovery from illness and other misfortunes.”<sup>197</sup> The pressure to embrace double religious belonging or participation becomes more intense when one’s life or the life of one’s relatives is diminished by illness and threatened by death. Many Christians can become truly puzzled especially when all the modern health care systems fail to identify the exact causes of an illness or when a situation of illness does not improve despite the use of modern medical care. In such circumstances, the metaphysical or supernatural perception of illness may begin to haunt the victim or his relatives who may end up looking for other solutions by paying visit to the *dibia*, *babalawo* or *Bokonon* whose job is among many others to probe the causes of a sickness through divination and prescribe the remedies.

## 1.2. The Understanding of Sickness in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Cultures

For the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba, misfortune and sickness are generally attributed to the machinations of an evil spirit (witchcraft, curses...) or to the transgression of ethical norms, rules, codes and taboos inherited from the ancestors. With the belief in a corporate idea of sin which suggests that any offence done by one individual affects all members of his community, the sickness of one individual is also perceived as the consequence of the offence of a relative. In general, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba categorize the etiology of disease in three ways:

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<sup>197</sup> Hance Mwakabana and Lutherischer Weltbund, *Crises of Life in African Religion and Christianity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2002), 20.

There is the ‘religious (suprahuman)’ causality, which presupposes ‘a belief that human beings in different ways are influenced by or dependent on suprahuman or spiritual powers such as God and spirits of nature.’ Then there is the ‘social (human)’ causality, which ‘refers to relations between living human beings, which in Africa frequently entail a supranormal component.’ Witchcraft and curses serve as examples, even though, as will be shown below, ‘witchcraft’ is often used as an all-embracing term for affliction-causation. Finally, there is the ‘natural (mainly physical)’ causation. ‘Natural, or mainly physical, explanations [of disease causation] refer to entities of nature, that is, the effects of, for instance, insects, germs, natural substances, forces or conditions, such as certain food, the weather or lack of equilibrium of some basic elements in the body.’<sup>198</sup>

Though Igbo, Fon and Yoruba believe in natural causes of illness, they tend, spontaneously, to look at the same time to supernatural causes, either suprahuman or supranormal. Confronted by any kind of misfortune or illness, the African in general and the Igbo, Yoruba or Fon in particular will often ask two questions: how and why. “The ‘how’ is answered by common- sense empirical observation, but the ‘why’ is not easily explicable. Beliefs in witchcraft and other supernatural powers explain why particular persons, at particular times and places, suffer particular misfortunes: death, accident, disease, barrenness or crop failure. It is the ‘Why me?’ question that the Africans ask and to which they seek an answer, an answer in which they link social problems to divine action.”<sup>199</sup> The quest for a reliable answer to the “why” often leads Igbo, Fon and Yoruba to consult the diviner, *dibia*, *babalawo* or *Bokonon* in order to find out the cause of the illness and find ways of restoring the situation.

Such service rendered by the diviner is not provided by the Catholic Church which has mainly addressed the issue of physical sickness by building many hospitals. But the Church’s emphasis on physical treatment with the construction of health care systems “was done without any serious consideration of the people’s own conception of the world in which they live and of the forces operating in it (the people’s world-view), a conception which undoubtedly influences or

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<sup>198</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 159.

<sup>199</sup> Kofi Appiah-Kubi, “The Church’s Healing Ministry in Africa,” *The Ecumenical Review* 27, no. 3 (1975): 231.

determines their understanding of health and disease. The Church, through her medical centres and the use of modern scientific methods, has overstressed the importance of physical medicine and treatment to the total or near total exclusion or rejection of spiritual healing.”<sup>200</sup> Whereas religion and health for the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba are viewed as closely related, there are perceived by Catholics and by secular cultures in other parts of the world as distinct. A lack of understanding of the holistic notion of health has led the Catholic Church to focus mainly on the physical sickness. There is a certain reluctance to spiritual healing which is generally limited in the Catholic Church to exorcism or the administration of the sacrament of anointing which is unfortunately perceived by many Christians as a near-death sacrament.

Double religious belonging springs from this deficiency of taking into consideration the worldview of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba and addressing the spiritual or supernatural aspect of illness that these people are prone to perceive. Paul Germond and James Crochanem assert that “many people work with a mix of healing systems and explanations of health, more often than not including religious ideas, thus living out of a hybrid reality that often appears theoretically incoherent though for the health seeker, it is often pragmatically rational.”<sup>201</sup> In a worldview where health and morality are always correlated, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Christians are torn between the western approach to illness and their cultural and religious approach. Though they may publicly

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<sup>200</sup> Appiah-Kubi, “The Church’s Healing Ministry in Africa,” 230. Despite the many positive changes that modern medicine brought to Benin and Nigeria (prevention of diseases, hygienic conditions, cure of many disease, etc.), modern medical with its technological tools remain very costly for populations. It treats mainly symptoms whereas traditional diviners are more interested on dealing with underlying problems. Besides treating a patient as an object, “another serious limitation of Western medical facilities ... is their total inability to deal with ‘witchcraft,’ which is a potentially menacing reality in the lives of most Akans [as well as Igbo, Fon and Yoruba] – educated, Christians, or otherwise.” See Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals: Religion and Medical Practice among the Akan of Ghana* (New York: Friendship Press, 1981), 75.

<sup>201</sup> Paul Germond and James Crochanem “Healthworlds: conceptualizing Landscape of Multiple Healing Systems,” in *British Journal of Sociology*, 44 no 2 (April 2010): 320, quoted by Stan Chu Ilo, “Searching for Healing in a Miraculous Stream: The Fate of God’s People in Africa,” in *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 51-52.

assert the irrelevance of the traditional methods of healing, they secretly and unconsciously believe in the efficiency of those methods especially in desperate situations.

### 1.3. Healing and the Role of Diviner

In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba thought, the aim of healing is to free the individual and his community from the life-negating forces, to restore his life force and reinstate a balanced and harmonious world. Emmanuel Milingo<sup>202</sup> suggests in the same sense that in the African context, healing “means taking away from a person a disturbance in life which acts as a deprivation of self-fulfillment and which is considered an unwanted parasite. In whatever way we take it, the expected result is to release someone from a stumbling block to human fulfilment. This may be taken in a physical or spiritual sense .... Healing includes the aspects of suffering which affect even the moral and spiritual life of the sick person.”<sup>203</sup> Healing is thus a liberation *from* negative forces which aims *for* the restoration of the life force and self-fulfillment. But this self-fulfillment cannot be separated from the harmony and fulfillment of the community since the individual in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba traditions is never isolated from the community. The healing of the individual contributes to the fulfilment of the whole community.

The healing process starts generally with the identification of the cause of the disease through divination. In fact, in Benin as well as in Nigeria (where it is believed that causes for an illness are more profound than they may appear on the surface), divination becomes an important

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<sup>202</sup> Emmanuel Milingo was born in 1930 in Zambia. In 1969, he became the Bishop of Lusaka. Milingo was a renowned exorcist who devoted much of his time to the healing ministry at the expense of the administration of his diocese. He published several books on healing ministry and exorcism among which is *The World in Between* (London: C. Hurst, 1984). He faced a lot of criticisms for holding public healing with large crowds and for some of his positions which were judged opposed to Church teachings. He was forced to step down in 1983 and was called to Rome. In 2001, he married Maria Sung during a group wedding blessed by Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church. Milingo was excommunicated in 2006 for ordaining four married men to the priesthood.

<sup>203</sup> Emmanuel Milingo, *The World in Between* (London: C. Hurst, 1984), 24-25.

and indispensable tool used for a diagnosis and for gathering all the information needed for healing to happen.<sup>204</sup> As do many other tribes in Africa, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba believe that divination is a tool “bestowed by God upon man [human being] so that he [or she] may be better fitted to cope with the practical problems of life on earth; but these include also the problem of handling successfully all the other transcendental tools.”<sup>205</sup> As channel of communication, the Oracle *Fa* (*Ifa*) which is used by the diviner is perceived as the one who reveals the will of God to the human beings by interpreting it in human language.<sup>206</sup> The role of the diviner is to communicate with the divine and the spirits by identifying the problem, treating the illness and enhance the life force. As in modern medicine, the treatment depends on the diagnosis. In general, herbal potions are recommended for physical illnesses, rituals are prescribed for the preternatural elements and

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<sup>204</sup> In Benin as well as in Nigeria, two systems of divination are usually used: the oracular system of divination through the use of the oracle *Fa* and the divination by possession or mediumistic system. Whereas divination is used for the diagnosis in the traditional setting, in modern medicine blood tests, X-ray are used for the same purpose. Is there then a double standard in evaluating both systems? Is this evaluation based on the scientific character of the method used? Believers of the Oracle *Fa* (with its 16 cowries which allows for 256 possible configurations) actually also argue for the scientific and valid character of their tool. On the spiritual level, Julius K. Muthengi argues that practices of divination exist in the Hebrew Bible. “The commonest method used in priestly divination was Urim and Thummim. It was intended to obtain oracles which declared the divine ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response to the inquiry. Several examples will illustrate the point in question. First, in Joshua 7 ... Second, Judges 20... Third, the process of selecting Saul as King in Israel (1 Samuel 10:17-24) is yet another example of priestly divination. Fourth, the method of *Urim* and *Thummim* was employed in one of the bloodiest battles in Ancient Israel (1 Sam. 14:23-46)” See Julius K. Muthengi “The Art of Divination” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 12.2 (1993): 96-97. The Roman Catholic Church has rejected all forms of *divination* because “they contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” CCC 2116. See Vatican, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm). The preceding paragraph (CCC 2115) gives us the background of this prohibition: “God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints. Still, a sound Christian attitude consists in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it. Improvidence, however, can constitute a lack of responsibility.” Such reasoning views divination only as a tool which foretells the future whereas it is used also as a tool for diagnosis. For Christians although no one can pretend to read the mind of Jesus, the question should be rather: “would Jesus have endorsed divination?”

<sup>205</sup> S.F. Nadel, *Nupe Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 38.

<sup>206</sup> For Charismatics, healing is instead viewed as the work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of Life, who by his power restores life. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals the will of God. Whereas Pentecostals/Charismatics perceive their gift of healing as coming from the Holy Spirit, the diviner views the same gift as inherited from the ancestors. Some AICs prophets believe that they were called by the Spirit through the ancestors. “While there are those who have been directly called only by the Holy Spirit, the largest majority of prophets have ancestral experiences in their calling, which is reminiscent of the experiences of the diviner.” See Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 30.



sacrifices are required to placate the supernatural elements.<sup>207</sup> But for Beninese and Nigerians, healing is not restricted to the prescription which is given to the patient. The process of healing in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cultures is viewed as holistic. In fact, “in most African societies, therefore, healing thus combines psychology, psychotherapy, religion and herbal medication. The healing ceremonies involve confession, atonement and forgiveness.”<sup>208</sup>

The determinant factor in the process of healing is also the therapeutic bond or the patient-healer relationship. For healing to happen, the patient needs to trust the diviner who plays an important role in this process. “On account of the virtue of their extra-ordinary sensitivity to spiritual reality and years of training, ... they [diviners] are able to decipher the past, the present and the future as well as to uncover the human and spiritual causes of events and the possible solutions to the problems of life.”<sup>209</sup> When a sacrifice is required by the ancestors who have been forgotten or by the different divinities, the diviner informs the families who ought to execute these sacrifices. The frequent solicitation of his services is also due to the fact that the diviner can help to cure somebody who is ill and can also give warnings against evil spirits, enemies. He also provides a big help for discernment and decision when one has doubts or important decisions to make.

With their wide scope of competency, the *dibia*, *babalawo* and *bokonon* are perceived as reliable by many Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. Chibuko explains that “while it is possible that diviners

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<sup>207</sup> Appiah-Kubi, “The Church’s Healing Ministry in Africa,” 235.

<sup>208</sup> Appiah-Kubi, “The Church’s Healing Ministry in Africa,” 232.

<sup>209</sup> Chibuko, *Liturgy for Life*, 31. For Oosthuizen quoted by Anderson, Allan Heaton, the diviner generally fulfills at least five important functions: “(1) as healer, through divination and the provision of traditional medicines, (2) ‘as the centre of social integration and cohesion,’ (3) ‘as seer or diviner,’ (4) ‘as protector of the people, their possessions and their environment,’ and ‘most important’ (5) ‘as the religious head of the society and mediator between the ancestors ... and their descendants.’” See Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuizen, *The Healer - Prophet in Afro - Christian Churches*, 165. See also Anderson, Allan, *Spirit-Filled World*, 146.

may fail from time to time, it is also possible that some seem to have powers of telepathy because they appear to be able to tell the client facts about himself or herself and the purpose of his visit at the very start of the interview.”<sup>210</sup> Though some diviners may give into manipulations, diviners generally are appreciated because also of their holistic approach to healing and for the care that they provide for their patient. Not only do they make time for their client, but they usually intervene especially in important moments of people’s life: moment of rituals of passage, life crisis moment, time of loss and afflictions, etc. Their capacity to enter into and interpret the worldview of their clients and their intervention at strategic moments have contributed to reinforce their influence even today.

If Catholic priests are able to devote the same time to their parishioners and are truly present in their life especially during limit-situations, then they will be able to build a relationship of trust which enables parishioners to visit rather parishes than a divination convent. Moreover, if they are able to enter into the worldview of their parishioners and contribute to healing from a holistic view then perhaps they can address more efficiently the question of double religious belonging.

## **2. Addressing Double Religious Belonging through an Emphasis on Healing Ministry**

The quest for healing is one of the causes which lead people either to participate or becoming double believer. Without a proper theology of healing and an emphasis on this important pastoral ministry, double belonging will continue to be prosper. The Catholic Church can perhaps learn from the African Independent Churches which have put a particular emphasis on the healing ministry.

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<sup>210</sup> Chibuko, *Liturgy for Life*, 32.

## 2.1. The African Independent Churches<sup>211</sup> (AICs)' Way of Healing

### 2.1.1. *Ministry of Healing in AICs*

AICs develop quickly in Benin and Nigeria because they take very seriously the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cosmology and quest for abundant life. Healing is at the heart of their ministry and worship. Philomena Njeri Mwaura confirms this by stating that “one major characteristic of these churches that is at the core of their appeal is their concern with healing. They understand, interpret and mediate health and healing from an African cultural and biblical perspective.”<sup>212</sup> On the biblical level, healing is perceived as part of the process of salvation. AICs trust that God is the source of healing and that he has bestowed the gifts of healing on some people who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, carry out this ministry. AICs believe in a particular way in the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit and his continuing action in the world. For the AICs, healing is viewed as both bodily and spiritual. Healing pertains to the restoration of the person in his or her dignity. Though there are healing prayers performed also in the Catholic Church, what seems to attract more people to the AICs is the whole environment in which they perform their healing ministry: music, dancing, preaching, testimonies. Their use of dreams and visions which are also part of the African worldview find a favorable echo.

Unlike the mainline Churches, the AICs have incorporated the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba cultural worldview in their healing ministry by replicating some of the traditional functions attributed to the diviner in the local culture. As stated by Uzukwu, “AICs successfully integrate the ministry of diviner-healers into the structures of the Church. The strong positioning of the *nganga*, *dibia*, or

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<sup>211</sup> The African Independent Churches are also called sometimes African Indigenous Churches or African Initiated Churches or even African Instituted Churches.

<sup>212</sup> Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “The Anthropological Dimension of a Patient’s Treatment: A Response to Prof. Bernard Ugeux,” *International Review of Mission* 95, no. 376–377 (2006): 137. Spiritual healing is at the heart of the ministry and worship of the AICs.

*babalawo* in ATR who, because of their therapeutic function, provide attractive answers in the age of confusion (the collapse of African socio-politico-economic structures) is replicated in AICs... AICs reinterpret the ministry of diviner-healers – named visionaries and prophets – as falling under the operations of the One Holy Spirit that indwells ‘the open space in the mind’ and bestows gifts and charisms.”<sup>213</sup> The prophets or seers in the AICs are both praised and criticized because they fulfill the role of diviners in Christianity.

AICs have distinguished themselves by their holistic perception of healing and their capacity to enter into the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba cultural and explanatory healing systems which are determinant for healing. By sharing the belief system and healing models of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba, AICs’ therapeutic intervention has become accepted among many people. In the AICs’ healing process, emotion transfer is done through rituals, exorcism, counselling, prophecy and prayers which are viewed as “carriers of power” and help providing “a release of tension through a cathartic ritual and belief that heighten the hope of the members.”<sup>214</sup> Not only do AICs share in some of the ATR beliefs in the responsibility of evil spirits as the source of illnesses but they also use some ATR’s methods such as trances. Nonetheless as observed by Mwalira “whereas in traditional African experience spirit possession may have been experienced as oppressive and disempowering, in AICs possession is experienced as the liberating power of the Holy Spirit, who mediates healing.”<sup>215</sup> Their particular emphasis on visions, prophecies, dreams and the importance of confession of guilt recall the works of diviners. If in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba religions, the power

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<sup>213</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 177.

<sup>214</sup> Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals*, 81-83 quoted by Mwaura, “The Anthropological Dimension of a Patient’s Treatment,” 140.

<sup>215</sup> Mwaura, “The Anthropological Dimension of a Patient’s Treatment,” 140.

of healing and visions of the diviners are generally attributed to the ancestors, in the AICs the supernatural powers of the prophet-seers are believed to flow from the Holy Spirit.

### 2.1.2. *The Theology of the AICs*

Aloysius Pieris suggests that the quest for integration between two different religious traditions can go in three different directions: syncretism, synthesis or symbiosis. He compares syncretism to “a cocktail in which the components change their flavor under their mutual influence,” he views synthesis as “a process in which the components totally lose their identity in a tertium quid, that is, in the creation of something altogether new” and he perceives symbiosis as a “living encounter... reciprocal spiritual nourishment.”<sup>216</sup> Whereas syncretism is a mixing of religious symbols and elements of another tradition (to the extent that at least one of these religious systems loses its identity and structure), synthesis leads to the advent of a new religion.

Mainline churches generally describe AICs as syncretic whereas some theologians like Magesa perceive them as having done a creative work of integration. Unlike the mainline churches which downplay the agency and creativity of AICs in terms of inculturation, Magesa notes that AIC’s “creative innovation appears here, in the process of making the vision, acts, and values of the indigenous tradition respond to the requirements of the word of God, bringing about a creative synthesis of Christian existence rather than a completely novel construction unrelated to the African cultural and spiritual reality.”<sup>217</sup> For Magesa, AICs present a model of integration which can inspire mainline Churches. The experience of the AICs in inculturating the gospel suggests that if inculturation in the mainline Churches is not rooted in the African belief in the good life or

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<sup>216</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *Prophetic Humour in Buddhism and Christianity: Doing Inter-Religious Studies in the Reverential Mode* (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2009), 77-78.

<sup>217</sup> Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 130.

the restoration of life in Africa, it will remain only theoretical. The AICs believe that Africans can experience this abundant life brought by Jesus only if “they are freed from the invisible chains of evil, of hatred, anger, malice, pride, and contempt for God and one another, in a word, from witchcraft. They also experience this liberation when the chains of possession by evil spirits, disease, poverty and ignorance, phenomena that are all associated with witchcraft, are removed.”<sup>218</sup>

Divination, healing, prophecy/visions, and deliverance are performed in the AICs under the banner of the Holy Spirit. The Celestial Church of Christ, founded in the Benin Republic in 1947 and present, too, in Nigeria, is one example of the AICs which emphasizes a certain pneumatology and stresses vision and divination. The Spirit is often invoked in moments of healing where she is called upon to reveal her divine power through vision and prophecy. The prayer of epiclesis, recited over those ordained in the Celestial Church to become *woli*, visionaries or seers in Yoruba, is of a particular interest: “Vision is the most important thing in your Church. Vision is the basis of her glory. Put it into your Church... You spoke and said that vision gives weight to your Church. You said that a Church that has no vision is lost. This is why we put into your hands your laborers who provide accurate predictions. Come and watch over them. Put Ezekiel into them! Put Jeremiah into them! Put Isaiah into them! Put Amos into them! Put Obadiah into them! God of glory, come down and penetrate/remain [in them?] for our sake in our Church.”<sup>219</sup> Visions and dreams are believed by the AICs to be some of the means of divine revelation.

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<sup>218</sup> Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 129.

<sup>219</sup> Albert Surgé, *L'Église du Christianisme Céleste: Un Exemple d'Église Prophétique au Bénin* (Paris : Karthala, 2001), 205 quoted by Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 182. As emphasized by Uzukwu, the response of the assembly to each invocation is “Nishè or Atchè” which means literally “so be it.”

Such emphasis on visions, dreams, prophecies or divination is generally backed by AIC's reading and interpretation of the Old Testament where one also encounters such phenomenon. In various places in the Old Testament, the Spirit is described as coming upon the prophets (1 Samuel 9:22-10:1; 16: 1-13; 1 Kings 1:32-34). Anderson observes that the "charismatic prophetic leadership of Elijah and Elisha was characterized by frequent recourse to symbolic ritual acts, a feature also common in African Spirit Churches."<sup>220</sup> Prophecies, visions are believed to be the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Joel (2:28) mentions the coming of the Spirit upon humanity will be followed by prophecy, dreams and visions.

Besides Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, the African traditional worldview represents the other source of inspiration of AICs. Uzuoku states that "the close link between vision prophecy and healing in the ordination rite presents AICs' visionaries and prophets not only as functioning in continuity with the *dibia*, *nganga* or *babalawo*; they function also in continuity with OT prophets and even in imitation of the Crucified-Risen Jesus-Christ the healer."<sup>221</sup> Ikenga-Metuh would agree with Uzuoku on the continuity with the Old Testament since he suggests that in the AICs, God is viewed as a God of justice similar to the depiction of the Old Testament.<sup>222</sup> But Ikenga-Metuh would disagree with Uzuoku's understanding of the Christology of the AICs. According to Ikenga-Metuh, the Crucified Christ seems to be lost sight of in those movements. For Ikenga-Metuh, the Christology of the AICs perceives "Christ the wonder-worker, the exorcist who sends the devils packing, and rarely Christ the suffering Messiah, a model for accepting and bearing sufferings that come our way. The Holy Spirit is appreciated for his emotion-laden

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<sup>220</sup> Allan Anderson, "African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology," *Word and World* 23, 2 (2003):182.

<sup>221</sup> Uzuoku, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 184.

<sup>222</sup> E. Ikenga-Metuh, "The Revival of African Christian Spirituality: The Experience of African Independent Churches," *Mission Studies* 7 (January 1990): 163.

possessions, and his gifts of *Agbara* [Power or Charismata] which enable the beneficiary to perform wonderful deeds. Rarely is he seen as a sanctifier who indwells a saintly soul.”<sup>223</sup> Behind the enacted theology of the AICs is an unclear approach to the Trinitarian God.

The AICs however do not seem interested in dogmatic propositions or articulated theology but what seems more urgent for them is the healing ministry. Their soteriology seems to be grounded in the belief in an immanent God who is concerned with the world and who wants to deliver his children from the snares of the devil. Their soteriology, which is viewed as freedom from spiritual or physical bondage, is focused mainly on the deliverance from evils and the quest for life in abundance. In fact, life is believed to be a battleground between forces of good and evil.

In order to overcome the powers of evil, prayers and deliverance are essential. Their ritual includes the use of many symbols such as “candles, holy water, incense, blessed salt, honey, perfumes, holy oil” which are meant to drive away the evil spirits. Even with “a very weak eschatology... influenced by two important traditional African beliefs – the belief that the goal of existence is life – enhancement and the belief that life itself is a spiritual combat,” the AICs continue to attract many Igbo, Fon and Yoruba because they respond to a need.<sup>224</sup> Despite the weaknesses of their soteriology and eschatology, what can the Catholic Church learn from the AICs in order to deal with the issue of religious hybridity?

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<sup>223</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, “The Revival of African Christian Spirituality,” 163

<sup>224</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, “The Revival of African Christian Spirituality,” 163. In the Catholic Church, salvation is to be viewed as both worldly and other-worldly; in other words, while it impacts historical existence it is also fulfilled in the life to come.



## 2.2. The Catholic Church in its Quest to address Dual Religious Belonging

### 2.2.1. *A Balanced Christology and Pneumatology*

In a context where illness is believed to be due to supernatural causes or predispositions, Christ may need to be presented more in line with the notion of an ancestor who protects Africans against the hostile forces, who restores life and expels anything which threatens life for the individual as well as for the community. His ministry on earth (*Mt 9:35; Lk 4*) and his resurrection reveal his sovereignty and power over all forces. Luke describes Jesus' healings as signs that he is the Christ (*Lk 7:21-23*). Unlike the mainline Churches where the titles given to Jesus (healer, liberator, chief, and many others) remain only at the academic level without a real impact on the faithful, the AICs translate and use those titles and images in their worship and are mindful of the needs of their adherents. The prayers in the AICs are focused on the African belief and quest for holistic and abundant life and the vitality of the community. A difference between the AICs and the mainline Churches is to be located in the ministry provided by the AICs and their perception of the prophetic mission of Christianity. In fact, "in contradistinction from the mainline churches, where the prophetic function is limited to the proclamation of the Word, AIC's prophets, enabled by vision, freely enter into the problems of individuals to divine, predict, warn, and provide healing services."<sup>225</sup>

In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba settings invaded by spirits, Catholicism's focus on Christology can be balanced by a consciousness of the Holy Spirit at work through his various gifts (1 Cor 12: 4-10) and manifestations (Acts 19:6-12). The mainline Churches can be inspired by the AICs who

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<sup>225</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 184. Talking of the AICs, Anderson states that "Their following is often determined by the extent to which the people perceive the prophets' pronouncements to be the utterances of the Spirit and by their ability to demonstrate the power of the Spirit by meeting concrete human needs in times of sickness and other afflictions and evil disturbances." See Anderson, "African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology," 180.

“believe in and experience the work of the Spirit of God in the universe through divine power which helps human beings in their affliction... Recognizing the incomprehensibility of the Spirit who is ‘all in all’ and who integrates everything, the AICs have generally preserved the splendor of God principally through celebration rather than explanatory theology.”<sup>226</sup> Explanatory and articulated West African theology have not always taken seriously the place of the Holy Spirit. The pneumatological vacuum in West African theology has been addressed by the unarticulated theology of the AICs expressed in their faith and liturgy which centers worship around the Holy Spirit. Prophets are perceived as having a great power bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit. If Catholicism can offer to the AICs a Christology which balances their overemphasis on pneumatology, the AICs can help Catholicism to rediscover the gifts of the Holy Spirit but not at the expense of Christ.<sup>227</sup>

A mutual enrichment between the AICs and the mainline Churches can be imagined. Ikenga-Metuh suggests that AICs and the mainline Churches can learn from each other especially in managing the tension between emotionalism (in AICs) and institutionalism (mainline Churches).

By adopting the Pentecostal spirituality expressed in forms of emotionalism traditional to Africa, they [AICs or AICM] endeared Christianity to a large section of the African population. However, uncontrolled emotionalism has resulted in some abuses like incessant fragmentation of the different sects, unorthodox doctrines, and lack of the stability necessary for spiritual growth. On the other hand, the experience of the AICM should remind the historic churches that recognition of the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit would add life and vigor to the spirituality of their African Christians. Similarly the historic churches should benefit a great deal from the AICM retention and development of the spiritual view of the universe, the holistic view of life, the unitary rather than dualistic view of the human person, and the sense of community, all of which were inherited from African religious traditions. A dose of rationalization, theology, and biblical studies for the AICM churches, a good catechesis for the Africans in the historic churches will reduce the

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<sup>226</sup> Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 130.

<sup>227</sup> With the advent of the Catholic Charismatic movements, the Holy Spirit is given a certain emphasis today in the Church. The works of Yves Congar, Elizabeth Johnson and many others have stressed the forgetfulness of the Spirit and the importance of rediscovering the Spirit in the life of the Church. But our theology remains mainly Christocentric and a lot still needs to be done in the Roman Catholic Church to give a greater place to the Holy Spirit.

fear of nature and the evil spirits, the syncretism, and this-worldly outlook of African traditional spirituality and AICM spirituality.<sup>228</sup>

Instead of a competition, both AICs and the mainline Churches can cooperate in an ecumenical circle to deal with the problems that confront the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba.

With the advent of charismatic groups in the Catholic Church and other Pentecostal movements, some Christians have turned to their pastors rather than to the diviners. A rediscovery of pneumatology and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14) in the Catholic Church can be very helpful in elaborating a healing ministry. But given the possibility of deviances, there is a need for discernment. Instead of the tensions which generally arise between the hierarchy and the charismatics, a collaboration between the two is much needed. The great collaboration between the founder of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Benin, Jean Pliya, and the clergy was instrumental in the spread of this charismatic group. But such cooperation is not always the case. The clergy should be more open to the rediscovering of the “forgotten Spirit.” The leaders of the Charismatic groups need to be accompanied and helped in their discernment since one needs to remain vigilant and alert especially while dealing the spirits. Peter’s warning is to be taken seriously: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, “The Revival of African Christian Spirituality,” 169. AICM refers to African Independent Church Movements.

<sup>229</sup> Some criteria have been provided by the Church for the discernment of the Charismatic gifts: “the primacy of the vocation of every Christian to holiness, commitment to spreading the Gospel, profession of the Catholic Faith, witness to a real communion with the whole Church, recognition of and esteem for the reciprocal complementarity of other charismatic elements in the Church, acceptance of moments of trial in the discernment of charisms, presence of spiritual fruits such as charity, joy, peace and a certain human maturity (cf. Gal 5:22), the social dimension of evangelization.” Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. “Letter ‘Iuvenescit Ecclesia’ to the Bishops of the Catholic Church regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church,” no. 18.

See [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20160516\\_iuvenescit-ecclesia\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160516_iuvenescit-ecclesia_en.html) (Accessed March 24, 2021).

### 2.2.2. *Learning from the AICs' models of healing and moving beyond*

The Igbo, Fon and Yoruba's quest for abundant life has not been given enough consideration in the Catholic Church. As observed by Amaladoss, "healing, for example, is an acute need of the people. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is, in actual practice, limited to the dying. This leaves the field open to other rituals and ritual agents to meet the needs for healing. A prayer or a blessing does not satisfy the ritual-hungry people. Rituals that 'touch' the body can themselves be elements of healing. The horizontal, social dimension is also as important for healing, especially in psycho-somatic illnesses, as the vertical, spiritual one."<sup>230</sup> In order to address double religious belonging, which is rooted in the need for people to protect themselves and their families against illness, misfortune, witchcraft, and evil spirits, there is need of deepening reflections on a proper theology of healing and of developing a ministry which deals with essential questions of healing and protection against the hostile spirits, the fear of witchcraft and curses.

Theological reflections which can explore, compare and evaluate the traditional methods of healing in African Traditional Religion and in the Scriptures are needed in Africa in general, and in particular in Benin and Nigeria. A healing ministry could address not only the physical aspect but also the spiritual, psychological, socio-economic and cultural dimension of healing. The cultural aspect has been generally underestimated. But in fact, as mentioned by Philomena Njeri Mwaura who summarizes the work of Bernard Ugeux "culture determines how health, ill health and healing are understood in a particular context. It offers explanations and specific therapies depending on a given case... For effective therapeutic interventions, healers should enter into the patient's explanatory systems, i.e. his/her own coherence. This is because every culture has its own

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<sup>230</sup> Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters*, 128.

system of meaning, with its own internal coherence.”<sup>231</sup> In other words, illness cannot be interpreted without reference to the culture.

If theology and a pastoral ministry of healing in the mainline churches can and should learn from the experience of the AICs, they need to be very prudent. As Orobator warns, the three major platforms on which African Christianity operates as performance (healing, Prophecy/visions, and deliverance) are also “prone to pathological manifestations.”<sup>232</sup> A theology that reduces Jesus to be at the service of “any variety of situations perceived as threatening” or which “reinforce a dualistic hermeneutical framework that opposes good and evil” can be very dangerous.<sup>233</sup> While Catholicism in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba lands cannot escape the issue of healing, it has to be aware of the risk of becoming a functional Christianity that only satisfies the temporal need of its faithful.<sup>234</sup> In addressing the problem of witchcraft or evil spirits, healing and deliverance require a profound discernment, otherwise they may lead to a certain obscurantism.

The instructions on prayers for healing published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith can perhaps be helpful in placing the ministry of healing in its proper context.<sup>235</sup> However some articles in this instruction seem too narrow and do not take in consideration the cultural perceptions of people. For example, article 2 of the instruction states that “prayers for healing are

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<sup>231</sup> Mwaura, “The Anthropological Dimension of a Patient’s Treatment,” 136.

<sup>232</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 89.

<sup>233</sup> Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 91-92

<sup>234</sup> Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Healing in the African Independent Churches,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (2005): 204. For him, “Christianity is not primarily an emotional and utilitarian religion. It is good to offer consolation to people, but the Christian faith is not rooted in mere consolation for suffering. Christianity is defined by the cross through which humankind has been redeemed in Jesus Christ. It is rooted in the response to the faith in the crucified and Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.”

<sup>235</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Instructions on Prayers for Healing,” (Vatican, 2000). See [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20001123\\_istruzione\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20001123_istruzione_en.html) (Accessed 28 February, 2021). Published by Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of the CDF under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the document seems to be directed against some practices observed in the Charismatic groups in general. The document makes general statements but it fails to take in account the particularities of the local Churches and the cultural sensibilities of people.

considered to be liturgical if they are part of the liturgical books approved by the Church's competent authority; otherwise, they are non-liturgical.”<sup>236</sup> In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cultures used to oral tradition, spontaneous healing prayers make more sense. Though the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith intends to frame the healing liturgies by prescribing the use of rites recommended in the “*Ordo benedictionis infirmorum*” and the “proper sacred vestments indicated therein,” it fails to understand that in some cultures like Igbo, Fon and Yoruba traditions, the use of fixed prayers is viewed as impersonal. Oral and improvised healing liturgy accompanied by music dancing, preaching, testimonies finds a resonance with Igbo, Fon and Yoruba peoples. The legitimacy of these healing liturgies cannot only be ascribed to the use of liturgical books. Though any member of the faithful could pray to God for healing, the CDF recommends that such prayers be done by an ordained minister when it is organized in a sacred place such as a Church. Though the need to regulate the prayers for healing is clearly important today, given the deviances observed in some new charismatic movements, the task of leading prayers of healing should not only be undertaken by ordained ministers who are very few and in fact set aside little time for those important ministries. Pastors may help training and accompanying lay ministers whom the Spirit has endowed with those gifts for healing ministries.

A healing ministry which limits sickness to its spiritual causes or to its biological causes is reductive. As suggested by Stan Chu Ilo, there is a need for a biosocial approach to sickness and healing. The biosocial approach to healing is a “way of promoting human and cosmic life by bringing together all the realities which interact in the procurement of abundant life especially in the face of sickness and death. It will bring together Africa’s commitment to a faith-based and God-centered universe with a scientific viewpoint which recognizes that God continues to work in

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<sup>236</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Instructions on Prayers for Healing.”

nature to bring healing through human ingenuity and invention in the medical sciences.”<sup>237</sup> The biosocial approach brings together various disciplines such as theology, medical sciences, sociology, anthropology, economy, etc. Such approach aims to reconcile faith and science. “Faith healing should be an integral path of medical intervention and not simply one of the instruments of seeking healing; both should run in *pari passu*.”<sup>238</sup> Instead of opposing traditional healing and modern medicine, the time has come to bring both together. The Catholic Church can take a holistic approach to healing by exploring ways of considering a biosocial approach. This holistic approach which has to be multidisciplinary needs to be followed with pastoral care.

### 2.3. A Pastoral Perspective: The Importance of Accompaniment

From a pastoral theology perspective, multiple religious belonging or participation occurs in Benin and Nigeria generally during moment of losses. In *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson offer six categories of loss: material loss, relationship loss, role loss, functional loss, systemic loss or intrapsychic loss.<sup>239</sup> Material loss has to do with the disappearance of an object or a possession. In Igbo, Fon or Yoruba settings, for example the loss of livestock which is important for economic and social reasons is experienced as a significant loss and may lead someone to find the supernatural causes behind such a misfortune. Relationship loss refers to the “ending of opportunities to relate” in various ways to another person. The death of a young person in an unexpected way is generally believed to be caused by an evil spirit (sorcery, spirits, etc.). This relationship loss is to be investigated with the help of the diviner. Role loss

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<sup>237</sup> Ilo, “Searching for Healing in a Miraculous Stream,” 58.

<sup>238</sup> Ilo, “Searching for Healing in a Miraculous Stream,” 58.

<sup>239</sup> Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, 1st edition (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 36-46.

happens when there is a shift in the social role. In Igbo, Fon or Yoruba traditions, the loss of a certain position or status in the community can generate a certain crisis which also leads to investigation and restoration. Functional loss refers to the loss of part of the human physical functioning or body. Systemic loss is a loss experienced by an individual and/or a whole system when a function disappears from the whole. The fear of losing the traditions of one's ancestors by belonging wholeheartedly to Christianity may push some to belong to both traditions. Intrapsychic loss is the "experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself."<sup>240</sup> But such loss which happens within one's own psyche can be experienced as loss of hope. Since desperate situations call sometimes for desperate choices, one may end up in two or multiple religious traditions because of the search for meaning. A search for answers to questions such as "why me" and "why now" may lead one to double religious participation or belonging.

The various losses are not to be seen as isolated but they have some interactive dynamic between them. In Igbo, Fon or Yoruba setting, illness which is a functional loss is experienced as a huge loss because it can affect other dimensions. Illness can lead to role loss (work), to material and relationship losses, to a systemic loss (since the whole community is affected) and to an intrapsychic loss. Because of its various implications, illness is taken seriously. Culturally, sickness is also experienced as a negative force which diminishes the life force and thus something needs to be done about it.

The search for the lost object or person may lead one to finding himself participating in divinations and various rituals from different religions or torn between two religious' traditions. Double belonging is to be viewed sometimes as a desperate quest for meaning. Instead of condemning those who find themselves in double religious belonging especially in times of loss

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<sup>240</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, 40.



or in limit-situations, the Catholic Church may need to accompany them and help them in the reconstruction of meaning. Helping in the meaning-making requires that one enters through the system and the world of someone who experiences a loss, understands really the relationship that that person has with what is lost since the more attached the victim is “to what is lost, the greater the suffering.”

A theology of presence is needed in Africa in general and in Benin and Nigeria in particular. A theology of Presence is grounded on God’s presence to Israel, God’s journeying not only with his people as a community but also as individuals as evidenced by many scriptural passages in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>241</sup> This presence of God reaches its paroxysm with the incarnation of Christ who comes to tabernacle among us. That God pitches his tent among us means that the Lord has chosen to be present with us, to breathe our air, to walk our roads and journeys with us in a very personal way. A theology of presence is about following Christ by “being-present-with” the others and slowly discovering their needs. By being-with, one gives the opportunity to the other to tell his/her story. The episode of the sick man healed by Jesus in the gospel of John (5: 1-16) seems to show this importance of being-with. “Do you want to be well again?” Jesus’ question helps the man to uncover his desires, to participate in his healing but also to reveal something about himself. By engaging a conversation with the man, Jesus gives him the opportunity to tell his story. Jesus would have saved a lot of time by just healing the man and continuing his journey. But he gives his whole attention and time to the man, to listen to his story. Through the telling of his story, the man

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<sup>241</sup> God’s presence to Israel is manifested through the presence of the angel of Yahweh (Gen. 22:11,15-16;31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-5), through the Ark of the covenant (Numb. 10:33-36) or the Shekinah or even the face of Yahweh (Ex. 33:14-15). God’s nearness to Israel is so overwhelming that Deuteronomy 4:7 questions: “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” For example, individuals such as Moses (Ex. 3:12), Joshua (Josh. 1:5-6a), Gideon (Judges 6:12), or Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8) have all been reassured by God’s presence: “I am with you.”

revealed his experience of loneliness. He narrates how for all those years, he could not find someone to assist him, how he lacks the support of family or friend but also of people present in *Bethsaida*. The man needed surely a healer but he needed also someone who could take time to listen to his story. In Jesus, he found both. If Jesus only presumed what the man needed which is obvious, he would have only healed him but not giving him the opportunity to articulate his story.

Presence, empathetic listening, and compassion are important in journeying with persons especially in times of loss. If the Catholic Church is absent during those moments, it is no surprise that people turn to diviners, or to African Independent Churches or Pentecostals when they are facing limit-situations. Pastors need to spend time with victims to hear their story and approach them as “holy ground” by “removing their sandals” in front of the mystery of the other. Instead of a one-size-fits-all recipe, pastors should respect the uniqueness of each person and case. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each person and his/her relationship with loss, respecting the healing process which is not linear and avoiding catch phrases as “it is the will of God”, or “have faith and hope” are important in accompanying people.

Pastoral care should also take in consideration the fact that healing in Africa has to do with the individual but also with the whole community. AICs have distinguished themselves in this area of pastoral care with their small units where fellowship and agape are generally emphasized and counselling provided in various ways. With the large numbers of the Catholic Church, this pastoral care can become challenging or impersonal. There is thus a need for revival of the basic ecclesial communities which can help in terms of personal or communitarian accompaniment and fellowship. They can help to empower Christians in their struggles, and sufferings and provide them the support needed in times of trouble.

Pastoral care should also encompass important sacraments such as the Anointing of the Sick which should not be reserved in practice only to desperate situations. The administration of the sacraments and the presence of the minister can make a huge difference in the life of people especially when their conditions are chronic. The importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be stressed here. To private confession there should also be added the possibility of a communal penance celebration. In an Igbo, Fon and Yoruba setting where healing needs to be communal, a celebration of the third rite of reconciliation at various moments of the year may be helpful for a healing process. Advent and Lenten services can be a proper time to recover the communal aspect of healing or reconciliation which is really emphasized in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Religion.

## **Conclusion**

Double religious belonging can be addressed only if Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Catholicism is grounded in the gospel while retaining the values of African cultures and if it addresses problems that people are confronted with without becoming a “functional religion,” meaning a religion which satisfies only the needs of people. Despite their weaknesses, the AICs make us aware of the translatability of the gospel in a particular culture. Moreover, the approach of the AICs shows that the “traditional African spirituality remains an essential ingredient for any effective revival of an African Christian spirituality.”<sup>242</sup> They perhaps indicate a direction worth meditating upon in terms of inculturation, although one may need to discern about the path that the Catholic Church may take in order to be consistent with its mission and identity.

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<sup>242</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, “The Revival of African Christian Spirituality,” 152.

The quest for abundant life is an important feature of the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba worldview. Healing appears to be one of the most pressing problems that Igbo, Fon and Yoruba are dealing with and that the Catholic Church has failed to address holistically. The Catholic Church has approached the issue of healing generally from a physical perspective with little attention to the cultural interpretation of sickness. But neglecting or despising the cultural healing system can only lead to a perpetuation of double or multiple religious belonging. However, in Beninese and Nigerian context where life is threatened in various forms (injustices, conflicts, etc.), the answer to double religious belonging – which is connected to the quest for abundant life – cannot be limited only to the need for a deeper inculturation or the healing ministry but should also encompass the quest for liberation.

## CHAPTER IV

### DOUBLE RELIGIOUS BELONGING AND SOCIAL ISSUES

#### Introduction

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* notes that apart from anxiety related to health and protection from evil spirits, “well-being, children, the climate” are some of the reasons which led a number of African Christians to revert to some practices of African Traditional Religion.<sup>243</sup> Indeed, Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Christians have recourse to African religion when they feel that their individual life and health but also the life and well-being of their community (climate and children for survival of the community, etc.) are threatened. Anything which haunts their quest for abundant life (such as evil spirits, witchcraft but also poverty, injustice, etc.) becomes an important matter of concern and can lead someone to participate in double religious belonging at different levels. In Benin and Nigeria where life is also threatened by corruption, bad governance, conflicts, injustices, the Church ought to be a liberating force. This chapter sees double religious belonging as an opportunity and a reminder to the Church of its task and mission today in countries where life is threatened in all its forms.

#### 1. Tackling Double Religious Belonging by Dealing with Social Issues

##### 1.1. Disharmony in the Community and Dual Religious Belonging

The vital force and the notion of community are essential for Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. If the preservation of life is the ultimate good, the notion of relationship is the “central and moral ethical

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<sup>243</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus: Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, (2011), no. 93. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html) (Accessed 13 February 2021).

imperative.”<sup>244</sup> African ethics is in fact grounded in the concept of *ubuntu* which stresses the interdependence and interconnectedness of the cosmos and the solidarity between people.<sup>245</sup> What happens to one individual affects the corporate group and *vice-versa*. This idea that each member of the group is bound together with others has nurtured the emphasis on the corporeal dimension of any individual’s act.

Anything which strengthens the bonds of the community contributes to the increase of the life force whereas anything which weakens those relationships leads to a decreasing of the life force. Ilo states that “just like any other service, all assistance counts as a support and enhancement of life for those who benefit because these values correspond to the values which are enhanced, so also acts of injustice diminish the life not only of individual but of the community... Community is thus conceived as a vital circuit in which everyone counts. This is the very hub whose pulsation is destroyed by the absence of reconciliation in the community.”<sup>246</sup> As mentioned by Ilo, injustices done by one individual – whether it has to do with corruption, oppression, etc, – lead to the diminishment of the life of the community. Resentment, hatred, conflicts violence contribute also to the decrease of the life force of the individual. Social injustices and poverty are viewed as a disruption of the relationship.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, 65.

<sup>245</sup> *Ubuntu* is a central African concept which was popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. *Ubuntu* or *botho* means “the essence of being human. You know when it is there and when it is absent. It speaks about humaneness, gentleness, and hospitality, putting yourself on behalf of others, being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and toughness. It recognizes that my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” See Desmond Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu* (Michigan: New Market, 1989), 71.

<sup>246</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, “A Theology of Reconciliation: A Reflection on the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Synod for Africa.” *AFER* 51-52, 4 (December-March 2010): 435.

<sup>247</sup> According to Magesa, in African Traditional religious traditions and societies, the “refusal to share is wrong. It is, in fact, an act of destruction because it does not serve to cement the bonding that is required to form community. Quite the contrary, it is perceived as an element that seeks to weaken and break such bonds. Nothing that weakens community bonds, or in any way helps to abet such weakening, can be morally wholesome. The unity of the community – equally the living, the living- dead (or the remembered- dead) and the yet- to- be- born – a unity that is

The corporate idea of sin not only suggests that any sin done by one individual affects all members of his community but it is also extended to other beings and to the cosmos at large. In such a worldview, a breach or a transgression of norms by an individual or by a group is “ultimately an offence by the corporate body of society... The pollution of the individual is corporately the pollution of those related to him whether they are human beings, animals or material goods.”<sup>248</sup> Thus, it is the whole ecological system that is affected by the offence of one person.

An offence is considered as a disruption in the web of relationships and is believed to be punished by God and the ancestors. The punishment does not occur only for the individual but for the whole community. Mbiti expresses this idea when he affirms that “by committing a particular offence, a person puts himself and other people in the dangerous situation where God punishes him and other people.”<sup>249</sup> Since the whole community is interdependent, rituals need to be performed for the purification of the individual, the group but also the ecosystem.

The disruption of the harmony of the society by violence, conflicts, injustices and the refusal to share call necessarily for action. In order to restore the vital force that was diminished by these acts, religious experts are generally needed not only to diagnose the problems but also to offer remedies. Various rituals, sacrifices, offerings are done. Expiatory rituals may involve blood sacrifices of animals. The risk of double religious belonging or participation becomes present at those moments. In fact, private or public sacrifices may involve at different levels – either directly or indirectly – some Christians who belong to the community which has to make reparation. This

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the community’s life in its fullest sense, is the paramount good. The opposite constitutes the paramount destructiveness.” Magesa, *African Religion*, 66.

<sup>248</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 201.

<sup>249</sup> Mbiti, 202. Such a conception seems similar to the ancient Jewish belief of corporate solidarity expressed through the use of the proverb “the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ez. 18:2 or Jer. 31:29-30). Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah later repudiated this conception and insisted on the personal responsibility (Ez. 18:4; Jer. 31:30).

is precisely where Christians often become involved in dual belonging. A solidarity with other members of the community may lead some Christians to participate physically and directly in those rituals. When the presence of those Christians is not mandatory, their monetary contribution may be required in many cases. In fact, rituals and sacrifices require a contribution (generally monetary) of each of the member of the community. By sending their offering or monetary contribution, Christians may participate – even if it is in a remote way – to those rituals. Given this overall context, it appears that dealing with social issues can thus be a way also to prevent to a certain extent a dual religious participation or belonging.

### 1.2. Double Religious Belonging and Social Issues

Igbo, Fon and Yoruba are generally willing to be involved in religious traditions or denominations which put an emphasis on the quest for life. The rapid growth of Pentecostal Churches in Benin and Nigeria seems to confirm this conclusion. In the last three decades, despite their hostile attitude toward many African cultural values, Pentecostal movements have paradoxically become very attractive to Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. Why is the membership to Pentecostal Churches on the rise?

Magesa suggests that “by promising health and wealth through the practice of spiritual healing and deliverance from evil spirits, and by constantly infusing their congregations with the hope of gainful employment as an act of faith (in Christ), they inadvertently touch the core of the worldview of African Religion, in spite of their outward western accoutrements and negative rhetoric against it.”<sup>250</sup> Well-being and wealth are at the core of African cultures. Whenever those two are lacking, the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba may look elsewhere to satisfy these needs. Unfortunately,

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<sup>250</sup> Magesa, “Christianity and African Religion,” 265.



many mainstream Christian Churches do not always provide answers to those needs and thus see some of their faithful leaving their Churches for Pentecostal movements, or becoming either double denominational religious believers or simply double religious believers.

The quest for well-being and wealth can be hindered by poverty, conflicts, violence, natural calamities that are viewed as afflictions which strike the individual as well as the community. Injustices, poverty, conflicts, violence are thus viewed as anti-life phenomena which need to be addressed. As the deprivation of basic necessities or amenities, poverty in Benin and Nigeria is a very complex phenomenon which has many manifestations such as the lack of sufficient resources for sustainable livelihood, hunger, homelessness, illness and others. All these manifestations reduce the vital force. With the high unemployment rate due to the persistence of injustices and poverty, many are excluded. Despite the precarity of employment, it is not uncommon to see a Christian who has not found a job after his studies being pressured by parents and relatives to consult the diviner for inquiry, to go through various rituals in order to find a job. “In the traditional worldview, someone must be blamed for any untoward occurrence and that someone is usually a woman, often an old woman”<sup>251</sup> who is accused of being a witch. The unemployment of someone in a family is viewed as caused by a witch and therefore justify the need to look for other spiritual forces in the traditional religion in order to ward off this misfortune.

In situations of injustice, the reflex of people is not to turn to judicial authorities but to consult first the diviner. When a woman is abused physically for example, she is sometimes advised to consult the diviner in order to understand why her husband behaves that way and is sometimes given charms in order to influence the behavior of her spouse.

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<sup>251</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye, *African Women's Theologies, Spirituality, and Healing: Theological Perspectives From the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 37.

Ecological disasters are perceived as misfortune. In case of calamities, the council of elders may decide to consult the diviner to understand the “why” behind this misfortune and offer the sacrifices or rituals needed to ward off the situation. Expiatory sacrifices are generally required. For Igbo, Fon and Yoruba, when one on a personal or communal level is confronted by misfortune, a sacrifice must be offered. A certain atonement is needed in order to restore the vital force which has been diminished by conflicts, violence, calamities, etc. Members of the community who experience this misfortune, whether they are Christians or not, may need to participate in one way or another (physical presence, monetary contribution or other forms of donations).

Dual participation or belonging is to be located precisely in such moments. In fact, in times of economic hardship or poverty, in moments of injustice or during ecological calamities, dual religious belonging can become a temptation for some Christians. Addressing social issues appears therefore as essential in dealing with double religious belonging holistically.

## **2. The Roman Catholic Church and the Need for a Deeper Involvement in Social Arena**

Christianity presents Jesus as a Life-Giver in whom African concepts of life are met. But the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba Christian generally has a hard time to account for his faith in a Jesus who brings life in abundance in time of hardship. In countries plagued by many diseases and where life is threatened by poverty, corruption, social injustices, what does it mean to say that Christ is life-giving? Which Christ does Christianity in Benin and Nigeria proclaim? Katongole goes even further by asking: “What accounts for the dismal social impact of Christianity in Africa? Why has Christianity, despite its overwhelming presence, failed to make a significant dent in the social

history of the continent?”<sup>252</sup> If Roman Catholicism wants to become meaningful to Igbo, Fon and Yoruba people, then it has to become incarnated, more engaged with society and prophetic.

### 2.1. An Incarnated Presence of the Church

If the Catholic Church in Benin and Nigeria has been a major force in the political and social transformation of the country,<sup>253</sup> the activism of the Church’s institutions seems to be fading slowly. Besides the pastoral letters which seem to have little impact on the few who read them, the Church in Benin and Nigeria seems to focus mainly on the administrative management of parishes and on spiritual matters and is reluctant to take a clear stand in politics. For Jean Marc Ela, Christianity in the African context “has been made captive by Roman structures that are weighed down by an ecclesiastical mentality; by the sociological burden of a religion of the ‘other world’; by forms of piety and devotion of Christianity in decay; by the disguised apolitical stance of Western missionaries; by the massive apathy, irresponsibility, and intolerable greed of certain members of the clergy; by the disembodied spirituality of some indigenous lay people; and by the lack of awareness or infantilism of African religious trained in a European fashion.”<sup>254</sup> Despite its harshness, what Ela’s criticism called for is ultimately an incarnate presence.

Drawing some insights from Gabriel Marcel, Margaret Guider develops a theology of Incarnate presence which focuses on three essential ministerial attitudes: *Inquiétude*, *disponibilité*,

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<sup>252</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 40.

<sup>253</sup> Françoise Boillot, “L’Eglise Catholique face aux Processus de Changement Politique du Début des Années Quatre-vingt-dix,” *Année Africaine*, (1992) : 115–142. See also Eo Ezenweke and Ia Kanu, “The Church and National Development: Towards a Philosophy of Collaboration,” *African Research Review* 6, no. 2 (May 28, 2012): 102–12, <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v6i2.9>.

<sup>254</sup> Jean Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 154.

and *esprit*.<sup>255</sup> *Inquiétude* which is related to “uneasiness” or “dis-ease” is the “disposition that allows ministers to detach themselves from the vise in which they are squeezed by daily life, with its hundreds of cares that mask the true realities.”<sup>256</sup> This has to do with a certain discomfort with the *statu quo* behind which one can take refuge. *Inquiétude* compels one to go beyond a certain technocratic perception of the ministry and helps one to move from doing to being. Instead of leading to paralysis or fear, *Inquiétude* seems rather to liberate the minister from a certain routine and to make him available.

*Disponibilité* which has to do with “availability and receptivity” “reflects an unwavering commitment on the part of the minister to be affected by the reality of the other. Because of this commitment, the minister allows for the possibility of being changed by truths previously unknown and unexperienced.”<sup>257</sup> *Disponibilité* has to do with the capacity of the the minister to be opened to the otherness of the other, to be affected by the “thou” and being moved so deeply that he/she does not remain the same after this encounter.

*Esprit* or spirit of truth should be an attitude that the minister should also have. Guider suggests that “to incorporate the spirit of truth one must have the courage to face the facts of life,

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<sup>255</sup> Margaret Eletta Guider, *Daughters of Rahab: Prostitution and the Church of Liberation in Brazil* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 156. Mgr. Christophe Munzihirwa, S.J. who was known as the “Congolese Romero” seems to be an embodiment of this incarnated presence during his life. Born in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1926, Mgr. Munzihirwa was murdered in 1996. Mgr. Munzihirwa became Archbishop of Bukavu in Eastern Congo in a tumultuous period in DRC. While Mgr. Munzihirwa was in Kinshasa for a meeting and was preparing to return to his diocese, he learned that the rebels had stormed his diocese of Bukavu. All the civil and military authorities left Bukavu and several people dissuaded the Archbishop to return to Bukavu. But driven by the desire to stay with his people, or by a certain *inquiétude*, he took the risk of returning to Bukavu. The reality of his people affected him so much that with boldness, he confronted the different parties and called for justice. As a shepherd driven by a spirit of truth, he took care of his sheep and became the only voice of the voiceless in the whole city. Despite the threats, he refused to leave his diocese or to stop proclaiming a message of justice and peace. His passion for justice finally led him to die for his people. Mgr. Christophe Munzihirwa’s incarnate presence and his witness as minister continue to inspire many. His recognition as Servant of God in 2016 opens the path for an eventual beatification and canonization in the future.

<sup>256</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 157. On the same page, Guider explains that “in a world where ministerial identity is frequently linked to function to what one does, *inquiétude* is inextricably linked to the aspiration to be, to the experience of incarnate presence.”

<sup>257</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 158.

and be prepared to challenge the ‘life-lie’ as it is lived by those who exist in a state of non-awareness, not seeing reality, shutting out what they would otherwise know or come to realize.”<sup>258</sup> The spirit of truth requires that after seeing the reality as it is, the minister takes the responsibility to confront those who are blind or deny that reality. A certain boldness is thus needed especially in situations of injustices, conflicts and violence.

The theology of the incarnate presence also points to three ministerial principles namely *creative fidelity, hope, and love*. Guider emphasizes that *creative fidelity* has to do with a “commitment to the ‘thou,’ rather than to a duty” and “serves to remind ministers that ‘fidelity can only be shown towards a person, never at all to a notion or ideal.’”<sup>259</sup> As for hope, it is essential for ministers and enables them “to continue to believe in what cannot yet be seen.”<sup>260</sup> The principle of love is also very important and has to do with what is eternal. Guider states that “to love another truly is to love the person in God and to affirm that incarnate presence carries with it the promise of a Presence that will not fail.”<sup>261</sup> But what is the link between the ministerial principles and ministerial attitudes?

Guider links these two with what she called the ministerial practices which are *secondary reflection, participation, and creative testimony*. Instead of separating knowledge and experience, *secondary reflection* integrates both and interrelates theory and practice. Guider suggests that secondary reflection is in ministerial practice “a contemplation of experience.”<sup>262</sup> As for the ministerial practice of *participation*, Guider states that it must be understood at “three levels of

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<sup>258</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 158.

<sup>259</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 159. Here, Guider states that creative fidelity means “resisting to those tendencies ‘to reduce the thou to an object of interest, having, or instrumentality of various sorts.’”

<sup>260</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 160.

<sup>261</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 160.

<sup>262</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 161.

experience: incarnation (understood as a ministry of embodied presence), communion (understood as a ministry that begins love, proceeds in hope, and persists in fidelity), and transcendence (understood as the ministerial intuition of the Divine presence).”<sup>263</sup> For Guider, *creative testimony* by interrelating justice and truth “is more than a ministerial practice: it is the fundamental vocation.”<sup>264</sup> Such a commitment to creative testimony is the core of the vocation of the minister who is called to give testimony. As followers of Christ, it is through an incarnate presence that the good news can be proclaimed today and help transform the society.

## 2.2. A Church More Engaged with the Society

As a remnant of the opposition between matter and spirit, the sole focus on “saving the souls” points to the dualism between the temporal and the spiritual which implies two juxtaposed realities. But because history is one, a Christian spirituality ought to engage the society. Salvation and history are one. The shift needed in Benin and Nigeria requires that Christians and their pastors take seriously the understanding of salvation as an ongoing process of liberation in and of history and put an emphasis on communal rather than the individualistic notion of salvation still present in Beninese and Nigerian Christianity. Salvation is a historical process but also communal. Since the fullness of salvation is to be located in history, the Church needs to engage reality and work toward a liberation of the person, the society and the world.

The Church in Benin and Nigeria should take as the heart of its work the preferential option for the poor which is constitutive of the Church’s mission today and of the Christian faith. Such

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<sup>263</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 161. On the level of participation, Guider suggests that one should move “from problem-solving” to “involvement in the mystery of being.”

<sup>264</sup> Guider, *Daughters of Rahab*, 161-62.

preferential option entails a solidarity with the poor for their liberation. The idea that poverty is a fatality remains embedded in many Christians' consciousness and mentality in Benin and Nigeria. But poverty is caused by injustices and evil structures. Decisions taken by the Church should involve the poor themselves and help them to become better agents of their own development. Through education, the Church should empower the poor so that they become their own agency and thus can participate to their own liberation. Education of consciences and formation of grassroots appear as important steps to bring justice and change. Popular organizations which fight for their dignity and rights and for the common good should be promoted and defended. Besides the poor who need to be educated, elites need also to be accompanied in a particular way. The laity who engage in politics should not only have a good grasp of Catholic social teaching but they should also be accompanied.

Catholic schools in Benin and Nigeria still strongly believe in the “developmental model for social change.” In such a system, those “who wield economic power are reinforced in their power” and the techniques, knowledge and attitudes acquired in the schools and university “nourish and perpetuate a system which serves not the poor majority but the minority.”<sup>265</sup> Such a model leads generally to a social reproduction of a minority class that prefers to maintain a *statu*

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<sup>265</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “The University, Human Rights, and the Poor Majorities,” in *Towards a Society that Serves its People*, ed. John Hassett, Hugh Lacey and Leo J. O'Donovan (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 211. Ellacuría suggests a more comprehensive model which sets the university's ultimate goal as “the well-being of the Poor majority.” See Ignacio Ellacuría, “The University, Human Rights, and the Poor Majorities,” in *Towards a Society that Serves its People*, 211. Such an objective requires an “overall commitment” from the different actors of the university. See Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Task of a Christian University” in *Companions of Jesus*, ed. Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 149. Romero reminds the Catholic educational institutions to “not develop an education that creates in the mind of the student a hope of becoming rich and having the power to dominate. That does not correspond to the time we live in. Let us form in the heart of the child and the young person the lofty ideal of loving, of preparing oneself to serve and to give oneself to others. Anything else would be education for selfishness, and we want to escape the selfishness that is precisely the cause of the great malaise of our societies.” Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, trans. James R. Brockman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 45.

*quo* in the society. But the education that the Church needs to promote should lead to a social change and not the social reproduction of a minority.

For the health care, the Church can create a platform where diverse actors can meet and share their knowledge. A valorization of traditional methods of healing such as phytotherapy can be promoted in Catholic hospitals. Health care systems can also valorize the role of traditional medicine men and women whose contribution cannot be overestimated. Their knowledge and wisdom would surely enhance the medical care system.

### 2.3. A Listening Church which puts Women at the Center

The Church in Benin and Nigeria needs to become a listening Church which opens wide its ears rather than “its mouth.” Elias Kifon Bongmba is right when he asserts that “for a community that is used to preaching, proclaiming, predicting, prophesying, programming, listening is important ‘because it implies consultation or deliberation at all levels of community, it becomes an imagery which testifies, according to Cyprian [of North Africa] that the will of God may triumph in the Church-community over human presumption or error.’”<sup>266</sup> Listening is essential because it helps the Church to discern the signs of the time. Listening also “establishes a humble beginning for service and praxis. One of the criticisms of missionary Christianity is that western missionaries arrived in Africa and assumed that they knew the needs of Africans... Listening establishes the basis of a dialogue.”<sup>267</sup> But to whom should the Church listen? The Church has the duty to listen to everyone especially to the poor, the women who generally bear a heavy weight in society and are the majority of Church members.

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<sup>266</sup> Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2018), 76.

<sup>267</sup> Bongmba, *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, 77.



Women should have an important role to play in the Church because they are leaven for both the society and the Church.<sup>268</sup> Given their role in the building of the domestic Church, it is unfortunate that they are not given a preponderant place in the Church institutions. Though they represent the majority of Church members, they continue to be given secondary roles. In a Beninese and Nigerian Church where clericalism is still very strong, a new ecclesial model of leadership which puts women at the center of decisions is needed. By listening to the perspective of women, learning from their knowledge and wisdom, and putting them at the center, the Church can grow and be more helpful to the society at large.

The Church needs to listen also to the youth who are not only the future but also the present of the Church. Their creativity and energy represent an important contribution to the Church. The place of the children needs also to be taken seriously. The Church in Benin and Nigeria should provide children a safe environment in which they can grow and mature. Listening to the children's cry in the Church today, is to protect them and participate in their full development and well-being on the physical, moral, emotional, spiritual... levels.

The voice of the elderly is also very important. In Igbo, Fon and Yoruba settings where elders are believed to be wise, the Church needs to have a deep respect for the elderly and to associate with them in the running of the Church. They can help also the youth in their growth and help building a sagacious Church.

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<sup>268</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad PubCo, 2002), 107.

#### 2.4. A Prophetic Church

The Christian faith has a political dimension which cannot be ignored. Katongole states that “when operating exclusively from a religious sphere, the Church’s role in Africa’s social history helplessly swings between the postures of reticence, frantic activism and total cooption.”<sup>269</sup> He argues that the Church should recover its social vision. A certain reimagining of a different world fashioned by the “deeds of the everyday” in the here-and-now is thus needed. For the advent of a new society in Benin and Nigeria, it is important for the Church to adopt an attitude of critical cooperation towards the State. The Church cooperates with the State “to create a just social order, one that would gradually eliminate unjust structures and would encourage the new society that the country needs in order to maintain and live within new structures of justice, peace, and love.”<sup>270</sup> But the Church has also the duty to denounce evil and structures of injustice present in the society wherever they are.

The prophetic role of the Church has to do with the urgent need for the Church to unveil the idolatries of the society. Speaking the truth seems to be the prelude for a true social change and for an integral liberation. The Church takes a stand by denouncing evil so that people can be converted. But such a prophetic role of denunciation of evil and any kind of injustice can put the Church at odds with political leaders and with oppressors and lead to conflicts. Boldness is thus needed. Sometimes, in the name of harmony or in order to protect its interests, the Church in Benin and Nigeria is reluctant to criticize the government or political parties in power. But as Oscar Romero has put it “a church that does not provoke any crisis, a gospel that does not unsettle, a word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that does not touch the real sin

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<sup>269</sup> Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 50.

<sup>270</sup> Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, trans. Michael J. Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1985), 83.

of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what gospel is that?”<sup>271</sup> Romero’s thought-provoking question challenges the Church in Benin and Nigeria and calls for a prophetic Church which deals with concrete issues such as justice, reconciliation, care for creation and peace.

### **3. A Path for the Church in Benin and Nigeria: Justice, Reconciliation, Care for Creation, and Peace**

Poverty, injustices, divisions and violence constantly threatens Beninese and Nigerian’s quest for life in abundance. The Church can contribute to human flourishing, justice, reconciliation, and peace-building as part of its care for our common home, the creation that supports and sustains humanity. Reconciliation, justice and peace are all interconnected since, as mentioned by Pope John Paul II, there can be “no peace without justice” and “no justice without forgiveness.”<sup>272</sup> Seeking reconciliation, peace and justice is an integral part of the Church’s mission today in Benin and Nigeria. Given the challenges in Benin and Nigeria, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the advent of the kingdom of God in Benin and Nigeria passes among many others through the path for justice, reconciliation and peace. If it is true that the “God of utopia never finds full correspondence in history,” it is also however essential to keep in mind that “God draws history forward [so] that it may give more of itself, and inspires all social processes to move in the direction of justice, peace, and a communion of sisters and brothers. The God of utopia corrects any deviations from this path.”<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 57.

<sup>272</sup> Pope John Paul II, “No Peace without Justice, no Justice without Forgiveness” Message for the Celebration of World Day Peace, 2002. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20011211\\_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.html) (accessed 13 February 2021), no 15.

<sup>273</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 178.

### 3.1. Need for Justice in Benin and Nigeria

The question of justice is a major issue in Benin and Nigeria since some injustices have nurtured the current poverty. As a constant threat for the Igbo, Fon and Yoruba's quest for life in abundance, poverty needs to be reduced by tackling its root-causes such as the savage exploitation of African resources, corruption, bad governance, etc.

Many Beninese and Nigerians especially those living in the rural area continue to be excluded from the society and find themselves on the margins. The faces of the poor in Benin and Nigeria are the peasants in the rural area, the marginalized in the cities who are ill-paid, the youth who are unemployed, the disabled, etc. Among these "crucified people" are also the children called in Benin *vidomegon* (placed-child or foster children) who are subjected to modern-day slavery. These children are blocked in their development and exploited by the family in which they are placed. Their future is sacrificed on the altar of greedy parents.

Women are also among the crucified people in Benin and Nigeria since they continue to be victims of domestic violence and abuses. Listening to women would help the Church "to understand what disease or poverty means for many women who often go hungry to feed their families. Listening to women will give the Church insights into the violence against women in the home, at work, and in society at large."<sup>274</sup> It is by listening to the women who are among the poor, the most marginalized and excluded in West Africa that the true reality of Benin and Nigeria will unveil itself to the Church. Hajia Katumi Mahama, quoted by Oduyoye, states that "the problems of disease, poverty and war affect women and children most when they occur. This is enough to urge women, irrespective of their religious affiliation, to close ranks and join hands in finding

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<sup>274</sup> Bongmba, *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, 78.

solutions to the problems that affect all women. To achieve maximum success, the co-operation of men and women is greatly needed because the issue is one which affects both men and women.”<sup>275</sup> The Church as a whole should help transforming the reality of women which have enormous consequences in the society.

Such situations of injustice need to be addressed by the Church since it violates the dignity of the human being who is created at the image of God. The Book of Proverbs puts it clearly when it says: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (Proverbs 14:31). Mgr. Romero makes the same point when he states that “there is no dichotomy between man and God’s image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God’s image, and the Church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.”<sup>276</sup> In a continent where “anthropological poverty” is still a reality, the Church needs to work for justice and the restoration of the dignity of people.

The fight for justice is grounded in Scriptures and is also rooted in the belief that we are all made in the image and likeness of God from whom flow our dignity as human beings. In Scripture, “justice is an aspect of God’s shalom, a notion that carries with it the idea of completeness, soundness, well-being and prosperity, and includes every aspect of life – personal, relational and national.”<sup>277</sup> Prophets such as Amos have distinguished themselves by their pressing and urgent call for justice. Injustices and abuses are the consequences of sin of commission and omission. Through Christ’s grace, humanity is being empowered to overcome them and to turn away from selfishness which leads to injustices.

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<sup>275</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Women in Religion and Culture: Essays in Honour of Constance Buchanan* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Sefer, 2007), 156.

<sup>276</sup> Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 40.

<sup>277</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008), 72.

The local Church in Benin and Nigeria has the urgent duty of “forming upright consciences receptive to the demands of justice, so as to produce men and women willing and able to build this just social order by their responsible conduct.”<sup>278</sup> Empowered by Christ, Christians are called to “speak out for those who cannot speak” (Prov. 31:8), to work for social justice and to take any initiative which contributes to human flourishing and liberation and the overall well-being of others. Denouncing the structures of social sin which perpetuate injustices, seeking and building a just order which respects the dignity and rights of all human beings, working for the establishment of strong institutions and good governance are some of the tasks that Christians can undertake.

### 3.2. The Importance of Reconciliation in Benin and Nigeria

Katongole suggests that reconciliation is “grounded in lament, which involves the ability to see honestly, name truthfully, and to stand within the broken world of our day-to-day existence, and yet not despair in the reality of new creation.”<sup>279</sup> Naming the problems without falling into despair appears as primordial in the task of reconciliation. Beninese and Nigerian people continue to lament divisions and the existence of many social tensions. Ethnical prejudices and clashes which are facilitated by a tradition of suspicion and mistrust transmitted in the family and the clan appear generally during intertribal marriages or during elections.<sup>280</sup> The manipulation of tribal and religious differences has reinforced the prejudices and has nurtured some tensions which during elections and other peculiar circumstances are expressed in various forms of violence.

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<sup>278</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Africa Munus: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html) (Accessed 11 February, 2021), no. 22.

<sup>279</sup> Emmanuel M. Katongole, “Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*:: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace,” in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, ed. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jørgensen, vol. 16 (1517 Media, 2013), 71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcpgx.9>.

<sup>280</sup> Gbédjinou Rodrigue, *Ô Bénin, mon Beau Pays : 50 ans après* (Cotonou : Ed. Francis Aupiais, 2010), 13.

Unfortunately, there has been a certain cooption of those prejudices, tribalism and violence in the Church. The Church which is expected to be counter-cultural is also struggling with some divisions based sometimes on ethnic differences and other considerations which become visible during the appointment of bishops or the nominations for important positions in the dioceses.<sup>281</sup>

In the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba worldview, influenced by *ubuntu*, an exclusion of someone based on ethnic, economic, political, religious or social differences leads to a self-diminishment. Ilo states that by breaking communication with someone or by discriminating against someone “I am denying both myself and my brethren the wonderful prospect of participating in vital union. I am also by the same token withdrawing myself and my brethren from the inner enrichment and organic sharing which draws from our common life. The absence of reconciliation is a threat to cosmic fertility, because it makes it impossible for life to flourish through mutual interaction, participation, and communion.”<sup>282</sup> Reconciliation in the African context should lead to restoration of the vital force and the harmony of the community. This process of reconciliation is thus not only individual but also communal, for when there is a broken relationship it is the whole corporate community which is injured and not only individuals. Healing needs also to involve the community.

In the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba setting, reconciliation is viewed as holistic since life is viewed as interconnected and sin is perceived as a breach which breaks the harmony and influences the whole cosmos. In Africa in general, “sin is understood through multiple prisms: the effect on one’s relationship with the deities, the effect on the community (broadly understood to include the

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<sup>281</sup> In Nigeria for example, the appointment of Peter Okpaleke as Bishop of Ahiara diocese by Benedict XVI in 2012 met much resistance led by some priests and lay people who rejected this nomination on tribal grounds. Despite Pope Francis’s warnings about an eventual suspension of the rebels in the clergy, the resistance continued until the resignation of Bishop Okpaleke on March 2018.

<sup>282</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, “Towards an African Theology of Reconciliation: A Missiological Reflection on the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second African Synod,” *The Heythrop Journal* LIII, (2012):1008.

spiritual and visible beings), the effect on the victim(s), and the effect on oneself. The process and ritual of forgiveness must necessarily account for all these factors.”<sup>283</sup>

This reconciliation has to be with oneself, with God and with the other. Reconciliation with oneself may need to deal with the presence of a certain internalized oppression inherited from slavery and colonization which expresses itself in various occasions. Healing needs to deal also with the anthropological and spiritual crisis. Benedict XVI notes: “what Africa needs most is neither gold nor silver; she wants to stand up, like the man at the pool of Bethesda; she wants to have confidence in herself and in her dignity as a people loved by her God. It is this encounter with Jesus which the Church must offer to bruised and wounded hearts yearning for reconciliation and peace, and thirsting for justice. We must provide and proclaim the word of Christ which heals, sets free and reconciles.”<sup>284</sup> The Church can be the very instrument in this process of reconciliation which cannot be complete without a reconciliation with God.

Reconciliation with God as an individual but also as a Church is essential. Reconciliation should not be only about the restoration of the sinner’s relationship with God but also lead to the restoration of the community as well. The Sacrament of reconciliation does refer to the need of reconciliation with the Church. But the notion of community should go beyond the priest and the penitent and include also the whole Church, the community of faith. The communal penance celebration could bring to the awareness of Christians this expanded community that they need to be reconciled with. The breaking of the word of God together, the examination of consciousness done as a community may enhance this communal dimension. A celebration of the third rite of

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<sup>283</sup> Simon Ahiokhai, “Social Justice and Rituals of Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Perspectives from African Religion and Roman Catholic Christianity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 2 (2020): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2020.0023>. Simon Ahiokhai is a Nigerian theologian who holds a PhD from Duquesne University. He is currently teaching at Portland University. Author of *Fostering Interreligious Encounters in Pluralist Societies*, Ahiokhai has written several articles mostly on the area of interfaith dialogue and comparative theology.

<sup>284</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Africa Munus*, no. 149.



reconciliation at various moments of the year may be helpful to recover this communal aspect which is really emphasized in African Traditional Religion. Perhaps a longing for a communal dimension of the sacrament of reconciliation may justify the popularity of communal Advent and Lenten services. For Bruce Morrill, “in contrast to entering the confessional, people are more comfortable with assembling in song and prayer, hearing together the word of God proclaimed, and feeling a sense of solidarity while reflecting on sin and repentance in their own lives and, for some, even confessing serious matters to an available priest for his judgment and absolution.”<sup>285</sup>

The wider notion of community which is stressed in African Traditional Religion indicates the limitations of the sacrament of reconciliation in the Catholic Church which considers forgiveness between the sinner, God and the Church. The wider community should go beyond the Church and includes also the community of people wounded by sin. The sacrament of reconciliation cannot be holistic if it does not include the victims to whom forgiveness is also due.

Reconciliation with the other may have to do with forgiveness, the shift from hatred to acceptance of people from other tribes. Restitution is important in that process of reconciliation with others. In fact, reconciliation cannot be holistic if it does not include the victims to whom forgiveness is also due. As much as possible, restitution should be done to the victims. Aihikhai expresses the same idea when he said that “restitution is not just a performative act; rather, it is also an essential part of the reconciliatory rituals of healing.”<sup>286</sup> In African Traditional Religion, reconciliation is viewed as holistic since life is viewed as interconnected and sin is perceived as a breach which breaks the harmony and has influence on the whole cosmos. Reconciliation with the other entails also a reconciliation with nature.

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<sup>285</sup> Bruce T. Morrill, “Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological – among Hierarchy and Laity” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2014), 601.

<sup>286</sup> Aihikhai, “Social Justice and Rituals of Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” 254.

### 3.3. Reconciliation with nature

Coastal erosion, pollution, deforestation and desertification are some of the main challenges in Benin and Nigeria. Marine and coastal erosion continue to threaten both countries which are taking some measures to deal with the situation. If air pollution is a serious problem in Benin, the most daunting environmental issue in Nigeria has to do with the overall pollution created by the exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta which has become one of the most polluted areas in Africa. The exploitation of oil leads to an important releasing of carbon dioxide in the air. Moreover, as a result of oil pollution, the marine wildlife is also affected leading to the modification of the ecosystem. The problem of pollution in the Delta presents many health risks for the population. According to UN Environmental Program, the level of benzene found in Ogoniland is 900 times higher than the level tolerated by the World Health Organization.<sup>287</sup> The pollution in the Delta also impoverishes the inhabitants who rely mostly on fishing. Because of the oil spills and the oil ballast discharges, fishing has become problematic. An ecological crisis in Nigeria inevitably affects its neighbor Benin.

Deforestation and desertification continue to be a serious problem in both Benin and Nigeria. In fact, “70-80 percent of Nigeria’s original forests have disappeared through logging, agriculture, city expansion, expansion of roads and building of industry. This has led to loss of plants and animals that depend on these forests.”<sup>288</sup> Benin has also lost more than half of its forests

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<sup>287</sup> UNEP, “Environmental assessment of Ogoniland: Site Factsheets, Executive Summary and Full report.” See [https://www.unep.org/resources/assessment/environmental-assessment-ogoniland-site-factsheets-executive-summary-and-full?\\_ga=2.18636541.577750905.1617022866-655418086.1617022866](https://www.unep.org/resources/assessment/environmental-assessment-ogoniland-site-factsheets-executive-summary-and-full?_ga=2.18636541.577750905.1617022866-655418086.1617022866) (Accessed on 28 March 2021)

<sup>288</sup> Naturvernforbundet, “Environmental issues in Nigeria.” See <https://naturvernforbundet.no/international/environmental-issues-in-nigeria/category942.html> (Accessed on 28 March 2021)

due also to agriculture and road building. Because of the desertification and the high rate of deforestation and lack of food and space for these animals, many plants and animals' species are seriously endangered and may disappear in the next decade.

In a setting in which balance and harmony with nature is highly valued, reconciliation needs to take place. In fact, "in the West African worldview, cosmic life is linked to cosmic harmony. Cosmic life entails all lives, whether planetary life or animate beings that inhabit the cosmos."<sup>289</sup> The visible and invisible spheres are all interconnected. Therefore, rituals of reconciliation should include not only human or animated beings but also the cosmos in general. But is there such an understanding in the Church? In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul affirmed the cosmological dimension of reconciliation when he said "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). The reconciliation brought by Christ is not only between God and humanity but it also affects the whole cosmos.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the cosmic dimension appears in the prayer of absolution with its mention of the reconciliation with the world which may have been inspired by a Pauline theology. In fact, the priest uses the formula: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."<sup>290</sup> But as Ahiokhai points out "though said within the context of sacramental ritual, one has to ask what role the world plays in the ritual and existential process of forgiveness and

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<sup>289</sup> Ahiokhai, "Social Justice and Rituals of Forgiveness and Reconciliation," 241.

<sup>290</sup> USCCB, *The Rite of Penance* (New York: Catholic Book, 1975), 77.

reconciliation.”<sup>291</sup> There seems to be a need of recovering the weight of those words. But the recovery should not be limited to the deepening of those words pronounced by the priest. It should also lead to a ritual of reconciliation with nature.

The format of this ritual of reconciliation with nature could be also inspired by the African Traditional rituals for purification and reconciliation. Such a reconciliation can lead to a better awareness of the impacts of our sinful actions – which lead generally to the diminishment of the life-force – and to a commitment to environmental care and justice. With an awareness of global interdependence especially in this pandemic of Covid-19, an explicit proclamation of “the Gospel of creation” should lead to a conversion of the heart and a cultivation of values which protect the environment. The Church is expected to promote an awareness of global interdependence and protection of the environment and to help for reconciliation with nature.

### 3.4. The Issue of Peace

Peace is grounded in Scriptures. The messianic prophecies depict the Messiah as the Prince of Peace who will bring harmony in the whole universe. The New Testament has seen in Christ the embodiment of this Prince of Peace. The peace offered by Jesus to the world is a deep one, an integral peace (Jn 14:27). Peace remains primarily a gift of God and its effects should start first from the heart of every human being and then from families and flow into society. Christianity has an important role to play in the advent of peace. Peace can be achieved only if the social structures which have led to violence are changed. Peace requires also a real conversion of heart of individuals, a death to selfishness and self-seeking.

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<sup>291</sup> Aihokhai, “Social Justice and Rituals of Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” 249.

Peace in Benin and Nigeria is under various threats. Tensions are generally fueled by ethnic problems and social injustices. If Benin and Nigeria have been spared civil wars during these past few years, vigilance needs however to be observed. Since lasting peace cannot be achieved without justice, the roots of social injustice should be addressed and corrected otherwise this can become dangerous in the future. The respect for the dignity and the rights of all human beings especially women and children is fundamental to achieve peace. Following the path of Jesus, Christians in Benin are challenged to restore the dignity of all those who are excluded today because of their tribes, gender, ethnicity, and religious beliefs.

The main challenge for Nigeria represents the presence of terrorist groups namely *Boko Haram*. Peace in Benin is also threatened by the presence in the neighboring countries of many terrorist groups such as *Boko Haram*, a branch of *Al Qaida* and *Isis*-linked groups in Burkina-Faso and Niger. Fostering interreligious and intercultural dialogue can help to build a culture of tolerance. Interreligious dialogue is important.

#### **4. Learning from Igbo, Fon and Yoruba Religious Traditions and Cultures**

Religions interact with one another, borrow and learn from each other. What can the Roman Catholic Church learn from African religious thoughts and cultures in order to deal with some of the social issues today in Benin and Nigeria?

##### **4.1. A Palaver Ecclesiology in Benin and Nigeria**

###### *4.1.1. A Sagacious Church based on Palaver Tree Model*

The Church can be inspired by the African model of the palaver tree which is popular in West Africa. The Palaver is actually an assembly that brings together people from a community

who gather in order to talk about common and pressing issues.<sup>292</sup> Oriented towards the preservation or increase of the vital force of the community, this gathering aims to protect and restore the relationship between members of the community. It provides a framework or a setting for communication, dialogue and decision-making about issues which affect the community. Existential concerns of individuals as well as of the community are brought up in order to find some answers or solutions. With its emphasis on the power of the word, the palaver tree is a model which is used to discuss matters that are important for the community but also to resolve conflicts and misunderstandings. The peculiarity of the palaver tree has to do with its structure and mode of operation. In fact, the “palaver is not led by the chief but by a council of elders, people who are well-known, respected, and knowledgeable about issues of communal life. In the palaver discourse, chiefs participate actively, like every other community member, and give their views as any other active community member.”<sup>293</sup> Such a model can be the basis for a Beninese or Nigerian ecclesiology.

The Church can use this model by giving a prominent place to the elders in the community. With their wisdom, elders can accompany the young in the community and help them to grow in their knowledge and love for Christ and the Christian community. In the traditional model of palaver, elders have a unique contribution.<sup>294</sup> In fact, in order to keep the community together, a certain anamnestic dimension is important. In fact, “the elders are charged with recalling again

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<sup>292</sup> In a setting where it is difficult to separate culture and religion, the model of the palaver tree as a patrimony belongs both to African cultures and religions. The palaver (*palabre* in French) which is a lively discussion takes place either under the Tree where there is the central shrine or in a square that can accommodate the whole village or community. See Francis Anekwe Oborji, “The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 109, no. 2 (2020): 222-235, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12330>, 431-481. Francis Anekwe Oborji is originally from Nigeria. He is currently Professor of Missiology in Pontifical Urban University in Rome.

<sup>293</sup> Francis Anekwe Oborji, “The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission,” 227.

<sup>294</sup> They were the leaders of the community. According to Magesa quoted by Oborji, palaver “could be described as a constant fellowship of African sages, leading the community towards the realization of harmonious relationships and ethical norms that protect and promote life in all its complexity.” Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 178-179.

and again the events of the family's past, so that these may suggest a similar solution for the question under discussion, or perhaps a nuanced and partly new solution.... The past is significant only when it proves to be the bearer of life for the present and the future."<sup>295</sup> Past, present and future are interrelated. In a Church where creative fidelity is needed, the role of elders is essential to maintain a healthy tension between faithfulness and creativity. By giving the opportunity to the elders or wise and experienced men and women to lead the community with the model of palaver, the Christian communities can become in Benin and Nigeria a sagacious Church.

With the palaver model, the Church will also be a listening and become a participative Church where each one, regardless of his or her age or gender, is valued. In fact, in the palaver model "each member is given a face and voice in the palaver discourse. Through this process, they each have their dignity intact and the opportunity to contribute to enhancing the life of the community. Detachment or rather disinterestedness in the affairs of the community is not possible in the palaver."<sup>296</sup> The palaver model can help in promoting the dignity of every person which flows from the understanding that each one is made in the image of God. This palaver model can become a medium through which important church matters are brought to the table. People can listen to each other, learn from each other and participate in the life of the community.

In the palaver model, the head of the community or the priest is a member of the community who participates as any other member. As in the palaver model where the chief makes use of his authority "to confirm the common position on the issue at hand to safeguard and implement the deliberations,"<sup>297</sup> the priest as *primus inter pares* could implement the decisions of the whole

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<sup>295</sup> Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2001), 49.

<sup>296</sup> Oborji, "The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission," 229–30.

<sup>297</sup> Oborji, "The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission," 227. Mgr. Christophe Munzihirwa's perception of the priest or the bishop as a Christian among others, as primarily a son and a brother before being a Pastor, makes completely sense here in that interplay of the role of the priest as head of the community but also a member of the

community. This ecclesiological model in which everyone participates and contributes fully to the life of the community can also help fighting a certain clericalism which persist in the Church in Benin and Nigeria and address also problems of justice, peace, and reconciliation.

#### 4.1.2. *A Palaver Model for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation*

The preservation of the community's life force is at the heart of the institution of the African palaver. In fact, strengthening, restoring, and increasing the vital force are primordial for Igbo, Fon and Yoruba. In the African worldview, the palaver model is viewed as a "model of Reconciliation that promotes equality, justice and peace for all who are caught up by the problem of conflicts and violence in the social context."<sup>298</sup> Such a model was experimented in South Africa after the apartheid and in Rwanda after the genocide to promote reconciliation and peace. The palaver is a setting where each one is required to tell the truth and to be aware of the transforming power of the words. As Francis Oborji puts it "healing words are spoken and recognized by all and sundry in the reconciliation process. These words are seen as abiding for the living because the community's way out, through healing and reconciliation, depends upon them. Moreover, the words are uttered through the guidance and the ever-abiding presence of the ancestors who are invoked at the beginning of the palaver assembly gathering. The ancestors participate actively, though mystically, in any village or family assembly of their living members."<sup>299</sup> In this process of reconciliation, both the living and the dead are present physically or mystically. In this model in which the power of the word cannot be overestimated, the goal is to achieve justice but also reconciliation and peace.

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community as any other. See Rigobert Kyungu Musenge, *La Liberté Intérieure comme Fruit du Discernement Spirituel* (Kinshasa: Editions Loyola, 2020), 115.

<sup>298</sup> Oborji, "The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission," 228.

<sup>299</sup> Oborji, "The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission," 229.



The Church can undertake the palaver model to promote reconciliation, justice and peace. In fact, such a model has been proven efficient in the case of Benin Republic in 1990. After seventeen years of dictatorship (1972-1989) under the Marxist-Leninist government, Benin decided to organize a Palaver conference which brought together all the citizens. The Catholic Church under the leadership of Mgr. Isidore de Souza, was entrusted in 1990 with the organization and the presidency of the National Conference on Invigorating Forces and Renewal of the Nation. Opened to all strata of society, this National Conference which was based on the palaver tree model was a watershed event in the political history of Benin and the destiny of many nations in Africa. If initially the goal of this conference was to set a new economic model for the country, the national convention, with the impetus of Archbishop Isidore de Souza, went beyond this mandate and pushed for a political transformation. The country shifted from a Marxist - Leninist orientation to a democratic and neo-liberal one. With its national conference which led to peaceful transition without a single drop of blood being spilled in 1990, Benin became a pioneer in democracy in Africa and set “a precedent that was followed by 15 other African countries in subsequent years. Since then, Benin has enjoyed four peaceful transfers of power.”<sup>300</sup>

The success of the Palaver conference was due to the commitment to truth that participants made. The atrocities of the communist regime were brought up. The Catholic Church was very instrumental in the success of this conference which gave opportunities to people who shared different convictions to dialogue, to listen to one another and to undertake the process of reconciliation. The Roman Catholic Church is a major transforming force as evidenced by the important role that the Church played in Benin for the advent of a peaceful transition from

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<sup>300</sup> Mark Duerksen, “The Testing of Benin’s Democracy,” (May 29, 2019) <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-testing-of-benin-democracy/> (Accessed 12 November, 2020).

communism to democracy and for reconciliation, justice and peace in the 1990s. Since the Palaver model has worked in the past, it can still be used today to address some of the issues.

#### 4.2. The Sacramental Nature of the Environment

As in African tribes in general where the preservation and expansiveness of life is closely related to the safeguarding of the environment, in Igbo, Fon and Yoruba cultures the care for creation is grounded in the central notion of life. In fact, the “moral imperative or duty to protect the physical environment is founded on the vital link between the survival of human life and the environment. To protect the environment is to protect human life, since the survival of the latter ultimately depends on the survival of the former.”<sup>301</sup> Care for the environment seems to be linked also to the belief that every being possesses a vital force. According to Tempels, Africans believe that “all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate. Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man [human being]”<sup>302</sup> Igbo, Fon or Yoruba’s concern for caring for the environment is also rooted in the belief in an interdependence between all the elements of creation. In that relationship of interdependence, there is an understanding of the cosmic solidarity. “All beings, organic and inorganic, living and inanimate, personal and impersonal, visible and invisible, act together to manifest the universal solidarity of creation. This is most important for African spirituality, because the cosmos in its variety of forms, speaks a

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<sup>301</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “Ethics of HIV/AIDS Prevention: Paradigms of a New Discourse from an African Perspective,” in *Applied Ethics in the World Church: The Padua Conference*, ed. Linda Hogan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 149.

<sup>302</sup> Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1956), 44-45

language which reveals the highest form of life, namely, God, who triumphs over death. With this view, the cosmos has a sacramental dimension for the African person.”<sup>303</sup>

This sacramental dimension of the cosmos is also visible throughout Jesus’ ministry since he makes use of the products of the earth to symbolize his abiding presence. Awareness of the sacramental character of nature which also mediates God’s grace and God’s creative power helps to consider nature as a “thou” which needs to be respected. The rediscovering of the “thou” of creation helps to move beyond the instrumental rationality to a reawakened sacramental vision of companionship.<sup>304</sup>

The creation has also a soteriological value for Beninese and Nigerians. In fact, “the African person conceives one’s salvation as connected to the entire cosmos: one can only save oneself by saving the cosmos as well.”<sup>305</sup> In that sense, the work of salvation cannot be considered finished if oppression is still ongoing, if God’s creation continues to be exploited. Taking care of the environment is part of the mission of Christians. An ecological conversion and a change of lifestyle are needed today in Benin and Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

The quest for abundant life encompasses everything which leads to the human flourishing. The principle of life appears to be an important framework through which double belonging can be understood. Igbo, Fon and Yoruba believe that the vital force needs to be expanded or at least protected against the negative forces. But this life force which is essential to the Igbo, Fon and

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<sup>303</sup> Bénédet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 210.

<sup>304</sup> Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fulness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 113.

<sup>305</sup> Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 210.

Yoruba is constantly diminished or at least threatened by poverty, violence, conflicts. Therefore, if Christianity does not tackle these issues, people will continue to revert or to hold onto the African Traditional Religion for meaning-making, for rituals or sacrifices to satisfy their quest for abundant life. Christianity in Benin and Nigeria needs to be liberating by dealing with the social reality, and by tackling important matters such as care for the creation, reconciliation, justice, and peace. Instead of being too concerned about “doctrinal purity,” or limiting the scope of the Church’s mission in only some areas, the ministers of the Church are called to become an incarnate presence among people in Benin and Nigeria. Engaging the reality in Benin and Nigeria means penetrating in all structures of the society and strata of humanity to “take down the crucified people from their cross.”<sup>306</sup> The Roman Catholic Church can be enriched by elements of the African religious thoughts and culture in order to deal with some of the social issues today in Benin and Nigeria.

Since the palaver tree that Beninese and Nigerian are familiar with aims to protect the life force of the community and the relationship between individuals and the community, the Church can build an ecclesiological model for justice, reconciliation and peace based on this model. In fact, “the palaver model is about equity, equality, justice, and peace for all who are caught up by the problem of social conflict and violence.”<sup>307</sup> African’s relationship with the creation and the environment represents a wealth that Christianity can build upon.

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<sup>306</sup> The expression is borrowed from Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

<sup>307</sup> Oborji, “The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission,” 232.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

The steady growth of Christianity in Benin and Nigeria is significant. Though the adherence to African Traditional Religion has officially decreased, *Vodun*, *Orisha* or Igbo religion continues to be present in the life of many Beninese and Nigerians. The African Traditional Religion has provided for people in Benin and Nigeria some frameworks that have helped them to make sense of their existence and life in general. Mbiti reminds us that in light of our knowledge today, though one may disagree with some of the answers that African Traditional Religion provided, one needs to remember that those “were nevertheless answers which sustained the life of the people and made it meaningful and viable,” for thousands of years.<sup>308</sup> The idea that the legacy of *Vodun*, *Orisha* or Igbo religion that has shaped the cultures in both Benin and Nigeria would disappear with a certain modernization and an intensive evangelization has proven inaccurate. The existence and persistence of double religious belonging invalidates this theory.

Double or multiple religious belonging which continues to flourish in Benin and Nigeria is expressed in different forms and at various levels. Therefore, a theological assessment of double religious belonging may end up being reductionist if it makes a general statement about its validity or invalidity by glossing over the different levels of dual belonging: soft, radical, moderate dual belonging. By reclaiming the spiritual heritage of African Traditional Religion which as a substratum represents a wealth for an in-depth inculturation, soft dual belonging can contribute to the renewal of Christianity in Benin and Nigeria. To be an African Christian is to have a hyphenated identity since one’s Christian faith is based upon the bedrock of African Religion.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> John Mbiti, “The Encounter between Christianity and African Religion,” *Temenos* 12 (1976): 127, <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.6306>.

<sup>309</sup> With strong conviction, Orobator asserts, “I doubt that any African can claim to be solely and entirely Christian. To be a Christian in Africa is to accept a hyphenated and multipolar identity; it is to contain a plurality of identities.” See Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 170.

If what Orobator calls “hyphenated identity” or soft belonging is inherent to the African Christian being and is thus acceptable, a radical dual belonging is hardly endorsable by the Roman Catholic Church. Anchored in a pluralist paradigm of theology of religions, radical dual belonging raises Christological, ecclesiological and ethical challenges. If for the Roman Catholic Church, which views things from “a binary ‘either-or’” perspective, radical dual belonging is undesirable, African Traditional Religion which approaches life with the “‘both-and’ principle,” remains open to double religious belonging in all its forms.<sup>310</sup> Unlike Christianity, African Traditional Religion remains flexible. The flexibility of *Vodun*, *Orisha* and Igbo Religion is due also to the fact that they conceive all divinities as sons of the same father or Supreme Being. With such a worldview, radical dual belonging is perfectly acceptable from the African Traditional Religion’s perspective. While practicing one’s main religion in its integrity, moderate dual believers add selected elements from another religious tradition. Whereas such a practice is in general discouraged by the Roman Catholic Church, moderate dual believers perceive their involvement in Igbo, Fon or Yoruba religion as participation rather than belonging.<sup>311</sup>

In view of the different distinctions of dual belonging, the notion of participation and belonging may need to be nuanced. Double religious belonging also calls into question the

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<sup>310</sup> Lamin Sanneh shows the flexibility of African Traditional Religion by narrating the encounter between Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first Nigerian and African Anglican bishop of West African and an *Ifa* diviner. The *babalawo* or *Ifa* diviner “assured Christians that he had incorporated Jesus Christ into the *Ifa* system. Before making any sacrifice to the *orisa*, he asked his clients first to call upon the name of Jesus Christ.” This diviner was “convinced that since the cult of *Ifa* existed for our good and benefit, to devote attention to the cult was in harmony with the God of Christianity.” Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 220. This flexibility of African Traditional Religion has to do with their capacity to recognize and to integrate values from other religious traditions. African Traditional Religion which perceives rituals from other religions as an added value remains opened to double belonging as long as it is in charge as a receiving culture. This flexibility is revealed by the historical religious import of African Traditional Religion. Falen shows the “new waves of religious imports” in the Beninese *vodun* which emanates from other African countries, but also from Western countries and from India and China. Falen states that a Beninese healer told him that “he believes in God, the prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna, and *Vodún*.” See Falen, “*Vodún*, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” 471.

<sup>311</sup> Cornille has tackled this issue. See Cornille, “Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging,” 147- 49.

definition of religion. Dual or multiple religious belonging can be viewed as inadequate if religion is understood in terms of a set of doctrinal propositions. But if it is viewed as a spirituality, a way of life from which one can draw insights as it is the case for African Traditional Religion, then dual or multiple belonging in some cases may be perceived as less problematic.

Regardless of its forms or types, the persistence of double or multiple religious belonging points to a lack in Christian faith, rituals and practice that makes people feeling the need to identify with another religion. What is missing then in Beninese and Nigerian Christianity that Igbo, Fon or Yoruba are looking for? Cultural elements seem to be missing in the way Christianity is presented in Benin and Nigeria. Schreiter rightly states that “dual religious systems raise the question for Christian of how serious we really are about contextualization,”<sup>312</sup> or inculturation. An inculturation of different rituals of passage which are essential in the social fabric of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba is clearly needed. Summarizing the works of Engelbert Mveng, Ikenga-Metuh suggests that “many initiation rites in Africa are not just rites of passage for social integration but also involve a rite of consecration of one’s life to a god and a mystic alliance with him, and sometimes symbolize a mystic identification of the initiate with the god.”<sup>313</sup> Since transitional rites of passage are critical moments during which the possibility for Beninese and Nigerian Christians to identify also with the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba religion increases, then an in-depth liturgical inculturation should be undertaken. Instead of a duplication of the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba rituals of passage which are similar to some of the Christian rituals, a process of inculturation can help to integrate them and thus reduce the chance of dual belonging or participation.

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<sup>312</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 172.

<sup>313</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, “The Revival of African Christian Spirituality,” 167.

Addressing dual or multiple religious belonging in Benin and Nigeria cannot, however, be limited to liturgical inculturation as important as it is, it has to touch the core of the Igbo, Fon or Yoruba religious quest which is a search for life in its fullness. The major concern of Igbo, Fon and Yoruba is to maintain or increase their vital force or life-force. In a setting where illness and misfortune are viewed as loss of that power and everything should be done for the restoration of the life force, healing becomes a major issue. In order to deal with double religious belonging, which is also grounded in this quest for restoration of the vital force, the Roman Catholic Church may need to have a more holistic approach to healing. The Church should promote a collaboration between hospitals and traditional healers.<sup>314</sup>

Healers and diviners play an important role in the African society since they “symbolize the hopes of society: hopes of good health, protection and security from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune, and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities have been contracted.”<sup>315</sup> Their capacity to work from the cultural perspective of people allows them to enter deeply to the psychological state of the patient, to establish a bond with them and help cure the patient. The *cura personalis* that they give to their patient who they regard as a subject and not an object is something that modern care system can learn from. Health care cannot be reduced to surgery or drugs but it needs to include the personal dimension. As Appiah-Kubi states it, “we cannot pretend to be concerned about the whole man [human being] unless we are concerned about his peace of mind

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<sup>314</sup> Archbishop Samuel Kleda of Douala (Cameroon) has been working for several years to integrate the traditional treatment with the modern one. He has been a key-actor in the treatment of Covid-19 in Cameroon by using medicinal plants which have proven their effectiveness against this respiratory disease in many cases. From March to August 2020, Mgr. Kleda claimed that “9,071 patients have benefited from the treatment both in Cameroon and abroad, including the United States, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Zambia and Gabon.” See La Croix, “‘We have defeated Covid-19 in Cameroon’ bishop says.” <https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/we-have-defeated-covid-19-in-cameroon-bishop-says/13015> (Accessed on 29 March 2021). Though traditional healing in Africa goes beyond phytotherapy and includes sometimes some rituals which the Church rejects, the work of Mgr. Kleda which is limited to phytotherapy is already a step-forward in the collaboration which hopefully will be expounded in the future.

<sup>315</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 170.



and heart in addition to his physical needs”<sup>316</sup> A biosocial perspective to healing may help bringing different perspectives to healing together and value the cultural perspective. A comprehensive health care which goes beyond the physical and embraces also the social and spiritual dimensions is needed.

Such an approach that needs to take seriously the cultural perspective of sickness and healing may be enhanced by the experience of the AICs. AICs’ theological approach to healing, which encompasses a more pneumatological perspective and an integration of the cultural healing system, can enrich the Catholic Church. The revival of the Charismatic movements and Congar’s works on the forgotten Spirit will hopefully help to better appreciate the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Pastors need to devote time to their faithful and accompany them especially in times of grief and loss. A theology of an incarnate presence is urgently needed in the Catholic Church.<sup>317</sup> A theology of presence which can be informed by the experience of the diviners needs to be elaborated. A regular celebration of the sacraments of healing can help people overcome crises.

A whole palaver tree theology can be developed to deal with the question of healing but also social issues at different levels. On the level of the whole community, a healing palaver can help bring together the contribution of major actors of healing (diviners, doctors or nurses, pastors, researchers, etc.) to restore the vital force of the individual as well as the community. On the level of the Church, this healing palaver “can be developed in Christian praxis to find its fulfillment in

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<sup>316</sup> Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals*, 147. Appiah explains that “to the Akan [a tribe in Ghana] mind, if someone for instance, has a toothache, fever, or stomach-ache and the doctor prescribes drugs or a series of injections, though there may be some relief, the root of the sickness has not really been touched. The root cause may range from a family relationship, interaction with the natural, supernatural, physical, and spiritual environment to an omission in performing a social, ancestral, or religious rite. The true sickness may be worry, anxiety, fear, jealousy, envy, strife, bitterness, resentment, guilt feelings, or a feeling of rejection.” Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals*, 143.

<sup>317</sup> Guider devotes a whole chapter to the Theology of Incarnated Presence in her book *Daughters of Rahab: Prostitution and the Church of Liberation in Brazil* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 156.

the sacrament of penance.”<sup>318</sup> Since the palaver provides a space for dialogue in order to restore the harmony and the vital life of the community, it can also be used to deal with social issues and to contribute to the well-being of the community.

In fact, if the solution to double belonging necessarily includes the question of healing, it also has to encompass the whole question of liberation and thus the need to deal with challenging issues such as care for the creation, reconciliation, justice, and peace which appear to be urgent tasks today in these two countries. In fact, in Benin and Nigeria, the vital force that Igbo, Fon and Yoruba are looking for is threatened by negative forces such as poverty, violence, injustice, conflicts, ecological disasters. Africans in general are looking for anything that promotes life and human flourishing. As Magesa states it: “Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and actions of human beings, or even of ‘natural’ cosmological events, by asking questions such as: Does the particular happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or, does it diminish life in any way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, detestable.”<sup>319</sup> By tackling issues that promote life, Christianity will have a chance to enroot itself in the heart of Beninese and Nigerians. There is thus a need for a holistic approach to the issue of double religious belonging. Such a holistic approach is essential since as Mbiti puts it “unless Christianity fully occupies the whole person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most converts will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of crisis and emergency.”<sup>320</sup> The dynamism of the Church in Benin and Nigeria should not be evaluated with the demographics but mostly with the capacity of Christianity

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<sup>318</sup> Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 48. Bujo identifies three kinds of palaver: the palaver in the praxis of healing, the familial palaver, and the “suprafamilial” and administrative palaver. See Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 45-54.

<sup>319</sup> Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 77.

<sup>320</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 3.

to engage with the reality and to transform the society. It is not by looking for a religion exempt from any mixture (a quest for doctrinal purity) but by being a genuine witness to the gospel that people will be convinced to remain in the Church and only in the Church.

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