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THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE AFRICAN CATHOLIC AS ELDER IN THE TASK OF MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In African sociological and cosmological set up, the beauty of life in every community is the formation of the elder council. These are dignify persons, set aside by the quality of moral life and the capacity to promote peace in community. By the use of analytical method, this essay examines the role and the existence of an elder in each African family to be a basic necessity for effective leadership and to promote community cohesion. We argue that Elders are held in high esteem, because they possess moral rectitude, do have courage and integrity to mediate in conflictual situation to ensue the process of reconciliation. This essay examines the role-play of the ordained African Catholic Priest in Nigeria, who plays the roles as mediator, reconciler and confessor. This is due to the fact that, by priestly ordination, he is set-aside as a reputable elder in human society. Elders in African world-view, are respected, revered and dignified as agents and ambassadors of peace. They engage in this enterprise by natural process of selection and election based on the clan system of representation which they might have acquired by long experience in 'town-hall' and community square conversations and gatherings. The ordained Catholic Priest enjoys the double role, due to his cultural and sacramental training, he is privilege to exercise these roles of mediating and reconciling feuds and conflicts in his pastoral space of priestly ministry in Nigeria.

Keywords: African, Catholic, Elder, Mediation, Reconciliation, Priest

Introduction

The gift of the priesthood is grace by the rite of ordination, which sets him as a member of the African community to become a cultic leader and cultural elder. Amongst his multiple functions, task and responsibilities, he baptizes, and hears confessions, he preaches as well as celebrates the Holy Eucharist to bequeath God's blessings and love. John Paul II taught that all the seven sacraments of the Church are connected spiritually and doctrinally to the sacrament of reconciliation,⁶⁵ thus, bequeathing God's love and peace to the recipient. Our vision in this essay is to demonstrate how the African elder including the priests in Nigeria, functions in the traditional family and the setting of the community. We shall explore how he settles conflicts, effects reconciliation, thereby ensuring the existence of peace and love. We will conclude by distinguishing the 'specific roles' and the functions the Nigerian priest as elder performs; specifying his task as an adult who, as elder, plays in mediating and reconciling people. These functions on the natural basis of human life, remind us of the functions of the ordained priest.

⁶⁵Cf. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 27, AAS 77 (1985), 248-250



In the day-to-day practice of African Traditional Religion and deep within the consciousness of the African person, the role of the elder is indispensable in the family, the clan and in the community. The elder serves as a resource person who connects the present to the immediate past, to the ancestors, to the spirit world and to the *Supreme Being*, through the medium⁶⁶ of oral tradition. The channel of “Oral traditions require face-to-face interaction of the spoken word.”⁶⁷ This further confirms the weight of this African proverb that says: “The mouth of the elder is more powerful than the Amulet.”⁶⁸ Thus, we are examining the prominent role the elder plays in the socio-cultural, religio-political life of the African community. This task is very important because it is a role that contributes particularly towards the mediation of conflicts and the seeking of reconciliation between disputing parties. Thus the role of an elder is irreplaceable in the African family and community as much as that of the priest in the emerging blending in the role-play.

This study seeks to integrate and inculturate this unique role of the African elder in the life and ministry of the Catholic priest with particular reference to aspects of mediation and reconciliation, in order to promote the effective programme of the New Evangelization⁶⁹ in the 21st century. Cardinal Gracias of Mumbai said once: “The Holy Spirit guides us in a particular direction at a particular time, and today we’re being led towards inculturation.”⁷⁰ The African Catholic Priest as elder in Nigeria, reconciler and mediator must engage in an intensive catechetical and pastoral education, need to be available to people by sacrificing his time as a shepherd.

The study and the understanding of any religion by non-adherents requires patience and careful study. Warren pointed out below that ‘every religion is unique and has a particular feature that is sacred.’ He writes that as we approach any particular people, culture or religion, in order to be present to that particular people, culture and religion; we need to be sensitive, respectful and vigilant. Else our efforts will become counter-productive, thus he writes:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We have, then, to ask what is the authentic religious content in the experience of the

⁶⁶The elder in Africa communicates and hands on the basic information on culture and tradition from one generation to another. He teaches by means of oral tradition, mainly on customs and on moral ethics. It is his duty to educate and nurture the native culture in the family, the clan and the community. By this medium of ‘oral tradition’ the elder transmits the riches of history, etiquette, morality and religious beliefs to members of the family, community

⁶⁷Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998, 47

⁶⁸Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 105

⁶⁹Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Africae Munus*, 159, p. 142; See also, Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (8 December 1975), 14: AAS 68 (1976), 13; See also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 55 & 56, AAS 88 (1996), 34-35

⁷⁰Cardinal Gracias of Mumbai, quoted in Allen, John L., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, p. 366; See also the teaching of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, on the unique role of the priest as an elder in the cultural setting of Africa in *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis* for the Catholic Church in Nigeria, 7-8



Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist or whoever he may be. We may, if we have asked humbly and respectfully, still reach the conclusion that our brothers have started from a false premise and reached a faulty conclusion. But we must not arrive at our judgment from outside their religious situation. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and griefs and joys of their history and see how those pains and griefs and joys have determined the premises of their argument. We have, in a word, to be 'present' with them.⁷¹

Seeking the way to present the gospel of Christ's reconciling the World to himself and to the African people and culture is the goal of Christian evangelization and religion. Jesus Christ died on the cross in order to reconcile humanity, and this mission continue in the Church through the mission of the ministers. To evangelize Africa is the reason why Paul VI (1969), John Paul II (1980-2002); Benedict XVI (2010-2011) and Francis (2013 – date) have paid encouraging apostolic visits, to sustain the faith and assist its growth to greater maturity. Our focus is to add a voice to the numerous theological and academic books, articles in research journals and theses written to accomplish the productive processes of integrating the gospel of Christ into the main stream of the African people and culture. Reflecting on the unique role and ministry of the ordained Catholic priest as elder, reconciler and mediator in Africa.

The function of the elder in the African family, existing in the clan, and in the community is unique and indispensable. The elder in the family is responsible for daily governance, the maintenance of law and order. In the African setting, every extended family has an elder that is responsible for their welfare. He, with others are responsible for each of their respective clans, constituting a body. In some cultures and traditions, they are called 'the council of elders.' They are the custodians of the cultural values and tradition, they are the guidance of religious beliefs and customs. Though some cultural practices and customs may differ, yet Africans have many beliefs and religious observances that are common to all. Thus, we agree with the definition of culture given by *Matsumoto* that: "Most cross-cultural scholars agree that culture is a shared conglomeration of attitudes, values, behaviours and beliefs, communicated from one generation to the next through language."⁷² By examining the role that the elder plays in ensuring that mediation and reconciliation leads to mutual co-existence in the family, the clan and the community, the elder becomes the most respectable person and is indispensable. This image emerges, as the African elder distinguishes himself as a moral force in the particular extended family and in the society.

The explicit role that the Nigerian Priest plays may differ from socio-cultural group to another, yet it is good to know that the culture and the role of the African elder plays in it remain the same, it assumes a new dispensation when applied to the duties and roles of the Catholic priest. As he performs his functions as an elder in the community, it places him on the level of being truly a

⁷¹Warren, Ma, "Approaching the African people, culture and religion," in Taylor, John, V., *The Primal Vision: Christian presence amid African Religion*, New York, SCM Press, 1963, Revised 200, 5

⁷²Matsumoto, D., *Cultural influences on research methods and statics*, Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1994, 21; See also, Feindler, Eva. L., Rathus, Jill. H., and Silver, Laura Beth, *Assessment of Family Violence: A Handbook for Researchers and Practioners*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003, 16



religious leader.⁷³ Though the non-Catholic adherents might see in him a moral teacher, who exercises the function of a builder of good character vested upon him by the community in virtue of him being a credible moral leader.

We argue that just as the elder is a bridge-builder and a reconciler in the extended family system, a custodian of culture in the clan, he is an important resource person in the entire life of the village community. It is in this perspective we view the ordained Catholic priest, exercising a dual function as elder and a spiritual father. Invariably, this context and cultural frame of mind places the ordained priest to become an elder by virtue of his sacramental ordination. This qualifies him to perform ‘specified’ sacramental actions (celebrating the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist). This is an official function he performs as an elder in the ‘Church as the Family of God on Mission’⁷⁴ by virtue of his sacramental consecration at ordination, which a lay baptized person cannot do. The African Bishops in the Second Synod of the Church in Africa (2009) aptly echoed strongly through the voice of Benedict XVI this fraternal spirit of communality and sharing: “Dear priests, remember that your witness to living together in peace, over ethnic and racial lines, can touch hearts.”⁷⁵ This explicit call to ordained African Catholic Priests to live in peace, over ethnic and racial lines, indicates there do exist occasional tension.

The reality and the presence of many religions existing side by side in the African continent⁷⁶ cannot be denied nor be avoided. We are conscious that in the 21st century, for progress and fruitful co-existence to be attend: ecumenism, dialogue and inter-religious sharing is required. The African Bishops spoke clearly in these words: “The Church lives daily alongside the followers of traditional African religions. With their reference to ancestors and to a form of mediation between man and Immanence, these religions are the cultural and spiritual soil from which most Christian converts spring and with which they continue to have daily contact.”⁷⁷ This affirmative stance and openness of the Church to dialogue with the rich and cultural values of African Traditional Religion is welcoming, it is an aspect the African Catholic Priests as scholars, theologians and intellectuals should explore and develop. We envision specifying the need to locate and explore the role an elder plays in the family and in the mission of mediation and reconciling conflicts in

⁷³Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* for the Catholic Church in Nigeria, n. 18, n.7. The bishops put this virtue of African elder across to the priests and the laity to show the connection of cultural and religious values. But more so, to appeal to the priests for the sacrificial spirit of responsible stewardship to the entire community they are serving

⁷⁴Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63: AAS 88 (1996), 39-40

⁷⁵Second African Synod, *Africae Munus*, n. 108, 103

⁷⁶Apart from the presence ATR, membership of the adherents of Christianity and Islam are increasing in high number as the major religious groups in Africa. John Paul II wisely called for dialogue with Islam, cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*: 65-66, AAS 88 (1996), 41-42. On this specific need to dialogue with Islam in Kano and Jigawa States, the diocese of Kano needs to increase her efforts to understand, dialogue and relate with the Muslims on the basis of dialogue of life. The Sunni Muslims are the dominant and the ruling class of Kano, *Duste, Hadejia, Birnin Kudu*, and *Kazaure* emirates. They are structured in the style of leadership and hierarchy as the Catholic Church

⁷⁷Second Synod of African Bishops, in Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, n. 92, 87



the family and in the community. It is within this context, we intend to position the ordained priest as elder in kenotic service of reconciliation and peace in Africa.

In the African continent in the 21st century, there are high prospects of growth and development of the Catholic faith.⁷⁸ This positive hope is echoed too by Henriot, who wrote: “For in so many ways of size and spirit, the Church in Africa truly is the Church of the future”⁷⁹ in that it is filled with teeming youthful members who are in their 20s and 30s years. The picture of this future in hope is further given by Richard, who expects a rapid rise in numbers. He wrote: “By 2025 the number of Catholics will increase to more than 228 million. The future of the Catholic Church in Africa is the future of the universal Church in significant measure.”⁸⁰ It is rightly in the context of this growth that the kenotic service of the priest as elder is expected to pull people towards a lived life of cultural and the assimilation of Christ’s message. The vision and the contributions of the ordained African Catholic Priest as elder, in building enduring structures of reconciliation, that might ensure the existence of peace in Nigeria.

In the African world view, the role that elders and ancestors play in the family, in the clan and in the community is so vital towards understanding the orientation of their socio-cultural life and the evolution of their religio-political life. The elders in particular, command enormous respect in the community, because they are the custodians of the laws and customs, of the ancestral cultural practice. They are the link with the past, thus they sustain the African cultural heritage and dignity.

The role of elders and ancestors in African Cosmology

African cosmology is both simple and complex depending on the subject and issue at hand. We state here that to have any meaningful discussion on the way life is lived in Africa and the unfolding of daily events and activities, one directly need to know that one is dealing with the realm of ‘the physical and spiritual worlds.’⁸¹ On these two phenomena, constitute the mystery between the worlds of the living and the *living dead* – the ancestors. Their activities serves as an aid towards understanding African cosmology. Sarpong explain further: “When Christians call their dead saints and refer to those of pagans as ancestors, they are not expressing different ideas. Both words express ideas about people who once belonged to their religious group, are now dead, and are supposed to be in a position of influence over the living.”⁸² This aspect of cultural pedagogy and doctrinal explanations are the illustrative mission of the ordained priest as elder.

⁷⁸See the comments of Allen, L, John, who discusses at length the future of Catholicism in Africa (with Latin America and Asia) to be the hot spots “where many important theological and pastoral currents originate.” Stating that these other cities have traditionally taken the lead: “Paris, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Toronto, to say nothing of how Rome – Continue to be important centers of Catholic thought and life,” See *The Future Church*, 432

⁷⁹Henriot, Peter, made an analysis of *Africae Munus*. In *The Tablet*, he critiqued and appreciated the laudable contributions of Benedict XVI. In this rich article, “Steps forward and back,” in *The Tablet*, The International Catholic Weekly, ed., Catherine Pepinster, London: Ignatius Kusiak, 3 December 2011, 11

⁸⁰Richard, John, “The Further Dimensions of Solidarity with Africa,” in *Origins* 33, n. 18 (October 9, 2003): 291

⁸¹Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 90

⁸²Sarpong, Peter, K., *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974, 33. (Sarpong is now a retired Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi)



Africans as a people, live and view the world as a cyclical⁸³ platform where life rotates in seasons for the family, the clan and the community. In these circle of events, the family and community function and produce food, give birth to children, celebrate marriages and honour the death. In this circle, when death occurs (especially when it is an elderly person), the departed member is honoured with a befitting traditional burial ceremony. Sarpong wrote: “When someone dies, people believe that his/her spirit which has become an ancestor goes to inhabit a special world of ghosts or spirits.”⁸⁴ Thus, burial ceremonies are the gateway to ancestorship.

This ritual and cultic ceremony is done to guarantee the deceased’s final passage to the abode of the ancestors. The Akan people of Ghana call their ancestors, *samando*, while the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria call them *nananom nasamanfo*.⁸⁵ For the purposes of our study, we shall narrow our focus in this chapter to why Africans venerate their ancestors by giving them food or pouring libations in the form of drinks on the ground during communal ceremonies. Sarpong wrote: “The relation between the dead and living is based on the assumption that there is no bad ancestor. For a bad person cannot be an ancestor.”⁸⁶ It confirms that the criteria for becoming an ancestor after the elder’s death depended on proof of once being a good person, who had a sound moral character. Again, when the deceased elder’s family and the community gave him a proper traditional burial, he is said to have crossed over to join the ancestors.

In Africa when death occurs in the family or community, the next most elderly adult male assumes leadership. For the said male adult to become an elder depends on the nature and manner he honoured the deceased elder (Father or mother) by organizing a befitting traditional, customary (and expensive) burial ceremony. As regards the burial ceremonies of the elderly deceased, Fisher rightly noted: “The more people involved and the more time consumed with the right ceremonies, the more effective will be the total restoration of harmony in the community.”⁸⁷ It is equally a common traditional practice that when the most elderly person dies in the family, and the person was traditionally honoured with the proper rites of burial, the deceased elder crosses over to join the ancestors. This by implications automatically gives the next person in the family the rights and privileges to become the next elder and custodian of the family, but failure to perform the traditional burial rites, means one cannot perform and enjoy those privileges nor play those functions. It is known in Africa, that the adult male child takes over the role of eldership in the family after the death and burial ceremonies of the last elder.

Without this proper cultural rites of burial being followed, a lacuna exists between the two worlds of the living and the living dead – the ancestors. *Achebe* in *Things Fall Apart* presented how *Okonkwo* who disrespected his father *Unoka*, and refused to give him the traditional burial

⁸³Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 91

⁸⁴Sarpong, Peter, K., *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 38

⁸⁵Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 95

⁸⁶Sarpong, Peter, K., *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 40

⁸⁷Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 95



ceremony, suffered. This happened because, *Okonkwo* declared his father a failure, this one single blunder added in a major way to his down fall.⁸⁸ This non-performance of proper burial rites for Africans is primarily a major source of conflict in the family and the community. We will examine the implications below at some length, since such indiscipline causes cultural disharmony. In order to maintain the harmony that will guarantee the continuum and the healthy interaction between the worlds of the living and the ancestors, proper burial rites must be followed. Today, in Africa, giving a befitting burial to a deceased parent, is a cultural heritage that commands respect in our Christian communities, churches and dioceses.

In African cosmology, we honour the ancestors, but do not worship them, contrary to the claims of many early European and American scholars like those of C.W. Hobley (1922), Edwin W. Smith (1942) and Malcolm J. McVeigh (1974) to mention just a few. Kwesi Dickson, a Ghanaian theologian, remarks: The African sense of community requires the recognition of the presence of the ancestors as the rallying point of the group's solidarity and they, being the custodians of law and morality, may punish or reward in order to ensure the maintenance of the group's equilibrium."⁸⁹ Africans venerate the ancestors by different means, some by rituals and sacrifices, others by songs, drums and dances. Fisher wrote in reference to the Akan people of Ghana, "The ancestors, *nananom nasamanfo* (the Igbo call them *indichie*) are venerated, but not worshiped."⁹⁰ Sarpong again wrote: "Only few people in Africa are reported to be lacking organized veneration of the dead ... Such a people are the *Nuer*, a small tribe of some 300,000 souls, inhabiting the southern part of the Sudan along with other *Nilotes* like the *Dinka*, the *Shilluk*, and the *Anuak*."⁹¹ Variety, it is said is the spice of life.

In Africa, the elders and the ancestors constitute a major source of getting information and knowledge of the ancestral life and wisdom. In the past when most African communities and the society was totally oral, customs and tradition were transmitted by this auricular method. A child receives information and learns it's language and culture from the parents and the elders by oral tradition – memorizing information – was the best method of education. The living elders are the link with the ancestors, who have already crossed the threshold of death. The ancestors are thus the bearers of tradition, the link with the past of one's clan and ethnic group.

Basically it is in this connection with the ancestors that the string that keeps the family is sustained and maintained, as well as that of the clan and the community with the past. This is one other primary reason why the ancestors are venerated and honoured by the living. For the purpose of respect, they are connected with the past, for cultural reasons people rely on their protection in times of war, conflict and against evil spirits. The ancestors too pass on the rules of drumming, the usage of proverbs, the richness and beauty of folktales, myths, symbols, arts to the younger generation after them. For they are like a school that pass on the core values of any African ethnic

⁸⁸Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989, 12

⁸⁹Dickson, Kwesi, A., *Theology in Africa*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984, 70

⁹⁰Fisher, R., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 95

⁹¹Sarpong, Peter, K., *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 33



group, to the next generation, as such they are a reliable link with the cherish memories of the immediate past, unknown to the young ones.

In African cosmology, the elders do not just keep a link with the ancestors because “that’s the way it has always been done.”⁹² They are rather a constituted knit group, unique and respected by tradition and culture. Their group and existence is a harmonious continuum that has come to be regarded as an edifice: *custom and tradition*. This forge identity, has helped and has shaped a statuesque that has a distinctive feature of a locating them as a unique and a different group different from others. It is therefore an offence and considered a deviation from culture and tradition that is unique to Africans, if one (a young person) out of choice goes against these accepted customs and traditions that were received from the ancestors by the elders. That failure is interpreted as a taboo, a forbidden custom, this concept too we shall examine later.

Finally, we shall sum up the major characteristic of ancestral beliefs found generally amongst many African tribes. We begin our examination with these beliefs as found among the Akan people of Ghana. This is quite unique, but the elements and the variables found here are a common practices found cut across most African tribal groups in the vast continent. In a summary form, according to *Opoku* and *Wiredu*, these can be classified into four points:

- 1) There is a strong understanding about life after death. Human relationships cannot be broken even in death. One remains a family member. One is never alone.
- 2) The living-dead are expected to continue to protect and guard the living with their increased power.⁹³
- 3) When things go bad for the clan or lineage, especially when the living cannot provide effective leadership in a time of crisis, the ancestors will send one of their own to lead the people at the appropriate time. A charismatic person is often said to be the very *reincarnation*⁹⁴ of the revered ancestors. Such a person is called *Nana* (grandfather or grandmother), even as a child.
- 4) The ancestral beliefs act as a form of social control by which the moral behaviour of individuals and groups in the community is regulated. The constant reminder of the glorious deeds of the ancient ones recounted in the rhythm of the talking drums, in the enactment of the myths, in the telling of the folktales, and in the wise use of the proverbs....⁹⁵

⁹²Wiredu, Kwasi, “Morality and Religion in Akan Thought, p. 213,” in *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, ed. Norm R. Allen Jr., , Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991, 210-222 ; See also, Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father’s House: African in the Philosophy of Culture*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992, 111

⁹³Opoku, K. A., “Aspects of Akan Worship,” in *The Black Experience of Religion*, Accra, Ghana: FEP International Private Limited, 1978, 38-39; See also, Wiredu, Kwasi, “Morality and Religion in Akan Thought,” in *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, 212-213

⁹⁴ *Reincarnation*, as a strong concept of ancestral life for the African religious consciousness, indicates that life is a circle. The good ancestors *reincarnate* in the immediate or extended family. They are born again to continue their good services to humanity. This is actually a direct cultural value that is not accepted by Christianity, because the incarnation of Jesus Christ into our human nature purifies and sanctifies all human persons and cultures. This is a valid point of pastoral catechesis that the priest needs to communicate as an elder to ATR

⁹⁵Opoku, K. A., “Aspects of Akan Worship.” in *The Black Experience of Religion*, 38-39; See also, Wiredu, Kwasi, “Morality and Religion in Akan Thought,” in *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, 212-213



From the aforementioned points, some concrete facts are given to some extent justifying reasons Africans honour their Ancestors. The religio-cultural practices are symbolic actions of preserving the rich heritage and the unique identity peculiar to each tribal group in Nigeria.

The African person in his/her religious consciousness is enshrined within the cultural values that define the elder as a mediator and a reconciler. This does not change even when this elder is physically absent in this world, when the person is deceased. Some European and American scholars who have endeavoured to live and study the cultural values of Africans have agreed with this point on ATR. Smith, while writing on the way these ancestors lived their lives while on earth and their contributions, emphatically stated: “When the old men were alive, they were looked up to for guidance. Now that they are in the land of the deceased, they have become even more powerful and important.”⁹⁶ This confirms the significant role of the elder who is still alive: to intervene, mediate and reconcile conflicts, sometimes relying on the witness of the ancestors to authenticate and mediate or a long term solution to conflict in the family or in the community. The elders in Africa do not only know the method and the process of mediation and reconciliation, they know that, if these traditional processes, rites and rituals are not followed step-by-step, peace will be elusive in the family and in the entire community.

The sources of conflict in the Nigerian family and community

The joys and the complexities of life unfold in the Nigerian extended family, like any other in the world. In the settings of the African traditional clan and in the intertwining structure of the community, there are also moments of joy and sorrow. The sudden manner in which conflict sometimes erupt in the Nigerian socio-cultural life, or in her religio-political landscape, is the cause of severe casualties for people, negatively affecting especially women and children.⁹⁷ These conflicts create untold hardships, and these hardships further increase the rivalries, which give birth to the desire for revenge and what is commonly called in Africa, ‘jungle justice.’⁹⁸

Nigerians bring their religious experience both joyful as well as sorrowful moments to worship God. The facts are obvious, because human life in Nigeria as elsewhere is full of activities and events, like the celebrations of birth, marriages and burials. In this daily unfolding of human life, occasions arise when moments of joy and sorrow come in torrents: like in moments of planting and harvesting of farm products. In such moments, conflict most often arises between the farmers and those who tend livestock (the *Fulani in Northern Nigeria*). These ugly moments can lead to grave injuries or even death. After some respite, the elders of the conflicting parties eventually arrange a meeting where most often the conflict is resolved.

⁹⁶Mc Veigh, Malcolm, J., *God in Africa: Conception of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, Massachusetts: Claude Stark, 1974, 30

⁹⁷Cf. Sadako, Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the refugee crises of the 1990s*, New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005, 172-178

⁹⁸A jungle justice means, the lynching or killing of a presumed enemy without recourse to the constitutional law of the country or community. It means, taking undue advantage of the law



Sometimes, the sources of conflict can be as simple as the issues of the naming ceremony of a child or the marriage arrangements for young people. There are circumstances if a child is born out of traditional marriage engagement, the child is not given a name, by the parents of the girl, as this is a taboo that causes shame to the family. There are so many traditional marriage prohibitions, customary laws stopping the youth from marrying freely the person of their choice, which could be due to long standing feud between families or communities. When a young person intending to marry violates this code of ethics, sometimes call a taboo,⁹⁹ it becomes a point of very serious conflict between families, clans and communities. In particular, conflicts most often begin between families and communities when there is a bitter dispute over marriage that ends in divorce and separation. Another source of conflict basically is in the area of inheritance.

In the coronation of kings or queens, if the wrong candidate is presented by some imposters, it becomes automatically a source of conflict in the community. Even when the right person is chosen, the wrong procedure of installation may cause conflict, as each African festival or ceremony has its proper cultural and traditional offerings. Thus, if the symbolic offerings for the merriment are not presented, such as the offering of palm-wine and the traditional kola nuts. Sometimes, conflict even erupts if a junior person breaks the kola nuts, before the most elderly person in the family or community. Under normal circumstances, these celebrations are life embracing activities that should bring people together and enliven the joyful celebration of tradition, nurturing the proud culture and causing an ecstatic display of traditional dance and music.¹⁰⁰ But yet, occasions of disputes over ownership of land or hunting in the forest create conflicts that destroys the peace of the family, the clan or in the community. The elders enter into the discussion after some brief moments of dialogue to settle feuds and conflicts in the family or the community.

Another major source of conflict for Africans is associated with the sudden death of a child, or a youth and especially a hardworking and an industrious adult. It is a common belief in Africa that a person lives his/her life to old age, so when a very young person dies (of brief sickness, by automobile accident or even when a young woman dies at child birth) the family members become suspicious. This automatically gives room for accusations of witchcraft and of evil forces. The oracles are consulted, the elders meet and the cause of the death often is known.

The Ownership of land as source of conflict in the family, community or church

One major source of conflict in the traditional Nigerian family or community and even in the Church, is the ownership of land. In the African worldview, land is sacred. It belongs to the gods. Thus, some tribal groups worship it as a goddess. Africa is a large continent with diverse settlements: some are settled around the sea, and thus most these people depend on fishing. Others

⁹⁹In Eastern Nigeria, since the *Osu* people of *Nsukka* are free to marry one another only, any arrangement of marriage between two persons and their families outside this Igbo kindred is taboo. This attracts the instant penalty of being excluded from the *ummunah* – the community

¹⁰⁰Cf. Fisher, R., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 21



are settled by the forest zone, thus depend on hunting. Yet others are settled on the Sahara belt, thus depend on farming. The scope and focus in this book is centered on some tribal groups in Africa located on the savannah belt, where farming is the commonest occupation.

It is important to locate the first settlers on the Sahara belt and how they developed into a farming community. Farar in his scholarly work believes that: “The possible foundation of common West African ancestral beliefs and the link with the earth may have originated in the continent’s first agriculturist sedimentary communities in the area known today as the Sahara some seven or more millennia before the rise of the Nile Valley civilizations.”¹⁰¹ As the Sahara suffered lack of rain and water for many years from 4000 BC, the inhabitants migrated southwest to the west and the east to search out pasturage and water sources. Those who settled eventually in West Africa developed the farming of the tropical staple grains such as millet and sorghum in the savanna and the African yams and the oil palm in the forest belt.¹⁰² We assert here that once many African tribal groups had settled on a fertile piece of land, and utilized it for farming or pasturing their livestock. The sense of ownership of this piece of land develops because constant usage over years or occupation, as this occupied piece of land eventually become self-owned by these groups, or the extended families and communities.

In the next section we shall examine how problems might emerge if, any person or group intrude on this occupied land. In Africa, as elsewhere, because of the domestic and economic use of land, intruders and clear enemies, as conflict ensue naturally between the first to occupy the land, and the intruder who is contesting ownership with the first settler.

The utility of land as source of conflict

In the African world view, any piece of land that is occupied and developed by a traditional group or clan and inhabited by it belongs to the ancestors. The living are merely the custodians of the land; they are not permitted to sell the land but only to use it or to lease it.¹⁰³ In modern times, many selfish elders sell the land that belongs to the ancestral family to multi-million dollar companies, to banks, to rich individuals. This poses a big problem and has dire consequences. It creates conflicts in families and communities. It is the duty of the elder in the family to quickly intervene to stop the selling of the land, as any use by those who bought the land can mean disaster for the family or the community. The disaster that might set in may be natural or supernatural. According to African traditional custom, no land that belongs to a family or community can be sold. Any selfish elder who tries to sell the land even if he is the chief or the king of the village community is doomed. This is where the elder of the family or the council of elders in the community use their moral integrity and constitutional power to stop anybody buying the land or using the land that might belong to a widow, orphan or of the community. The buyer is given back his money, as any disobedience can lead to grave danger.

¹⁰¹Farar, Tarikhu, “Afrocentric Scholarship and Models of History and Culture Growth,” in *The Afrocentric Scholar* 2, n. 2, December 1993, 55-66

¹⁰²Ibid, 67-69

¹⁰³Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 106



Another major source of conflict in Africa is the ownership of land. Extended families with a bigger population seek more land to farm in order to grow more food for the need of the bigger family. When they decide to forcefully encroach and take over another person's or family's land, conflict immediately begins. Another major source of conflict over land is when a community is under pressure by another community over demarcation of their borders or when the family or community is involved in a land dispute with another tribe.¹⁰⁴ For the farming population of Africans, the ownership of land guarantees a concrete means of sustainability. Therefore to acquire rich and vast expand of land, means that there is guarantee of fast economic growth and expansion. In most communities and tribal groups, the land belongs to the traditional rulers, chiefs, kings, queens or the emirs. They have the supreme authority to lease it out for community development, if sought for by government to build schools, churches, mosques, clinics or industries. The early Christian missionaries to Africa from Europe, did not buy any land to build churches, schools, clinics or hospitals, as these were provided free of charge. In some cases, if the traditional ruler is Muslim, like the case of the emirs in the core Muslims cities in Northern Nigeria, they refused to give land to build Churches. This is still the reality and practice till today. But where there are many indigenous Christians in these core Muslims states (Sokoto, Zamfara, Kano, Jigawa, Yobe, Borno), they give the land of their ancestral land to build churches, schools and clinics. This is really exceptional cases promote the rapid growth the Christian faith and population in the locality, town or city.

In some African tribal religious consciousness the Earth is a Goddess

There are different cultural heritage in Africa, especially in Nigeria, depending on which geographical zone or location one comes from. For instance, Africans who live on the land, revere and virtually 'worship' the earth goddess'. They do this because the mother earth provides food for the sustenance of life and livestock. Those who live by the sea or big lakes revere and 'worship' the sea or the lake as a goddess because they fish, eat and drink from its resources. Finally, those Africans who live by the forest zone 'worship' the forest as goddess because they depend on hunting of animals for sustenance, but watch against wild animals killing them, because it is a common belief that evil spirits inhabit the forest. For the moment, we now turn our attention to the families that make a living using the land as means of sustenance. This African countries include Ghana, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Cost, Zambia, Nigeria to mention but a few.

Beginning from the African political and cultural map of West Africa, we examine some tribes in Nigeria and Ghana who actually have similar customs to most tribes in Africa. Okpoku of Ghanaian descend wrote: "Among the Akan, the earth is a goddess, called *Asase Yaa*; the *Fante* show their difference in naming her *Asase Efua*."¹⁰⁵ This is an interesting cultural value in

¹⁰⁴In Kano, Kaduna, Jos, among the Maguzawa, Bajju, Beron people, this is a common feature of what causes conflict between families, clans and communities

¹⁰⁵Opoku, Kofi Asare, *West African Traditional Religion*, 34. See also, Fisher, R.B., *West African Religious Traditions*, 107



appreciating the modern term adopted for the care of the environment. Yet one cultural point of interest is that “the Akan erect no shrines to her (the earth goddess), and she does not have a priesthood. In fact, the earth is not even a deity in the sense of the spirits below *Onyame*. The Akan elders say: *Asase nye bosom, onykyere nmusu*, “Earth is not a deity, she does not interpret evil things.”¹⁰⁶ It is the African elder that interprets the minute details of the local tradition and the cultural values and heritage of his family and community.

In keeping with their cultural and religious consciousness, the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria revere the earth as a goddess. The Igbo regard the Earth as very central to their belief. She is *Ani*, sometimes *Ala, Ana, or Ale*, the giver of every good thing. She is regarded as the daughter of *Chukwu*, the Creator, and the goddess of fertility, who herself gave birth to a host of other deities. An interesting cultural and traditional value, like one of the Igbo, gave (the earth goddess) a priesthood, but they erected for her temporary shrine-like huts, called *mbari*, which housed sacred sculptures of her and other deities and human beings and animals. Women came to her to beg for children.¹⁰⁷ This rich cultural value indicates that human beings communicate with God through the gift of nature and its wonderful fruits. The same religious consciousness is found among the *Maguzawa, Bajju, Ikulu, Beron, Gbagi, Jaba* people of northern Nigeria.

To further pinpoint the centrality and the importance of how the Igbo people attach so much importance to the earth goddess, we turn to what Chinua Achebe wrote on the significance of *Ani* at the feast of the new yam, which is common to most tribes in Nigeria, but very unique to the Igbo people. Achebe aptly wrote:

It was an occasion for giving thanks to *Ani*, the earth goddess and the source of fertility. *Ani* played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth.¹⁰⁸

The earth is so revered by Africans, because it does not only provide food for sustenance of life, but it is the sacred burial place, the womb the deceased elders, now ancestors are buried. From the above, it is clear that in the African worldview, the land is sacred.

The land is sacred because in it the spot the remains of the ancestors are buried, apart from the fact that it provided the family with food and is a place where sacrifices for women’s fertility is offered. Life rotates and has meaning for the African, by and through the land. Fisher again wrote, “the ancestral rules of behaviour have as their authority the Earth Goddess, embodied by the land as the womb where the ancestors lie and where a baby’s umbilical cord is buried.”¹⁰⁹ The symbolic points – birth and death – of the human person, these traditional beliefs and rituals performed on

¹⁰⁶Opoku, Kofi Asare, *West African Traditional Religion*, 34

¹⁰⁷Fisher, R.B., *West African Religious Traditions*, 107

¹⁰⁸Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, 37; See also, the web site of Msgr. Dennis Isizoh, cdi@afrikaworld.net

¹⁰⁹Fisher, R.B., *West African Religious Traditions*, 107



the land confirm the sacredness of the earth as an element of reverence. As a consequence, nobody is allowed to commit any offence or taboo against the land.

Taboos and offenses forbidden against the land in Africa

In the African worldview and religious consciousness, the land is sacred and must not only be honoured and be kept unpolluted by all means, but must be protected against abominable abuses by men and women. In Africa, the Catholic Church's theological teaching for the care of the earth has not only relevance and meaning, but it is already a sacred text of culture. It is an obligatory law in African Religion that the land must be kept sacred against sacrilegious abuses which are considered abominations to the Supreme Being, the spirit world and the ancestors who are buried on it. Smith rightly wrote: "The close links of the Africans to their land are largely due to their belief that it is the dwelling place of the ancestors. The fertility of the soil and the health of their animals are assured as long as the ancestors are respected."¹¹⁰ For the African, observing strictly this religious and cultural discipline and the ethics of behaviour promotes fertility and sustains life, but anything contrary to this cultural practice creates conflict.

Therefore to say the least, the taboos and offenses forbidden in the family and community are meant to preserve sanity, respect and the promotion of customs and tradition. It is the duty of the elder in the family or the elders in the community to ensure these rules are observed and practiced by everybody. Failure to do appropriately what is required, spells doom.

At this point, we are going to turn to what the family or the community accept as standard prescriptions. Breaking of these prescriptions is tantamount to punishment that comes in many and different dimensions. These are in summary the taboos and offenses against the land, specifically codified and applicable to most African cultural settings. They are as follows:

- 1) To swear by hitting the ground is not permitted.
- 2) To have sex in the bush, on the farm, or on the bare floor is not allowed.
- 3) To kill by shedding blood upon the ground is forbidden.
- 4) To commit suicide is an act against the Earth.¹¹¹

Observing the aforementioned taboos may appear simple, because Africans do not have sophisticated sets of CCTV cameras in the farms or forest, nor do we depend on satellite cameras to monitor culprits. The traditional and cultural doctrines of fair-play, honesty, justice and truthfulness is enshrined at birth till death on everybody. It then becomes extremely obnoxious, a taboo and an offense to the Earth Goddess generally amongst West African ethnic groups – Yoruba, Akan, Angas, Beron, Igbo, Bajju, Attap, Agwor, Maguzawa, Gbagi, Fante – to have sex on the farm land or forest even if it is with one's own spouse. Accordingly, Wiredu wrote that by the tradition and custom of the Akan people of Ghana, "the elders and the wise men (*anyansafo*) would say that the wisdom behind such a taboo is clearly meant to issue a stern warning to sex-

¹¹⁰Smith, Edwin, W., *Knowing the African*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1946, 107; See also, Mc Veigh, Malcolm, J., *God in Africa*, 44

¹¹¹Fisher, R.B., p. 108; See also, Sarpong, P.K., *Ghana in Retrospect*, 53-58



starved men who may be tempted to rape an unsuspecting maiden in the unpoliced fields.”¹¹² This is quite true that African culture and tradition has provisions to deter culprits, committing abominable crimes in these secrets and hidden places. The elders in the family and in the community are morally the custodians of the tradition and custom, and, by implication, they are the people who ensure the observance of the moral and religious obligations of the family and community.

In Africa, we have a powerful expression that says: “the words of elders are words of wisdom.” This means the spoken words of elders and ordained priests are words of wisdom and power especially in moments of crisis. At this moment, we will share the story of the power that accompanies the words of elders in moment of crises. In Kano State of Nigeria, in 2002 when the imposition of *Shariah* law on all citizens was causing major problems, the Muslim political leaders had ordered that the *Maguzawa* people, mainly adherents of Christianity and African Religion, should stop selling the local alcohol called *brukutu* in their local markets in *Gamashina* and *Dukuki*, in the *Sumaila* Local Government area. The elders immediately had a meeting and stopped the selling of all types of grain in the local and state owned markets. Since the Muslims depend on these grains for daily food, the deliberate decision of the elders not to take these grains to be sold in the markets caused serious food supply problems. It made the Muslim political leaders to immediately withdrew the prohibition of brewing and selling of the *brukutu* in the local markets, which the considered offensive to the *Shariah* Law they had imposed on everybody in the state. This was an instant solution to the problem the Muslim political leaders had created, which confirms the power of the spoken words of the African elders to be effective.

In a similar instance of religious persecution in 2008, when some Muslims fanatics attacked and burnt all the Churches and killed many Christians in Tudun Wada Dankadai Local Government Area (LGA) of Kano State, the *Maguzawa* elders¹¹³ ordered that their people should neither buy nor sell their grain, fertilizer and other goods from the Muslims in the local market. This created a big economic setback for the Muslim traders and business men and women as the *Maguzawa* took their goods further away to the Christian south. This called for an immediate reconciliation and restitution by the Muslim political leaders to the Christians in Tudun Wada Dankadai Local Government Area of Kano State. This is a proof that though the *Maguzawa* elders are not politicians, they have immense power and it is effective to resolving feuds and conflicts.

The role of the elder in the extended Nigerian Family System

In African cosmology, the continuum of human life finds expression in the following rites of passage: the naming ceremony, the rite of circumcision, the rites of age grade, traditional marriage and the rite of burial. Each of these has a unique and special ceremony involving the family, the clan and the community, of which the elders pilot the activities. For example, a new born child is to be received by the family and the community, at a special event called the ‘naming ceremony.’

¹¹²Wiredu, Kwasi, “Morality and Religion in Akan Thought,” in *African-American Humanism: An Anthropology*, 15

¹¹³An eye witness of account of religious violence against the *Maguzawa* people of Kano state, Northern Nigeria. Only Muslims can become political leaders in Kano and Jigawa States



At this event, the identity of the child is known by the name he/she is given. For Africans, names given to children are symbolic and convey a deep sense of union with the world of the spirits, the ancestors and with nature. In this ceremony, a chicken, goat, sheep or cow is slaughtered depending on the status of the family and the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the child. Wealthy parents actually use this type of naming ceremony to establish their status and feed the poor in the community. If the parents have been seeking for a male child after the birth of many girls, they slaughter a cow to welcome and give the child a distinguish name as honour and gratitude to God. The sex of a child being male or female is important in Africa, depending on the profession and main occupation of the family or community. In most cases, receiving a male child takes greater precedence over a female child, reasons being that the male child will farm, hunt or be a fisherman for the profit of his family, but the main reason is that the arrival and presence of a male child is a guarantee of prolonging the family tree. In that he will grow, fend for himself, get married and rise children.

The rite of arriving and passing through ‘the age grade.’¹¹⁴ According to the natural organization of the *Maguzawa, Igbo, Kikuyu, Bajju, Akan, Bantu, Yoruba*, and generally amongst most African tribes, the initiation of the male child into the totem of the community is very important ceremony. This ceremony is meant to ensure that the cultural and traditional growth of the male is according to ancestral practice. It is expected as the male child grows up, he gradually passes through the various grades of tribal life. He commences as a *bamboi* (Maguzawa), *kihe* (Kikuyu), an uncircumcised boy, and after circumcision becomes a *daura bante* (Maguzawa), *mwanake* (Kikuyu), and finally a *saurari* (Maguzawa), *muthuri* (Kikuyu).¹¹⁵ The child has to be initiated, step by step, into each grade according to the ritual of the tribe, and payment has to be made for entry into each stage by the father as an elder in the family. Mostly after the child succeeded in this endurance test of courage and character, the adolescent is seen and accepted as a promising youth, later to be married to rise to the status of a young elder.

The elders in the family monitor and co-ordinate the process of the gradual development of the child from one step to another. It is a general phenomenon in Africa, for instance among the Kikuyu people: “When a father considers that his son is old enough, he agrees to his marriage, and after the marriage, when he is the father of a child, he becomes eligible for eldership.”¹¹⁶ To arrive at this final stage of joining the ranks of elders in the community demands a thorough traditional ceremony depending on the particular tribe.

What determines and qualifies an industrious male adult to join the company of the elders in the community depends on credible achievement such as being a successful farmer, a hunter, a good fisher man, or being a remarkable blacksmith. Child bearing is a very important factor in

¹¹⁴‘The Age Grade’ is a traditional and customary ceremony (in most Africa tribal groups) a growing male child is admitted into youthful life thorough mystic ceremonies in the night. It is mainly focused on a test of endurance and the ability to face hardship with courage, to defend the weak and fend for oneself

¹¹⁵Hobley, C.W., *Bantu Beliefs and Magic*, London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1967, 209

¹¹⁶Ibid



determining the strength of a man or a family, so, a fruitful and productive husband and father of a disciplined family is a clear indication that he has the prerequisites to become an elder in the family, clan or community. Achebe notes that “age was respected among his people (the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria), but achievement was revered.”¹¹⁷ Thus, an elder must be of sound morality and needs to prove his prowess during farming or wrestling competitions in the village farming season. But the ability to be eloquent and being a gifted and wise person at public speech, is an addition impetus to become an elder in the community. For instance, to be the king’s linguist or spokesman (in Akan, the *okyeame*), the chosen one must know how to speak eloquently when welcoming guests into the palace of the king, knowing the nuances, proverbs and tradition of the tribe.¹¹⁸ Thus, a promising elder having an intense knowledge of the custom and tradition, rules and ethics of behaviour, promotes the African culture and sustains its integrity.

Generally, it is important that a candidate joining the council of elders in Africa has the credentials and the ability to speak the truth and mediate between two conflicting parties. This is explicitly the prerequisite for the recognition of a male adult to the ranks of elders in the clan and in the community. By exhibiting this rare quality of being a trustworthy reconciler and unjust mediator, automatically the door to being cultural and traditional elder in the family, clan or community is open. This is because this adult has qualifies and has the credentials to reconcile and mediate between two parties who had a dispute or conflict. This is a litmus test of his worth.

In Nigeria, the system of governance of clan and community is different from one tribe to another. Some tribes have the structure of a clear visible head or a leader as a paramount chief, a queen or king, while others have the system of ‘a group of elders’ working in unison to direct the affairs of the community. For instance, the system of governance of the Akan people of Ghana reflects the former, and that of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, and the Maguzawa of Northern Nigeria, reflects the latter. What is important in each tribal group set up in Africa is, the execution of justice for all, especially on behalf of the poor, the orphans and widows, the maintenance of law and order and equitable sharing of natural resources without violence.

In typical Nigerian villages, towns and cities, the centrality and importance of the elder and the ordained Catholic priest lies in the way the family, the clan and community is organized. This in reality reflects the vision of the Church in Africa properly located in the concept of the Church as the family of God in the First Synod of Bishops of Africa.¹¹⁹ What fits our vision of the role of the elder in the community is found in the Igbo and Maguzawa cultural systems. Fisher aptly wrote: the “Igbo society is *acephalous*; that is, it has no chief or king. It is ruled by a council of titled elders and by religious leaders, such as the chief priest.”¹²⁰ This is a resourceful cultural advantage to the Church in Africa in the decisive application of the proposals of both the First and the Second Synods of the African Bishops (1994 and 2009). It is a resource cultural value in that we can

¹¹⁷Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, 29

¹¹⁸Cf. Fisher, R. B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 49

¹¹⁹John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63 AAS 87 (1995), 39-40

¹²⁰Fisher, Robert, B., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 48



develop this model further in the organization of the parish and diocesan structures in Africa. Being that in the African worldview, the elders serve as custodians of culture and tradition, by the socio-cultural status they occupy, they are taken to be the promoters of law and order and the representatives of the small unit or extended families. It fits in appropriately with the what the early Christian community of the apostolic Church practiced (cf. 1 Peter 5: 1-2; 1 Timothy 5: 17,19). It shows clearly that from the perspective of the African world, elders communicate among themselves as equals, as when they speak in public, they enjoy speaking in proverbs.

For Africa, particularly in Nigeria, elders do not speak in plain words. Achebe wrote: “Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.”¹²¹ So in Africa, title holders: elders, chiefs and kings speak mainly in proverbs. They mostly use proverbs and riddles during their council meetings, or when they are speaking at traditional and cultural ceremonies and festivities. In most cases, the use of proverbs becomes immanent and necessary on occasions of serious conflict, in order to raise an alert on an approaching danger to the family, the clan or the entire community. For instance, in his novel, *Arrow of God*, Achebe gave a lived experience of how the chief priest had to summon the community in order to give the message that the white man wants to see them immediately at court in *Okperi*. He rounds off his speech with two proverbs, a way of explaining the situation: “Unless the penis dies young it will surely eat bearded meat,” and “When hunting day comes we will hunt in the backyard of the grass-cutter”¹²² In Africa, when elders use proverbs as a form of communication, the message is immediately decoded. Thus, the listeners know what is said, like in the situation of danger as above. It was meant to calm the youths against violence, who would display an occasion of anger or go violent against constituted authority. These irrational actions most often create antagonism leading to conflict and hate in the community.

In the African perspective, the use of signs and symbols are very common among the different tribes. The use of these symbolic objects signify authority bestowed on the elder, chief or the king by the community. Though these symbols differ from tribe to tribe, yet each by its merits exhibit and is a visible medium of authority. For example, Chinua Achebe in his novel refers to masked men standing in for the ancestral spirits. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe refers to the council of elders of the nine villages of *Umuofia*, called the *egwugwu*, dressed in *masquerade* to manifest the ancestors to the people.¹²³ In the Igbo culture and tradition, according to Achebe, the mask can only be worn by a title holder, and an elder in a grand ceremony involving the large gathering of the nine villages. “In addition to the masks the Igbo (elder) use other ancestral symbols, including the *ofo* stick used by the family head as a symbol of authority. Libation is sometimes offered to

¹²¹Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, 10

¹²²Achebe, Chinua, *Arrow of God*, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974, 142-243

¹²³Ilogu, Edmund, “African Traditional Religious Systems of Social Control: A Nigerian Example.” in *African Creative Expressions of the Divine*, edited by Kortright Davis and Elias Farajaje-Jones, Washington, D.C: Howard University School of Divinity, 1991, 142-157



the ancestor through the *ofo*.”¹²⁴ It is only the elder as the head of the family, the clan or in a bigger gathering of the community who pours libation to the ancestors. This is a very special ceremony carried by the most elderly person in the family or community.

In many African tribes, the elders use symbolic objects endowed with mysterious power to command authority. The elder in the family or elders in the community through the use of these traditional symbols are linked to the ancestors. In the Igbo traditional customs, the distinctive role of the elder as head of the family is highly recognized. *Okpoku* portrays this revered traditional practice in these words: The elder “carries another type of wooden stick called *okpensi*, about 6` to 18` long; sometimes men carry it around, but they also hang it in the hut with the *ikenga* or personal ancestor ... Finally, there is the ancestral stool, the *okposi*, where the ancestors sometimes reside.”¹²⁵ Through the use of these sacred symbols, the elder in the different cultures and traditions of the African people exhibits his authority of leadership, which is irreplaceable in the family.

The elder is the connecting bridge with the ancestors. He connects the mundane world to that of the ancestral spiritual world. His role specifically pinpoints the central role he plays in the family’s communion with the ancestors, Achebe once again gave a poignant description of what the elder does in the family shrine:

Ezeulu rose from his goatskin and moved to the household shrine on a flat board behind the central dwarf wall at the entrance. His *ikenga*, about as tall as a man’s forearm, its animal horn as long as the rest of its human body, jostled with faceless *okposi* of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and his short personal staff of *ofo*.¹²⁶

For the Igbo elder in his family set-up, this movement within the house mostly in the morning before going to the farm, is a clear sign and it means that he is preparing to offer sacrifice to the *Supreme Being*. As the legitimate and cultural head of the family, to employ the assistance and the approval of the ancestors for his family before carrying the day’s work in the farms, in the forest or going for fishing, it is solely his sacred act and duty.

In the African view of culture, the significant role the elder plays in mediating and reconciling an offender back to the community after he had suffered the punishment of deportation or banishment is necessary. When a serious crime is committed, the elder in the family is the best mediator. This unique and necessary mission of the elder in the family, the clan and the community differ in context, from one African tribe to the other, but the intention and the mediatory role he plays is the same. Achebe once again narrates the situation and how the role of the elder is important in the Igbo culture. This is when *Okonkwo* threw a huge banquet before his departure from his

¹²⁴The importance of the *Ofo* stick use by the elder(s) for daily or traditional ceremonies, cited in the work of Fisher, R., *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, 99

¹²⁵Opoku, Kofi Asare, “Aspects of Akan Worship.” in *The Black Experience of Religion*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974, 285-299

¹²⁶Achebe, *Chinua, Arrow of God*, 6



mother's people, who hosted him during his seven years exile from *Umuofia*. The elder of his maternal family, called *Uchendu*, spoke on behalf of the family. During this great ceremony, the old man received the kola nut to break and invoked the following prayer to the ancestors: "We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs his itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him."¹²⁷ This confirms the dramatic use of proverb by the African elder, and it shows the significant role he plays in the community through his proverbial expressions, rendering praises, pouring libation to and recognizing the ancestors. By his imparting heavenly blessings and giving good wishes to the recipient of his words, he exercises his proper role as elder in the family. This is the traditional role of the elder, who gives blessings by spoken words. This is the confirmation of the riches of oral tradition in African culture and tradition.

Again, in African eschatology, Africans see death as the inevitable passage of the human person from this world to the spirit world. That is why the death of the most senior elder in any family brings joy instead of sorrows. It attracts joy and celebration, because he/she has gone to the realm and abode of the ancestors. Therefore, for an African to maintain and sustain this continuum between the world of the living (the elders) connected to the mysterious world of the living dead (the ancestors), a grand and an elaborate burial ceremony must be celebrated. In most African cultures, the most costly treasure and precious animal like a cow or ten to fifteen sheep are slaughtered for the burial ritual. Bame wrote: "Once the deceased is properly escorted into the abode of the ancestors, he or she joins the revered forebears of the clan. The *mogya* turns into the *saman*, or ghost, which now is a *sasa*, a spiritual power, which can influence the living for good or for bad."¹²⁸ This is a passage that presents the transition from this mortal life through proper burial ceremony, which leads the African elder to the realm of the ancestors. But a failure to perform this traditional required ritual or rites, attracts the wrath of the ghost of the deceased ancestor, because, the deceased person feels dishonoured.

In the next section, we will examine the role of the elder in handling conflicts in the extended family. Significantly, we will discuss how the skill and experience of the elder in the family emerges fully and distinguishes him from others. This happens when there is an occasion of conflict in the extended family. As the most elderly person he is the final arbiter of any domestic case of the family.

Conclusion

The mediating and reconciliatory role of the elder and the ordained Catholic Priest is integral, necessary and a sacrament of unity in the human community. Leadership is character, and a good character is the wealth of the community. Thus, the ordained Catholic Priest most distinguish

¹²⁷Ibid, *Things Fall Apart*, 154

¹²⁸Bame, kwabena, *Profiles in African Traditional Popular Culture: Consensus and Conflict*, New York: Clear Type Press, 1991, 30



himself in every community to mediate and make resolute efforts to reconcile conflictual and war-ridden communities irrespective of creed, class or gender.

In Africa, an elder is defined by three natural elements and acquired virtues: advanced age, moral integrity and the possession of wisdom. These qualities distinguish an elder from others, they make the elder a person that is recognized, respected and listened to in the extended family. In many African families, the most advanced person in years in the extended family, or the person older by age is highly revered and respected. The premise of being accorded honour and reverence in the extended family is because the most elderly person in the family has lived long and has become a resourceful library. This qualifies him to transmit history successfully by oral tradition to the next generation. It is known that he/she, being a major link to the ancestors, possesses both ordinary and extraordinary powers of leadership in the family, such a person is the most suitable personality to mediate and handle issues of conflict in the family.

Elders in Africa settle conflicts using mainly the spoken word and ritual symbols, and so is the sacramental role of an ordained Catholic Priest. It is a method and tradition that fits their life styles. Before the acquisition of knowledge by writing (Western education) amongst the West African tribal groups knowledge until recently was transmitted by oral tradition. Due to this process of transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next by oral tradition, it becomes easier for what the most senior elder knows in the extended family to be a treasured history. As it is the tradition that, it is the most senior elder in the extended family that knows the history of the family, it falls on him to draw out the family tree backward to the ninth or tenth generation. He/she can trace sometimes the family history backward to the founding ancestors of the clan or tribal group. The elder too is the person who knows the complex nature of myths, legends and stories of the tribe. This qualifies him/her to mediate and resolve conflicts on behalf of his family in cases of land and marriage, or on ethical issues that demands some teachings on morality and customary way of life.

In Africa, especially in Nigeria, the elder has absolute authority over his/her juniors. The elder in the family automatically acquires authority over his younger brothers and sisters on issues of morality, commitment to work and industry. Igor Kopytoff wrote: In Africa, “an elder – as elder – represents to a junior the entire legal and mystical authority of the lineage. The very fact of eldership confers upon a person mystical powers over the junior.”¹²⁹ This shows that the formation of authority is by age and by the natural flow of birth.

In some tribal groups of West Africa however, the traditional family setting is patrilineal except for the *Akan* people of Ghana, who have a matrilineal system. In the patrilineal family set up, the most elderly male in the extended family is the custodian of law and order. When cases, conflicts or crises are reported to him in the extended family, he takes time to reflect over them, consult the

¹²⁹ Kopytoff, Igor, “Ancestors as Elders in Africa” Accessed, <http://www.africaworld.net/afrel/kopyoff.html> , on February 12, 2012



immediate subordinate heads of small families in the compound. The population of an African extended family is about twenty to forty five people living together in one settlement of a big compound. The elder in the family always classifies the cases of conflict in three categories: purely domestic, moral disorder¹³⁰ or spiritual problems involving the spirit world. We shall explore each category to explicate the distinctive role the African elder uses in handling each category, the ultimate vision of settling the dispute, feud or conflict in the family.

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¹³⁰We have discussed above the case of how it is forbidden to have sexual intercourse in the farm or forest. When such cases are reported, the elder handles the case according to laws and prescription of the native custom



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