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# Missiological Perspectives on the Communal Significance of Rites of Passages in African Traditional Religions

## Introduction

Traditional African society is hierarchical in its structure (Sundermeier 1998:55). Status can be both ascribed and achieved. Because rites of passage mark the movement of an individual from one stage to another and from one role or societal position to another, they are part of the socially recognized means through which individuals achieve status in their community (Pemberton 1998:527-529). Apart from ascribing social status to its initiates through their participation in rites of passage, traditional African society also believes that societal harmony is not possible without them (Imasogie 1992:14). As such, rites of passage take on significant implications for both the participants and their communities since these rites “help define and redefine the community’s relationship to an individual and the individual’s changing place in the community” (Oates 1970:81).

“Every culture has a central cluster of values that control all aspects of life in that culture. . . . Values provide patterns for living, criteria for making decisions, and yardsticks by which to evaluate oneself and others” (Pilch 1991:49). This article seeks to highlight such values by exploring the communal significance of initiation and funeral rites of passage in African Traditional Religions.

## **Initiation and Funeral Rites as Community Values in African Traditional Religions**

### The Communal Significance of Initiation Rites of Passage

In traditional Africa, initiation rites are considered very important community values. "The most elaborate rites of passage usually concern the initiation of the young into adulthood. In this way a society not only socializes its young by outwardly moving them into new roles of social responsibility, but also transforms them inwardly by molding their moral and mental disposition towards the world" (Ray 1976:91). This is because the traditional notion of personhood is essentially relational.

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. . . . A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. (Mbiti 1990:2)

Initiation rites are also school settings for training young people in the skills of living useful and productive lives in their communities (M'Passou 1998:15). The occasion usually marks the beginning of acquiring tribal knowledge and wisdom that is only available to those who have been initiated. Initiation involves a period of awakening to many things and a time to receive secret instructions. The introduction to the art of communal living happens when the group to be initiated withdraws from the community, usually for several weeks, to live alone in a specific place. The tribal "curriculum" carries so much weight that without being initiated, a person is not accepted as a full member of the community. All those who have been initiated together form a lifelong age group. Since the underlying emphasis is on separation from childhood and incorporation into adulthood, no matter how old or big a man is, "so long as he is not initiated, he is despised and considered to be still a boy" (Mbiti 1990:119). The initiation into adulthood implies that "for the well-being of a society certain facts of life must be mastered through the observance and participation in some rituals before one can enter into adulthood. Therefore, the young adults must be ritually initiated into adulthood, upon whom dwells the responsibility for social and spiritual well-being of the community" (Ishola 1992:27). But beyond the mere necessity of mastering the important concepts of life, puberty rites also provide for the development of social norms as part of the societal mores that are considered essential

to the continued existence and the ongoing solidarity and corporate-ness of the whole community (Ishola 1992:28).

The initiation rite of passage is generally conducted following a three-fold ritual pattern consisting of rites of separation, transition, and re-incorporation, of which the middle phase of transition is considered the most important. "In this phase people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into 'new' beings with new social roles" (Ray 1976:91). These sub-rites aim at ensuring proper departure from the prior status, safety against dangerous forces during the passage, and proper identification with and recognition in the new status (Cos 1998:xi). It is believed that to be spiritually transformed, the initiates must first be taken out of their usual profane world and ushered into the sacred world of initiation (Ray 1976:91). The withdrawal of the youth from society is interpreted as

a symbolic experience of the process of dying, living in the spirit world and being reborn (resurrected). The rebirth, that is the act of rejoining their families, emphasizes and dramatizes that the young people are now new, they have new personalities, they have lost their childhood, and in some societies they even receive completely new names. (Mbiti 1990:118)

Another important feature of initiation rites in African Traditional Religions (ATR) is that they provide the initiates a ritual process for reviewing and repeating what their ancestors said, did, and experienced as members of the same community. Initiation rites are therefore also concerned with showing proper respect to the ancestors who must be revered as the custodians of the tribal ethics. It is understood that without enlisting the ancestors' active involvement in community affairs, cultural unity would only be an illusion (Imasogie 1992:16). Therefore, every family in the tribe ensures that its members at the age for initiation take an active part in the rituals because of the belief that

a society is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained and the spirit powers given regular adequate recognition. Members of society are expected to live and act in such a way as to promote society's well-being; to do otherwise is to court disaster not only for the actor but also for the society as a whole. Any act that detracts from the soundness of society is looked upon with disfavor and society takes remedial measures to reverse the evil consequences set in motion. (Dickson 1984:62)

In the light of the above discussion, an individual's failure to undergo initiation rites amounts to self-excommunication from the entire life of the

community. Any misfortune in the families or clans in the community will be interpreted as the ancestors' unhappiness with this "moral disorder in relationships" (Magesa 1997:81) that led to "disequilibrium of societal peace and harmony" (Ishola 1992:28). In the traditional mind-set, such individuals are considered social isolates or deviants because "to be cut off from relationships with one's ancestors is to cease to be a whole person" (Partain 1986:1067).

### The Communal Significance of Funeral Rites of Passage

In the traditional African understanding of things, life does not end with death but continues in another realm. As such, the concepts of life and death are not mutually exclusive concepts. "Through death, what is this-worldly spills over into what is other-worldly" (Abasi 1995:448). The living and their dead relatives (the ancestors) live in a symbiotic relationship because the community is a continuum consisting of the living and the dead (Amanze 2003:46). The relation between the living and the dead stands out as one of the most fundamental features of traditional religious life. The use of the word "ancestors" may generally refer to the dead progenitors of a family, clan, or tribe, but in traditional religious understanding it mostly refers to dead members of a family, clan, or tribe to whom the living members of the group continue to pay regular cultic homage. A person attains ancestorhood generally on the basis of long life and moral superiority (Amanze 2003:43). In order to understand the importance of funeral rites in ATR, one must first grasp the central traditional belief in ancestors and their influence over every sphere of communal life.

In African traditional thinking, the relationship to the ancestors is fundamental to the sense of selfhood and society (Partain 1986:1069). The widespread idea that the ancestors play a very important role in the life of their surviving communities is rooted in the belief that the human personality survives the death and decay of the body (Smith 1950:24). "Regardless of their mode of existence it is commonly believed that the ancestors still live, though invisible, and that they are certainly present in the life of the individual and the community. . . . They see everything, hear everything, are interested in the affairs of human beings, and wish, above everything else, to be remembered" (Amanze 2003:44). Following are three key roles played by the ancestors.

First, the ancestors are believed to be the guarantor of life and wellbeing and as such are incorporated in the community network of relationships. According to Johannes Triebel, the phrase "living together with the ancestors," which also includes their veneration, summarizes the traditional African cultural and religious identity (2002:187). He further argues that in the traditional African mind-set

the ancestors are here, they influence our lives, and we depend on them. Our well-being and possible misfortune are related to them. Fear and hope are like two poles that characterize the dependence on the ancestors. Living together with the ancestors means fear and hope at the same time. . . . Everyone who neglects the relationship to his or her ancestors endangers his or her life, indeed the life of the whole community. The wrath of the ancestors can cause misfortune, illness, hunger, and death. It is therefore necessary to ensure their favor and benevolence towards the living and thus to preserve the stream of life (Triebel 2002:187, 189).

The notion of fear and hope is based on the belief that at death people carry along their personalities to the next life. Consequently, "if it is an angry father who dies, one expects him to be a rather angry ancestor. If family members had a short-tempered elder as their head, they become particularly careful in making certain that after he is dead he is not annoyed, knowing that he always was a man who became annoyed very easily" (Amanze 2003:46). However, the most significant element in the ancestors' interaction with the world of the living is that they are also "irrevocably committed to the well-being of their lineage and its continuance" (Shorter 1969:29). In other words, while on one hand the ancestors can cause misfortune, on the other hand they can grant fortune, wellbeing, life, and good living (Idowu 1973:193). Therefore, it is quite wrong to conclude that ancestor veneration is based only on fear and the desire to escape suffering and harm.

Second, the ancestors are the representatives of law, order, and ethical values in the community. "They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities.

Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forbearers who, in that capacity, act as the invisible police of the families and the communities" (Mbiti 1990:82). Punishment is the ultimate result of every offence against the ancestors and their commands. Therefore, misfortune, illness, and death in the community are often interpreted as a sign of the ancestors' anger because of an individual or family's misconduct. Any time the ancestors' authority is questioned, they in turn question people's lives. To repair an incident with the ancestors (for example, to heal sickness or to prevent further cases of misfortune) and to re-establish the lost harmony, offerings are made as reconciliation to appease them. Hence, it is "only by respecting the ancestors and giving them their offerings [either to have good fortune or to repair misfortune], only by respecting the laws and orders set by them will one have a successful life" (Triebel 2002:189).

Third, the ancestors act as intermediaries between people and God because of their close association with the living and their proximity to God. It is believed that “just as a chief is approached through an intermediary, so prayer may go to God through the ancestral spirits” (Parrinder 1969:69). The ancestors are able to function as intermediaries because “they are able to communicate with God since they are god-like, and they are able to communicate with human beings because they are men-like” (Amanze 2003:45).

In traditional thinking, “dead people are not dead at all. Death is only a transitional state to a spiritual life free from material hindrances” (Amanze 2003:44). Death is spoken of as a departure, a setting out on a journey, a transition to ancestorhood. Nevertheless, whenever it occurs, “the soul of the deceased must undergo a series of spiritual adjustment if he or she is to find a secure place in the afterlife and continue to remain in contact with the family left behind” (Ray 1976:140). Funeral rites are performed to reduce the effect of the loss as well as to facilitate the process by which the deceased joins the community of the ancestors. A traditional funeral is believed not only to help the deceased reach their “fathers” (i.e., enter the ancestral world) but also “have a tomorrow” (i.e., a continuation of life in the lineage) (Abasi 1995:448, 450, 451). This is the community’s expressed desire for kinship continuity and solidarity even in death. The community’s survival is crucial and rests on the strict observance of proper burial and funeral rites to help the deceased make a good and successful journey to the ancestral world to join those who ensure life and wellbeing, and who become intermediaries to the living.

The above two sections have highlighted the pervasiveness and strength of initiation and funeral rites in African Traditional Religions. As a result, any suggested change is inevitably perceived as an attack upon African identity and the roots people have in society (Partain 1996:1067). The next section focuses on missiological perspectives on rites of passage.

### **Missiological Perspectives on Initiation and Funeral Rites of Passage in African Traditional Religions**

#### **Historical Christian Responses to Beliefs and Practices of Traditional Religions**

The beliefs and practices of traditional religions continue to play a significant role in the life of many Africans including some of those who have embraced the Christian faith (Jebadu 2007:246). In light of the fundamental values of initiation and funeral rites of passage in ATR, an inevitable question is, What should be the appropriate Christian response

to the issues associated with them. Historically, the Christian response to the beliefs and practices of traditional religions has taken one of four main forms: displacement, accommodation, fulfillment, and substitution (Smith 1989:628).

### **The Displacement Model**

The displacement paradigm “denies that there is anything that is of God in non-Christian religions” (Nxumalo 1980:6). Its advocates judge every aspect of traditional religious beliefs and practices to be idolatrous, thus, anti-biblical and require converts to Christianity to make a complete conceptual and ritual break with them. They assume that there is a religious incompatibility between Christianity and such practices as traditional initiation and funeral rites of passage (Smith 1989:629). The majority of the early missionaries viewed the religious piety of Africans as wholly erroneous, idolatrous, superstitious, and necromantic, and some even “regarded it as their duty to eradicate it and replace it with a transformed character. Therefore, they adopted a policy of ‘religious vandalism’ or a ‘smashing crusade’ against local customs and beliefs” (Chingota 1998:147), or what could be labeled a “‘tabula rasa’ policy which aimed at ‘wiping out and replacing’ the local cultural heritage” (Höschele 2007:262).

The rejection of traditional customs was often rooted in the missionaries’ ethnocentric tendency to associate the gospel with their own culture and as a result to judge all other cultural ways as bad. Also, for the reason that in many societies religion is the core of the culture and permeates every aspect of daily life making it difficult to draw a sharp distinction between religious and non-religious practices, some missionaries felt that most customs were to be rejected indiscriminately (Hiebert 1985:184). A major weakness of the displacement model is that it focuses on doctrines and rational argument in contexts where existential issues rather than clarity and orthodoxy are the most important consideration (Nümberger 2007:66). The indiscriminate rejection of old cultural ways either creates a cultural void that is filled by imported customs leading to the gospel being misunderstood and rejected, or the old cultural practices simply go underground (Hiebert 1985:184, 188), whereby believers assent to orthodox Christian belief and join in the public denunciations of traditional customs, but privately retain their loyalty to them especially in times of serious crises (Partain 1986:1067).

### **The Accommodation Model**

The accommodation model emphasizes the socio-ethical motives of rites of passage and permits Christian converts to actively participate in them (Smith

1989:641). The principle of accommodation presupposes the acknowledgment of neutral and naturally good elements in non-Christian ways of life and insists that such elements should be incorporated as an essential part of local Christian communities' behavior (Luzbetak 1988:67). This paradigm tends towards an uncritical acceptance of traditional practices into the church (Hiebert 1985:185) as part of people's cultural heritage that should be respected (Carpenter 1996:504). Some apologists of the accommodation model argue that

African Traditional Religion like all religious systems, as Christian religion itself in the modern world, is the victim of corruption, syncretism and degeneration. Just as we do not reject Christianity because of bad elements which have broken into its life and practice, so African Traditional Religion needs to be treated with sympathy and understanding. (Nxumalo 1980:11)

As such, the accommodation model minimizes change in the lives of converts whereas the gospel challenges people individually and corporately to turn from their unbiblical practices. This paradigm also opens the door to syncretism as Christians continue to maintain beliefs and practices that stand in conflict with the gospel.

### **The Fulfillment Model**

The fulfillment paradigm sees the traditional rituals in connection with Christian revelation. This theory assumes that all the positive elements of traditional customs already exist in the Christian tradition in a higher form, and therefore views traditional rites as "a laudable preparation for Christianity's more complete revelation, instead of as a totally depraved system" (Smith 1989:638, 640). The main concern of the fulfillment theorists is on seeking to satisfy the meanings behind the rites of passage and to respect the important motives that form the foundation of traditional practices.

### **The Substitution Model**

The substitution paradigm seeks functional substitutes to replace what it sees as valuable social and psychological functions of traditional rituals to satisfy the function of old religious practices and thus fill the gaps left by eliminating non-biblical practices. While the substitution model retains the theological exclusivity of the displacement model, it nevertheless acknowledges that an inconsiderate Christian approach to traditional religions builds up barriers that keep many people from responding to the gospel. Biblically appropriate functional substitutes provide enough



cultural continuity along with the change to adequately convey Christian meanings and forms within the traditional context. They also afford the best means of meeting felt needs associated with rites of passage without creating cultural voids (Smith 1989:639).

Although the substitution model may have some weaknesses, it is the most credible of the four models. Using the critical contextualization approach, this paradigm emphasizes “the importance of formulating, presenting, and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity, and theoretical consistency” (Wan 1999:13). “The message of the kingdom of God is universal and transcends all cultures, but it can only become manifest in the lives and experience of particular communities. The universal gospel must become particularized in specific settings” (Tennent 2010:334). This was the case with God’s dealings with Israel in Old Testament times whereby he deliberately chose to accommodate certain aspects of his revelation to the cultural conventions of the ancient Near East, and thus, worked through that specific culture rather than above it (Hill and Walton 2009:157, 159). Jesus also applied the same principles while addressing the good news of God’s reign to the specific contexts of the Jewish culture by expressing it not as a mere abstract concept or only a fuzzy future reality but as a present truth that could meet their deepest felt needs. The early church also understood that all gospel communication is a contextual event, and that as such, the unchanging truths of the gospel cannot be effectively “experienced, celebrated, or communicated without being culturally embodied” (Tennent 2010:338). According to 1 Cor 9:19-23, without compromising the divine insistence upon repentance and faith, Paul’s method of presenting it varied depending on the people he was trying to reach (Hesselgrave 2000:150).

The contextual approach to missions is not about producing a domesticated version of the gospel or diluting the gospel to make it suitable for people we want to reach. It is about always making room for critically adapting the never changing gospel to the ever changing world in such a way that the gospel “speaks to the total context of the people to whom it is addressed” (George 1994:321). Today, if the Church really wants to impact more than the surface level of people’s lives, it has no choice but to balance biblical integrity with relevancy to the cultural context of the people it seeks to reach with the gospel.

### Responding to Fear for Not Participating in Rites of Passage

Full membership and fulfillment in many traditional African contexts come for individuals as they participate in family and community

relationships (beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals) (Partridge 2005:127). Some converts to Christianity succumb to dual allegiance and syncretism as they continue to practice elements of their former religion. In many instances, an individual's failure to participate in some cultural practices amounts to self-excommunication from the entire life of the community. Any misfortune in the families or clans will be interpreted as the ancestors' unhappiness with this "moral disorder in relationships" (Magesa 1997:81) that led to "disequilibrium of societal peace and harmony" (Ishola 1992:28). In the traditional mind-set, such individuals are considered social isolates or deviants because "to be cut off from relationships with one's ancestors is to cease to be a whole person" (Partain 1986:1067). Because the social penalty for refusing to participate in some community rituals could be stiff, many people, out of fear of the spirits and the penalty for not participating in important rites of passage prefer to follow the traditional customs (Kraft 2008:33).

This being the reality in which many sincere Christian converts find themselves in many traditional settings, it is imperative that proper consideration be given to issues relating to spiritual power. According to Alan Tippett, in a power-oriented society, change of faith must be power-demonstrated because many animists need a visible demonstration of the superior power of God before they are willing to become Christians (Tippett 1971:81). In biblical passages such as Exod 5-12, 1 Kgs 18, and Dan 4, God demonstrated his power over the pagan gods through signs and wonders. These signs and wonders became the symbols not only of God's supreme power but also of his presence, protection, and provision. They also became a source of motivation for eye-witnesses to either renew their relationship with God or to acknowledge his supreme authority (Wimber and Springer 1985:30). Acts 5:12-16 also records that one of the things that attracted people to the early church was the expressions of the power of God at work in the apostles' ministry. These demonstrations of the superiority of God's power either gave credibility to the content of their preaching or at least drew attention to their ministry (Acts 3:1-9, 11-26).

Converts in traditional contexts need to be set free from the constant state of fear of retaliation of the spirits or the harm an enemy can place on them through some form of spiritual power. In such cases, "the Christ who is the remedy for their fears will often be more attractive than the Christ who saves them from their sins" (Kraft 2008:448). Converts from traditional contexts will have courage to stand up for their Christian faith when they experience the Christian God as a God of power who is able to control the enemy spirits and how they interfere in their lives. Their spiritual world view will not get transformed just by hearing about God's power but by experiencing it personally. With the majority of the world, including most

of the adherents of the major world religions involved in animistic practices (Kraft 2005:377), it is crucial to give due consideration to the issue of power encounters. In many instances the success of Christian witness depends on it (Love 1994:88; Wagner 1987:23).

Many African Christians feel that initiation and funeral rites of passage are “relevant to them as Africans in their struggle for human existence both spiritually and materially” (Amanze 2003:43). As such, the Church cannot afford to just condemn these practices as being unbiblical, neither can it just consider participation in them as a denial of the Christian faith. By simply doing that, Christianity will be speaking to the majority of its African converts in unknown tones. While the Church is right in decrying the unbiblical beliefs and practices associated with initiation and funeral rites, it needs to breathe new life into these rites in a form that is purged of non-biblical meanings and forms. Biblically functional substitutes for ATR initiation and funeral rites in which Christians can actively take part are necessary for church members to be both faithful followers of Christ and remain people in regular standing in their communities.

### Conclusion

God’s missionary passion to save the world (John 3:16) calls into question all human prejudice and preconceived ideas about human cultures. As such, any endeavor made by the Church on behalf of God must be based on a sound biblical theology of mission. Also, for the reason that mission always takes place in a particular context, all genuine communication of the gospel in missions should seek to make the gospel concepts and ideas relevant to people within their own cultures, bearing in mind that the “universal dimension of the gospel precludes any ethnocentrism or parochialism in the way the contemporary church carries out its missionary task” (Köstenberger 1995:456). While firmly maintaining biblical integrity, the church in its mission must also be resourceful and flexible in adjusting its methods and procedures to the changing situations of the world in which it finds itself.

Although mission and ministry in traditional contexts must focus on the importance of giving allegiance to Jesus Christ and being grounded in biblical truth, their contents need to be packaged in such a way that they speak to people’s existential needs of healing, protection from curses and evil spiritual powers, and people’s yearning for blessings in every aspect of life. The Church needs to realize and accept that “a Christianity that [merely] talks about and promises spiritual power but leaves out the experiencing in this area . . . leaves itself open to the problem of dual allegiance” (Kraft and Kraft 1993:350). Unless the church presents a powerful Christianity, many of its members will “continue to seek out the old power sources to satisfy their fears and needs” (Bauer 2008:342).

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