

# **The Particularistic Outlook of African Traditional Religion and the Issue of Theological Training of African Votaries**

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## **Abstract**

This article begins with a critical look at the issue of Religious and theological training of African votaries, priests, priestesses, herbalists, diviners rainmakers, and so on. The argument whether African votaries are trained theologically constitute the thesis of this paper. African indigenous professional votaries received a divine call either from the Supreme Being, divinities or ancestor to function as professional votaries. The articles posit that there are two types of priest, the lay priests and the professional priests. The lay priests or priestess is the head of the family or compound. He or she officiates at the domestic ancestral shrines, where he leads the household in making offerings, liberation and prayers. These type of votaries do not have any deep religious or the theological training. The professional votaries have deep and intensive religious and theological training. They are chiefly connected with the cult of the divinities. They are called Olorisha, Babalawo, Onisegun among the Yoruba. Among the Akan of Ghana they are called Obomsomfor; while Igbo called them dubia and Hausa people called them Boka. The paper argued that there are traditional religious and theological centers for training of votaries. The novice undergoes long periods of initiation and training by older and more experienced priests and priestesses. The paper submit that African votaries have religious and theological training. Theological education or training in the context of this paper is the education that one receives in the discipline of theology. Here, "theology" does not merely refer to systematic theology or Biblical or dogmatic theology; it is that avenue or field of study that has as its objective a clear understanding of God, the Supreme Being. It maybe define as the discipline that aims at an appropriate understanding, interpretation, defense and application of the word, divination, treatment of sickness, diseases and misfortunes through the power of Supreme Being. African votaries have informal religious and theological training that qualify them for their job. There are two forms of training, formal and informal. Formal education is goal-oriented, systematic and rigorous.

Informal education is random and spontaneous. The paper recommend that for African votaries to be more relevant in the society with their job, they must as well have formal education. Formal education under tutors is more advantageous more specific, tailored and certificated. The paper adopts descriptive method in carrying out the research work.

**Keywords:** Theological, votaries, indigenous and informal

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## **I. Introduction**

Religious votaries in the traditional setting include the traditional priests, medicine-men, the divines the rain makers. It is not uncommon to find one person combining all these roles in his person. On the whole these functionaries are regarded as respectable men and woman in the society.

Quarcoopome (1987:74) is of the opinion that traditional priest is the servant of the divinities and the ministers in the temple, shrines, groves etc. there are both men and women in the profession and the women are allowed to play as prominent role as the men.

There are two type of priests, the lay priests and the professional priests. Both are train to function as ministers with the specific area as assignment. While some are set aside from birth to dedicate their lives to the priesthood, others are called or appointed through the medium of spirit possession. The spirit of a through the medium of spirit possession. The spirit of a divinity may possess a person of his choice who may be taken in to the bush or forest for a period of time ranging from three weeks to three years or more. On his return, such a person may be found to be behaving in a strange way and uttering strange sounds or words. A training priest

may be called and he will interpret the message and declares that such and such a god has decided to make that person his or her priest and intermediary.

He or she is then formally trained in the art of priesthood and a shrine built for him or her. The position of African votaries in the total lives of the people is a unique one. Primarily he stands between man and God. He is the bridge or link between the devotees and his object of worship. As the means of establishing contact between the Supreme Being, the divinities and divine beings and man.

In the context of this work, the researcher called the theological training of African Traditional Religious votaries AFRICAN THEOLOGY because it centered on the theological understanding of Africans and from the perspective of the African cultural context.

It should be distinguished from black theology, which originated from the American and South African context and is more closely aligned with liberation theology

### **African Indigenous Education Development of African Theology**

In the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, African theology as a theological field came into being. This movement began to protest against negative colonial and movement began to protest against negative colonial and missionary interpretations of the religion and culture in Africa (Michael 2013:10). Realizing that theology is a contextual phenomenon. African Christians began to read the Bible using their own cultural lens, which of course resulted in some interpretations that did not always agree with how Western theologians interpreted things.

African theologians such as Charles Nyamiti, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, and Kwesi Dickson have given an analysis and interpretation of African traditional religion and point to its relation to Christian Faith.

Ojetayo, (2013:52) argued that theological education or training is not mere information, but wisdom. It is more than academic venture, theological education or training is engagement in learning spiritual wisdom given to us through the revelation of God, the Supreme Being. Banks (1991:12) corroborate Ojetayo by saying that theological education is not so much about dry academic knowledge as much as it is about stewardship of the mysteries of God.

Theology by definition is the systematic study of the nature of the divine and, more broadly, of religious belief. It occupies itself with the unique content of analyzing the supernatural, but also deals with religious epistemology, asks and seeks to answer the question of revelation. Revelation pertains to the acceptance of God, divinities, cosmos as not only transcendent or above the natural world, but also willing and able to interact with the natural world and in particular, to reveal themselves to humankind.

Base on the above statement, religious adherents consider theology to be discipline that helps them live and understood concepts such as life, love, cosmos, success, misfortune and so on. Theology assist the adherents to live obedient life and offer quality service to the deities they believe and worshiped.

African indigenous theological training help the initiates to have deeply understanding of their religious traditions, and also, assist them to explore the nature of divinity without reference to any specific tradition. Formal training of traditional votaries especially in the science of traditional medicine is mandatory for all would be medicine-men, though some like those who understudied their parents and relations over the years have less formal training.

### **Admission into Traditional Theological Training**

“Priest whose primary function among the Yoruba is that of a mediator. He is a person “in touch” both ways between the object of worship and man: he knows them both, hears them, and speaks on behalf of one to the other. It is his duty to offer up man’s worship and to bless man in the name of his object of worship”. (Idowu, 30).

It would seem, though, that when worship first began, everybody was his own “priest” in that he expressed his attitude towards the object of worship as the impulse seized him. This is very much evidenced among the Yoruba. A devotee of a divinity has a shrine set up in his own house and conduct the routine ritual himself as tradition prescribes. But there is a difference between the ritual which is a mere response to an “unbidden impulse” and the deliberate expression of an attitude. Therefore, even though a devotee may himself undertake the routine ritual in the house, he can do this only because he has already automatically received with his adoption of the divinity the consecration which fits him for the conduct of the ritual.

Priesthood in Yoruba traditional religion is maintained by regular admissions into the priestly orders of those who are qualified for the purpose either by heritage or by training.

The office of the high priest is hereditary; a son must succeed his father in that office. If the son is too young, he performs his duty by proxy, and on ceremonial occasions lays his hands on those proxy to assert his own right as the Chief priest and to ensure the validity of the ceremony or ritual.

The children of priests in Yoruba land are sometimes enrolled as recruits and are gradually trained to serve as acolytes and ultimately as priests. Recruitment takes place chiefly during festival of the gods, especially at worship period. During the festival celebrations there is a parade of the gods, the lay people being given a chance of seeing the gods who usually dwell in the temple well-guarded by priests against sacrilege. A young

man or woman, impressed by the dignity of the priests or inflamed by enthusiastic admiration of the gods gives himself up for training. His application is accepted if his fitness has been attested to by Ifa, the god of divination; otherwise it is rejected. The parents of the child who has been vowed to the gods<sup>a</sup> before his birth present him to the priests during or after the festival. The child is in duty bound to surrender himself for service to the gods.

### **The Position of the Traditional Votaries**

Like other religions, the position of the traditional priest in the total lives of the people is a unique one. Mbiti (1960:59) opined that the votaries primarily stands between man and God. He is this that bridge or link between the devotees and his object of worship. As the means of establishing contact between God and the divinities and the ancestors he is the chief intermediary between the divine beings and man. In this regard, the priest is the religious symbol of God among his people.

As the representative of the people in relation to God, the priest help the people to offer sacrifices and to make intercession with God, the divinities and the ancestors. "People approach medicine men in time of sickness and misfortune and he seeks the intervention of the divine beings on behalf of the victim". (Idowu, 1999, 173). He is able on behalf of the divine beings to drive away spirits and heal the afflicted. In times of national crisis he intercedes on behalf of the whole community. Thus in case of drought, famine, plague or any other adversity of communal dimensions he offers the appropriate sacrifice to God, the divinities and the ancestors.

The traditional votaries are men and women of integrity, they are important social figure. In consequence of their religious and theological training, they become the repository of national customs, knowledge, taboos, the theology and even the history of the society. This extensive knowledge qualifies him to act as political head, judge and ritual expert like Biblical Samuel. Traditional priests are very prominent at the installation of kings and chiefs.

**Diviners:** Among the votaries in African traditional religious system are the diviners. They belong to the category of medicine men both in training and duties. They are basically concerned with the art of divination. This is a method of finding out the unknown or hidden secrets by means of mediums, oracles, being possessed, divination the objects etc. through this system of divination the diviners seek to interpret and explain the mysteries of life, convert the message of God, divinities, ancestors and spirits to the members of the community. (Wande, 1979:35) assert that diviners also give guidance in daily affairs, settle disputes, uncover or reveal the past, hidden things and facts, diagnose diseases, give solution to various problems and also look into the future.

Suffix to say that the diviners are agents of unveiling the mysteries of human life, to the find out hidden secrets or knowledge and pass them on to people. They are thus consulted freely for both public and private affairs by the people who look upon them as counsellors, seers, fortune-tellers and prophets. Among the Yoruba the diviner is known as the father Ifa system. It is connected with Orunmila, the divinity of divination.

Diviners also attend theological training involves training under a superior diviner for a period raging from three to seven years. There theological training involves leaning the names and signs of divination, figures, the proverbs and stories connected with them and the use of divination stones, gourds, palm reading etc.

The Ifa divination system, which make use of an extensive corpus of text and mathematical formulas, is practiced among Yoruba communities

The Ifa divination system, which makes use of an extensive corpus of texts and mathematical formulas, is practiced among Yoruba communities and by the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. The word Ifa refers to the mystical figure Ifa or Orunmila, regarded by the Yoruba as the deity of wisdom and intellectual development.

In contrast to other forms of divination in the region that employ spirit medium ship, Ifa divination does not rely on a person having oracular powers but rather on a system of signs that are interpreted by a diviner, the Ifa priest or babalawo, literally "the priest's father". The Ifa divination system is applied whenever an important individual or collective decision has to be made.

The Ifa literary corpus, called odu, consists of 256 parts subdivided into verses called ese, whose exact number is unknown as they are constantly increasing (there are around 800 ese per odu). Each of the 256 odu has its specific divination signature, which is determined by the babalawo using sacred palm-nuts and a divination chain. The ese, considered the most important part of Ifa divination, are chanted by the priests in poetic language. The ese reflect Yoruba history, language, beliefs, cosmovision and contemporary social issues. The knowledge of Ifa has been preserved within Yoruba communities and transmitted among Ifa priests.

The basic function of priest is to be a mediator between the object of worship and the worshippers. As a result of this, he is the person in charge of the shrine. It is he who takes care of the shrine and sees that it is suitably prepared for worship; he consecrates emblems for the shrine, sees that the place is kept clean and supplied regularly with necessary articles, drinks and food offerings.

There are several ways by which the priest ascertains the will of his divinity. He may have his guidance through dreams during which it occurs to him that the divinity is asking him to do certain things; this he immediately carries out on waking.

Another way of ascertaining the will of the divinity is through a medium. In some places, usually a virgin, preferably before she attains puberty, is treated with decoration of charms so that she may be able to see and hear the divinity. She sits between the shrine and the client and declares messages from the divinity. It is not unusual to find a woman of advanced age who has been possessed to be a medium, but she must have passed the age of, or ceased from child bearing and sexual pleasure.

Nabofa (1987) submits that the priest dressed in accordance with the behest of the divinity. The priests and devotees of Olokun always dress in white clothes. In some localities, the priest wear some insignia as the civil chief coral beads around the neck, wrist and ankles and a scarlet cap.

Every priest also upholds the taboos of the particular divinity, because of his close association with the divinity and for the sake of the efficacy of his ritual performances. These taboos include things like food or drinks which the divinity does not take, and which are therefore forbidden to all his worshippers or things which make for ceremonial defilement or contamination. In every case, a demand is laid upon the priest who is entering into the sacred office to be sexually clean. That is why the priestess should be a person past-child-bearing and sexual habits, menstruating women are banned from the shrines. Thus, the priest has always been an important social figure. He is inevitable in the social life of the Africans because the keynote of Africans is religion. Virtually, nothing is done without the ministrations of the priest.

### **African Traditional Education**

To understand the history of education in Africa, adequate knowledge of the traditional or indigenous educational system which existed before the arrival of Islam and Christianity is needed. Islamic education was not formally established in Nigeria until the fourteenth century and Christian education came in the nineteenth century. But indigenous education persists even today, showing no sign of disappearance from the scene of education.

In old African society, the purpose of education was clear: functionalism was the main guiding principle. African society regarded education as a means to an end not as an end in itself. Education was generally for an immediate induction into society and preparation for adulthood. In particular, African education emphasized social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, spiritual and moral values. Children learnt by doing, that is to say, children and adolescents were engaged in participatory ceremonies, rituals, imitation, recitation and demonstration. They were involved in practical farming, fishing, cooking, carving, knitting and so on.

Recreation subjects included writing, dancing, drumming, acrobatic display, racing, while intellectual training included the study of local history, legends the environment (Local geography, plants and animals), poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs, storytelling and story relays. Education in old Africa was a nitrated experience. It combined physical training with character molding and manual activities with intellectual training. At the end of each stage, demarcated either by age level or years of exposure, the child was given a practical test relevant to his experience and level of development and in terms of the job to be done. This was a continuous assessment which eventually culminated in a passing out ceremony or initiation into adulthood.

Asserting the African Education: Babs Fafunwa (1991) is of the view that:

“Education in old Africa was not rigidly compartmentalized as is the case in the contemporary system today. Educators are beginning to talk about Universities without walls, schools without classes and subjects without grades.

This is as it should be, particularly in Africa where only a handful constitutes the elite, and where; if a stage is missed all other chances may be forfeited.

The aim, content and methods of traditional education are intricately interwoven; they are not divided into separate compartments as in the case of Western system of education. The characteristics of traditional education in Africa are aptly summarized by (Abdon Moumouni 1988:20) thus: The great importance attached to it and its collective and social nature. Its intimate tie with social life both in a material and a spiritual sense. Its multivalent character, both in terms of its goals and the means employed.

Its gradual and progressive achievements in conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional and mental development of the child. Because indigenous education failed to conform to the ways of the Westernized system, some less well informed writers have considered it primitive, even savage and barbaric. But such contentions should be seen as the product of ignorance and due to a total misunderstanding of the inherent value of informal education. When evaluating any educational system, one must determine the extent to which it is meeting the needs of a particular society at any given time. According to (Fafunwa, 1991). Traditional African education must therefore be judged not by any extraneous consideration or some foreign yard stick but by its performance within a given social context. Many European observers tend to ignore this important factor.

### **Development of Character**

Indigenous African education places considerable emphasis on character-training. Indeed it is the corner-stone of African education. J.A. Majasan in his study of Yoruba education identified character-training and religious education as the two main objectives of Yoruba education and showed that other objectives were pursued through the latter.

The parents, siblings and other members of the community participate in the education of the child. Everyone wants him to be sociable, honest, courageous, humble, persevering and of good repute at all times.

### **Respect for Elders and Peers**

Closely related to character-training is the respect for elders or those who are in authority, particularly the chief, the cult leaders, the diviners, relatives (especially uncles) and other neighbours. Greetings play a major role here. The African has a complicated greeting system. There are special polite greetings or salutations for parents, elders, peers, and chiefs. There are morning, afternoon and evening greetings; there are greetings for various situations – playing, dancing, drumming, sitting, standing, farming, fishing, weaving, swimming, walking, convalescing; and there are special salutations for different kinds of festivals and ceremonies on such occasions as birthdays, burials, marriages, yam festivals, observance of ancestor worship, and others.

### **Intellectual Training**

If by intellect we mean the power to integrate experience, and if intellectualization is the process of reasoning abstractly, traditional African education can be said to encourage intellectual growth and development. Observation, imitation and participation are some of the major learning processes even in this modern age. The African child learns the local geography and history of his community. He is very familiar with the hills and dales, the fertile and the non-fertile areas; he knows the rainy season and when to expect a dry spell; he knows the time of the hunting and fishing seasons. Local history is taught by the elders in each household and the songs of praise which accompany many of the historical events make the oral traditional history a stimulating experience which is hard to forget.

### **Vocational Training**

It is fair to say that the aim of education in traditional society is character-training and job-orientation. We can roughly divide the various traditional vocations into three groups.

Agricultural education: for example farming, fishing and veterinary science (animal care and animal rearing).

Trades and crafts: for example weaving (baskets and cloth), smiting (iron, silver, gold, etc), hunting, carving (wood and bronze). Sculpturing, painting and decorating, carpentry, building, barbering, drumming, dancing and acrobatics, hair plaiting, dress-making, leather-working, soap-making, singing, pottery-making, mat-making, bead-working, gold-washing, Iron-ore working, threshing, glass-making, brass-working, dyeing, Esusu—collecting (banking), catering (frying, baking, grinding), food-selling, wine-selling, wine-tapping and trading in all kinds of merchandise (manufactured goods and agricultural products).

Professions: for example doctors, priests, witchdoctors, civil servants, village heads, chiefs and kings, tax-collectors, heralds, judges, councilors, police and messengers, shrine-keepers, soldiers, etc.

Vocational training in traditional society is largely run on the apprenticeship system and is a time-honored device for educating millions of African youths and adults. Usually the children are not trained by their parents but by relatives, master-craftsmen in particular fields or friends in order to ensure discipline and concentration.

### **What is Literacy?**

This has been defined by A.S. Hornby as the ability to read and write (2006:679). On the above, it is the ability of reading out any written thing and also the power to write out things that can be read. Trying to buttress the point in literacy, John Salmon was of the view that the ability to read and write is not restricted to a particular language. (1978:22).

From the above, literacy can be environmental and epochal. One can be literate according to the matrix or ambience of a given society.

### **What is Illiteracy?**

This is the opposite of literacy and it is the inability to read and write. Whenever one is not able to read out things written or write things that can be read, such a person is said to be illiterate. But in his own assertion, Kebull Brown (1995:10).is of the view that literacy or illiteracy should include hearing and understanding of a thing written or read.

### **Early Africans, Literate or Illiterate**

From the above definition of illiteracy, it is an established fact that any African who is able to read and write is literate while any African who cannot read and write is illiterate. Against this assertion, Recharad Geman said literacy or illiteracy is not restricted to one's matrix or a particular language. One may be literate here and will not be literate there.

In Gehan's view, one can be literate in Igbo cosmology but when taken to the Jewish cosmology, he becomes illiterate, since he cannot speak, read or write Hebrew language. In the same vein, a Jew that does not know Igbo language cannot write or read Igbo is said to be illiterate in that area. Therefore, the question of literacy and illiteracy can only be justified within a given world view or spectra of a given society. In buttressing this point, Jonathan Iko (1978) infers that People make a lot of mistakes by measuring literacy and illiteracy with English language. What of some Chinese and Germans that cannot read or write English language. Are they not literate and useful in their own areas?

In the above citation, Iko is of the view that the measurement of literacy and illiteracy cannot only be done with the lingua-franca-English language. But if one is useful in his area or can serve his area rightly, the person is said to be literate.

Basically, literacy implies the ability to read and write a given language. African know how to read or write before literacy was introduced through Western or Islamic education.

The idea of not being literate was orchestrated by the oriental mind which has done us no good, but has instead put a knife in the things that held us together and things fell apart. It is the same mind which says that Africans cannot philosophize, at the same time ascribing every good thing to the white while a whole cascade of evil is believed to have come from us and lives with us. The question now is, were the early African literate or illiterate or can it be rightly said that this people who are of the hinterland of Africa were literate? In trying to proffer an answer to this all imposing question, the writer is of the view that if literacy can be measured in reading and the usefulness of one in reading and writing in a particular language, then early Africans were literate even before the advent of the Europeans into the hinter land of Africa.

It should be on record that the academic doctors and professors were the parents, surrogates and brothers and sisters whose onus it was to pass societal values. It should also be on record that the writing materials then were the "Nzu" or "Odo", the walls and the Earth were the chalkboard. They also made use of the leaves with sticks or broom as their pencil or pen. In African cosmology, if one owes or is indebted to someone, straight lines will be made on the walls. The length of the lines will indicate how much owed by the debtor. Long lines represent big debts while small lines represent small debts.

It was also the custom to remember dates with the market days especially in Igbo world view. Dates were remembered with Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo which are the market days. On this note, Babs Fafunwa (1991), highlighted seven goals of African Traditional Education.

### **Seven Cardinal Goals of African Traditional Education**

The aim of Traditional African education is multilateral and the objective is to produce an individual who is honest respectable, skilled, co-operative and conforms to the social order of the day. Although the educational objectives cannot be neatly distinguished, according to Fafunwa (1991) seven aspects can be identified:

To develop the child's latent physical skill.

To develop character

To indicate respect for elders and those in position of authority.

To develop intellectual skills

To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour.

To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs.

To develop, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large. Suffice it then to say that this education was aimed at training a child physically, developing his character, intellectual training, vocational training and respect for the elders and peers.

## **II. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Africans before now were literate enough to be relevant in their communities. Since they wrote in their native style, and read with meaning in their style, they were indeed literate. And they send message through signs

If literacy connotes the ability to remember memorized words, the writer is of the view that early African were not far from the word literacy.

They were able to rehearse off hand the leaves in the Bush, Rivers and neighbouring villages around them. Peradventure one was sent to buy things from the market the person was able to buy without missing any. What other marks of literacy are we looking for? To be simply put, early Africans were literate.

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