

The practice of oracular consultation theology religion essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

AJIBOLA, G ILESANMI

Abstract

The transmission of the Christian message among the South-West Nigerians, like in many other part of Africa is at best describable as Tradita.

[1]Consequently, in the course of practice the people's socio-religious engagements grow simultaneously with that which was passed on. However, instead of getting a hybrid religious practice like Santeria/lucumi[2]which seriously speaking does not reflect authenticity of either side of the religions from which it emerged, the South-West Nigeria Catholics attempt a " re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to the culture." [3]The people interpret and re-interpret their experiences within the tradition that give vent to their faith as Catholics and their identity as Yorùbás. The continuum brings on board various cultural practices in conversation with Catholicism in an effort to make " faith becomes culture"[4]. One of such area is the oracular consultation which now places a demand of authenticity on faith and culture in the language of the emerging tradition. Could such practice be considered an authentic Catholic practice towards a genuine inculturation? This paper takes this question to test in the five criteria for appraising claimed religious truth in the work of Terrence Tilley.[5]It presents Tilley's theory of tradition, and while agreeing that tradition is made and found, it does not totally agree with Tilley's reserved position on doing a theory of development. It agreed with Tilley that a ' taxonomy of doctrine' as Lindbeck's is needed but in establishing authentic development. It concludes that the practices of oracular consultation of the Yorùbá Christians does not totally pass Tilley's five test criteria for appraising claimed religious truth,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

but work in such practices in the tradition of the Catholic intellectuals need carried out for ecumenical and educative conversation with the Catholic faith.

Introduction

The Christian church cannot pretend against the confronting new pastoral and theological challenges arising from the now greater pluralism in the world. Though this situation is not new to the Church,[6]the attitude and mode of relating with such situations has significantly shifted to an encouraged attitude of openness and educative conversation.[7]In like manner, theology has also moved from its theory to practice stance to a more practical outlook that give vent to close consideration of faith in relation to practices, where " faith is the faith and the expressions are that by which we come to recognize and eventually to understand what it means to live in and live out that faith".[8]A consideration of theology in this mode necessarily entails a practical approach; hence Heitink observed that doing theology will by that fact entail applying a theory of action. To him, quoting Furet, a theory of action must contain the following elements: deal with concrete domains of action, analyse the context of the action and the action themselves in the present situation and with regard to their potentiality. These must be done on the basis of empiricism ... with the purpose of developing action models and strategies for the various domains of action. [9]Such development of action models has been taken up by many contemporary practical theologians;[10]they generated models developed to make theology speak more practically to contexts and vice versa. In the contemporary Nigeria and perhaps, worldwide, a lot has changed from the

attitude of past missionaries' blanket condemnation of socio-religious tradition of the people in the process of transmitting the Christian tradition. The unexamined rote followership of a Christianity that is garbed in foreign cultural and social colors is also no longer tenable. According to Tilley, and rightly so, " there have been marked shifts in the content of practices and beliefs we accept as ' given' on the basis of tradition"[11]However, armed with the Church's disposition to *ad fontes* and *aggiornamento* and backed with documents as *Nostra Aetate* and *ad Gentes*, many practices are now being traced back to their roots and are attempted to be updated in the light of transmitting the message of Christ to the nations. No wonder that oracular consultation and practices of prophecy is being commonly associated among many Nigeria Christians as compliant with early Christian practices and traceable to the Biblical Judaism and the New Testament practices. But is the practice a true religious claim?

Traditioning of Christianity as tradita among the Africans

That African is deeply religious and tenaciously cultural is widely acknowledged.[12]Traditionally, the African does not draw a sharp separation between his personal acts from the overall consideration of the community, nor does he separate his ' secular' engagement from its relationship with the ' sacred', thus Mbiti wrote that in Africa, traditional religious practices are "... not primarily for the individual, but for his community [and] to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involve participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community.[13]With the advent of Christianity and Islam, what has changed considerably is the acceptance of the foreign religions but with the

same zeal of religiosity. Unfortunately, the approaches of the new religions' missionaries were "... generally ineffective, primarily because most Westerners lack an understanding of the importance of African religion as an integral part of African culture and life".[14]Like many others, the missionaries of the Catholic extraction also missed the track; they were " deeply marked with the Roman spirit that took for granted that the catechism used in the Roman West was entirely suitable for Africans" and " that in the work of evangelization the emphasis must be on stamping out savage and immoral customs".[15]Evangelization from these backgrounds where local traditional heritages were ipso facto bracketed against Christianity only drove underground cultural and traditional religious practices perceived to be inimical to Christianity in Western garb. Hence, side by side grew traditional religious practices and Christianity, in most cases the former sustaining the latter.

Oracular consultation and Ifá divination among the Yorùbás

It must be stated from the outset that for space, this section is by no means a detail discussion on oracular consultation and Ifá divination among the Yorùbás but a brief background for the purpose of the issue at hand. The word Yorùbá connotes a designation for the ethnic group that occupies the South West Nigeria as well as the dialect spoken by the group. In the traditional Yorùbá socio-religious practices is the oracular divination which is highly embodied in the Ifá divinatory pattern. One of the young Christians to whom the question of what Ifá is was posed in one of the interviews conducted by me simply replied, " is it not story telling sessions?" He wasn't far from the truth, but that is not the whole truth. Many scholars at different

times have referred to the chapters and verses of Ifá, commonly referred to as *odu* and *ese* respectively as "myth". Of course, they are myths in the sense of philosophical rendition of certain truths situated in some distant past. The current Arch-Bishop of Abuja, Nigeria - John Cardinal Onaiyekan subscribed to that view.[16] While Imasogie[17] referred to them as mere "couplets", Benjamin Ray as 'poems'[18] Ikenga-Metuh[19] called them "divination figure". One common thing characterizing each of these descriptions is that the 'Odu and Ese' are collections of stories, proverbs and parables. By whatever name one may choose to refer to them, they are correlated chains of stories, proverbs and parables that capsule the Yorùbá religious belief systems. Ifá is an age long tradition of the Yorùbás.

Traditionally, hardly would any Yorùbá engage in any relational engagement [with people, environment, physical or spiritual] without consulting the gods, especially through Ifá divination mediated by Ifá priests. The priest, by means of associated rituals conveys the messages of Ifá to the client - often, in the form of stories. It is through this stories that the Yorùbá culture informs and regenerates itself thereby preserving all that is considered good and memorable in that society. It is a deposit of the Yorùbá societal values and world view and a means of keeping and disseminating the same despite the lapses and imperfections of human memory on which the system is based. According to Wande Abimbola, they are "attempt by a non-literate people to develop, preserve and disseminate the ingredient of their own culture... (hence it is) a store house of culture...(that) deals with history, mythology, belief, value system and the world view of the people".[20] The system, one might say, is both a skill and a science and it takes year to learn its rudiments. Apprenticeship is open to whoever wishes to learn the art; <https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

hence it has men and women as priests. As a science it has operational formulas and laws and as an art it teaches how to avoid pitfalls in navigating the vicissitudes of life through words of wisdom and offering of sacrifices to the gods. Ifá is also used in determining what life holds for individuals or groups as it is also perceived to offer guidance in private and corporate relationships. It is a compendium of codified experiences with much in stock to bequeath to humanity. In the words of Oluwo Philip John Neimark, Ifá has " no preconception about race, gender sexual preferences, it is about character, ... use of powerful positive energy to protect lives, yours and of those you love, to grow, to reach fulfillment, it empowers, accepts and deals with good character and of positive energy." It aids in avoiding " fear, prejudice and discrimination." [21] Ironically though and perhaps in a somewhat different slant from Neimark's, Nathaniel Ndiokwere observed that operational devices as Ifá are quite attractive to a people in an environment where insecurity is perpetuated by fears of evil spirits. [22] With the advent of Christianity and Islam, both of which tend to do the same thing in passing a general condemnation of most cultural practices associated with traditional religion, the patronage of Ifá by adherents of these religions became private and sometimes clandestine. With time, a parallel to its modalities were founded in indigenous Churches. [23] Among the African Indigenous Churches, one notices with some ease the enthusiasm with which people flock to these churches to ' inquire of the Lord' through prophets. This ' prophetic service' is readily extended to non-members as well as members. The famous ' bayi l'Olorun awon omo ogun wi," that is, " Thus says the Lord, God of host" in The Apostolic Churches (TAC) exemplify the type of problem solving formulae that people perceive in attending such churches. Members

<https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

and non-members rush in great numbers to receive such oracular utterances. Usually, the process begins with prayers and singing climaxing in an emotional work-up in which someone (under claimed influence of the Holy Spirit) suddenly introduces such phrases as the one above and then goes on to announce ' what God is saying'. Adherents also go to the pastors for prayers (to inquire of the Lord) and they get responses through such visionary pastors. In the Catholic Church where the place of ' Prophets' is not given in the hierarchy of the church, the lay ministers and the charismatic movements provides such ' opportunities' through speaking in tongues, prophecy and faith healing. To many of these practitioners, these practices are not considered to be outside the tradition of Catholicism as evident in the early church era. The presence of, and seeing of visions by charismatic leaders, mostly among the lay faithful in the Catholic church, has sustained some Catholics who are not attracted by direct meddling with the traditional oracular consultations. For Ndiokwere[24]this function has semblance with the work of the Ifá priest also known as Babalawo. But while the Babalawo's service is considered a " pagan divination," it is not considered as such in the context of Christian practice of inquiring of Lord.[25]Hence, many patronize other churches for purposes for which they would have gone to the Babalawo. Of course some still go to the Babalawo. The on-going scenario is perceivable in most instances of the practice of Christianity in various shades in Nigeria. It is perceived as Christianity in the tradition of the Africans amidst variation in details. The stance of the Church as echoed via various popes from Paul VI to Benedict XVI apparently recognized what is good in these practices amidst a sound of caution. The church " rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those

<https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." [26] Nevertheless, in such engagements, the Church encourages caution in ensuring Catholic identity and communion with the Catholic Church. [27] This paper shall return to the latter part of the on-going statement in connection with its stance on the need for theory of development and continuity.

Contextualizing Tilley's work

In situating the work of Tilley for the purpose of this paper, Colleen Mallon's Globalization at large comes to mind. In the article, Mallom asserts that globalization' is " a work in progress" [28] with its general import on the individual, societies and the world as evident in its process of shaping and reshaping traditions in a globalized world. Mallon underscores the role of theologians in this " emerging world (dis)order" and its bearing on the lives of people. [29] In this regard, the role of theologians must be practically situated around ' living the Christian mystery in a globalized world' where ' our self-understanding as a faith community and our witness to the revelatory gift entrusted to us' are met with new challenges. Doing theology in the world today must necessarily eschew patterns in which tradition is packaged as a thing to be handed on or over; " traditions must be understood as not important as the divine-human relationship". [30] Thus, the church must realize herself as ' universal in and through its diverse, contrastive... (and) disjunctive particularity' as a " witness that is both faith-filled and credible." [31] In other words, the church's understanding of her

Tradition as fixed need a re-think, given the contemporary situation as described by Mallom above. Shall Tradition be seen and expressed as fixed or fluid, unchanging or adaptable, made or found or as singular or plural? Many theologians are found in the contemporary times fully occupied with these issues. Tilley also joined the likes of Yves Congar,[32]in addressing this issue under a somewhat witty title: Inventing the Catholic Tradition, where Inventing could mean to discover or to make.[33]Tilley towed the path that tends to be open to the emerging reality of global inclusiveness as he asserts: Tradition is handed on or over,[34]they are not fixed but fluid, [35]and while they are neither made nor given, they are both constructed and given.[36]Tilley noted that the method in discussing tradition hitherto has been theological, breeding dichotomy that maps out scholar/participants, given/made distinctions. He advocates for a departure of approach to historical and descriptive method because Tradition is better describe in terms of performance and practice.[37]This shift from the traditional relation of tradition to revelation in discussing Tradition with emphasis on " enduring practices"[38]is quite significant. For Tilley, while " other concepts of traditions have presumed that the key is to know what a tradition is, [his] present approach presumes that knowing a tradition is much more fundamentally a knowing how to live in and live out a tradition". [39]This is a situation where " a religious tradition is best understood as an enduring practice or set of practices including a vision (belief), attitudes (dispositions, affections) and pattern of action."[40]Overall, Tilley's interpretation broadens the capacity for individual and communal participation in shaping and being shaped by tradition to the overall better service to one's faith. This is in alternative to the rigid resistance implicit in <https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

the former models where dissenting the rules of participation excludes one from the community, and of course, possible contribution of some positive good to the tradition.

Of Tilley and the theories of development and constancy in tradition

Although, Tilley do not really subscribe to doing a theory of development and constancy in tradition because to him they will always have problem in attempting to find continuity where it cannot be found,[41]he, nevertheless recognizes the fact that there is a need to mount principles (rules) in discerning authentic developments from corruption. Few questions arise here, what is authentic about a thing? What makes an identity particular in plurality if the developmental and continuity approaches to traditions are to be held suspect? In his arguments, he contends that " if a community abandoned principles... it would abandon the Christian tradition." [42]Where that is so, could theories not be made to sustain that which is meant to constantly remain in continuing the tradition in practice? These questions are apt consequent on Tilley's consenting to continuity only in act of judgment or appraisal that recognizes continuity not in such theory.[43]In line with a general trend in Browning's perception, there can be no such thing as theory that is not about something practical, there is also no such thing as practice devoid of all theory whatsoever.[44]Tilley specifically singled out John Henry Newman and Alasdair MacIntyre in discussing constancy and change in tradition. I perceived that overall, faith is what need be preserved in issue of constancy and change, authentic development will entail that in which faith is preserved in the various shades of its expressions as dogmas, symbols,

etc. For Newman, for there to be an authentic development of faith, there are seven steps to keep in focus[45]among which is the preservation of idea. " If a community claiming to carry on the Christian tradition abandons its center in Jesus, it would not be an authentic development but a degradation of the tradition or the initiation of a separate tradition." [46]Perhaps Newman might have found the theory difficult to apply as Tilley observed in the world in which he lived, that does not make such theory irrelevant. In contemporary times, there are such instances especially in practices that claim to exercise Christian tradition with clear marginalization of the central idea of Jesus. A clear example is in the case of a Christian movement whose leader Olumba Olumba Obu claimed to be God to his adherent.[47]Elements of true needs in such theory could help maintain continuity and constancy in such situation. Again, the spate of churches proliferation in Nigeria quite necessitate a need to have some independent yardstick in theory for ' discerning authentic developments from corruption' and to have some focus on what is authentically Christian even within the peoples' cultural matrix. It is though a problem to continually interpret religious experiences in the light of tradita, given the fact that " reversal and fractures" do occur in Tradition, however, the sieve of constancy and continuity could be used in delineating authenticity in what is presented via ' reversal and fracture' as Tradition. To a great extent, Tilley favored Lindbecks' taxonomy of doctrines at the expense of John Newman and MacIntyre's theories of development because it is contextual rather than developmental.[48]His base line argument that " what makes two different pattern of practice... the same tradition is nothing less than the recognition that they are ' the same,' that ' we' share the same practice with ' them'" [49]does not seem to probe the guarding principle in <https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

variation of conversation between Christianity as a Religion that the accepting community sees as 'control parameter'. Such control parameter is what will make meaning of ethical queries where two individuals with homogenous culture but varied religious disposition are at stake. For instance, what ethical principles differentiate a Yorùbá traditional religion adherent from a Yorùbá Christian? Of course if we say 'non', then there is nothing peculiarly Christian about the latter and if we say there are, then there is a defining Tradition at play; perhaps, the centrality of Jesus which Newman's theory considers the first 'test'. Doctrinally, are there no defining 'constant' that betray a sense of continuity in development that could also theoretically be presented as safeguards? Now that the line between Ifá cult and Christianity is made even thinner,[50] such theories are needed not necessarily in exclusion of criteria - the likes of Tilley's, but such that could be made to function together, by deriving the criteria from a given theory.

A test of Tilley's criteria for life-shaping convictional claims in Oracular consultations

Tilley's model is attractively progressive and he no doubt understands the need for control of what goes on in the process of traditioning. Similarly attractive is his disclaimer on the 'use of administrative power to enforce adherence to novel innovations that are backed up by appeal to dubious or non-existent tradition as authoritative.'[51] 'Appeal to dubious or non-existent tradition as authoritative' could be one of the reasons responsible for Tilley's strong stance against theories for continuity but as said earlier on, such could be identified, sieved and thrown off board while retaining that which is identifiably sustaining in practice as Tradition. To Tilley, traditions

are neither made nor found in any simple sense but rather are ongoing practices constantly being invented. Practices generate rules for continuing the practice. To recognize a tradition we can uncover its 'rules', noting that rules and their application are both relatively constant in their continuity and often rather fluid in the inventive application of them." [52] It is on this basis that he proposed the five rules through which this paper appraises the 'life-shaping convictional claims' of oracular divination developed in the peoples' practice of Christianity as Yorùbá. [53] According to Tilley, a claim can be appraised as true if it: Represents the world in which we live or part of it in a revealing way. The Yorùbá Ifá compendium fulfills this criterion as it provides revelatory truth in parodies, myths, stories, sayings, etc that reveal God to the community, even in proto-Christian manner. [54] Fits with other facts we recognize. Ifá, considered in practical ways, of 'the world as we know it' [55] is a function of the divinatory patterns that derive its functionality from the spiritual to the physical and direct same to subject of material composition. It does not operate in vacuum and is of direct bearing with that which allow for simulation in the African Indigenous Churches. [56] Enables communities or individuals to be 'true to themselves'. Most Catholics who patronizes the Babalawos, Onifás or even other churches as the African Indigenous Churches for the purpose of 'divination' do so in pretense of other motives or under some cover. [57] Enables one or shows one how to 'be true to' others and to the tradition carried on in practice. This underscores individual faithfulness, even as models, in practice to the community. Two discomfoting issues arise here: the instance where the oracular practice is done in hiding cannot produce an exemplar. Two, forebears were either seen as 'brainwashed' adherent holding to

<https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

unexamined Westernized Catholicism or playing out a syllabus of catechism assimilated through rote learning. In the first instance, the practice fell short of the measure but in the second instance, it appears Tilley's rule is inadequate to measure such experience. Enables their participants as individuals and a community to live in ways that propel them to develop revelatory insight, to utter fitting claims, to be authentically themselves and to keep faith with others. This apparently summarizes the first four criteria and to use this as a single criterion will, as Tilley himself observed, be "very difficult and may be rather rare for an individual or a community".

[58]Summarily, considered from the lenses of Tilley's criteria for practices that are true, oracular consultation as a cultural practice in the experiences of Catholics in Yorùbá land have values that talk to the identity of the individuals. However, going by the clandestine coloration in participating in the practice, there are many questions that still beg for answer in recognizing the practice as authentic Yorùbá Catholic practice. We must however acknowledge that there are beliefs in the ifá corpus that are not inimical to Christianity and that such basis could form explorable basis for dialogue.

Beyond theory of tradition to application of rules for religious claims

Tilley's theory of tradition is clear and simple - that traditions cannot be reduced to tradita [what is transmitted].[59]They are neither made nor founded in any simple sense but rather are ongoing practices constantly being invented[60]and reinvented.[61]They are enacted and transmitted in particular practices[62]within which its grammar is made and founded. The

grammar of the practices is that which shapes the individual and the community and by which the individual and the community also is shaped. They are the rules, and according to Tilley, neither the rules nor the beliefs essential to tradition are independent of the varying practices.

[63]Considering the oracular consultation culture of the Yorùbás from the ongoing point of view, one understands and witnesses a tension between a Catholic Christian Tradition that is been guarded against such influence as the other practices that constitute a self-involving oracular culture. The result of this tension, if unchecked and delineated, may not in the literal sense of Tilley's metaphor, make the Church " becomes a museum piece" but make her uphold a non-re-creative tradition. This is by no means a suggestion that the oracular culture be inculturated as it is but that an unbiased attentiveness to its content be attempted.

The Value of oracular patterns to a Catholic Practical Theology

From the search light of Tilley's criteria to delineate religious traditions that have no significant place for truth, as tested above, the status of oracular consultation as a Christian practice is found not to be totally true. This, however does not mean that there is nothing good or of relevance to the authentic development of the faith of the people. The continued search for thus says the Lord and getting no conventional, humanly mediated oracle in concrete or precise answers in the Catholic Church Tradition tend to lead to a practice of Christianity that is laden with double belonging in South-West Nigeria. There are instances where oracular engagements in the Bible are cited as instances that corroborate and justify the people practices. There is

a need for proper catechesis in making clear distinctions in this apparent substantial reference point. As it is, the Catholic Church ethical and religious presuppositions currently hold no significant sway on the people's experiences and tendencies to handle their fears and aspirations in the consultation of the oracles. Individual Catholics in this environment often take steps in practical handling of personal issues that may warrant oracular consultations without recourse to Catholic ethical and religious presuppositions. The offerings of oracular advices are often seen as more practical than the same ideal as mediated by the sacraments in the church and enforced by the priest and his lieutenants. To make a significant meaning of the Catholic ethical and religious presupposition, the church must engage the oracular phenomenon in dialogue. There is no doubt that Ifá offers an opportunity for dialogue with the socio-cultural imperatives of the Yorùbás. Since Practical theology as an action theology incorporates the study of the social sciences, a model of conversation between Ifá as an authentic socio-cultural pattern and Christianity could be justifiably established. Such conversation will offer Christians an opportunity to converse with the rudiments of the oracle in an educative manner that will yield a better social, moral, religious and psychological self and communal re-creation. What is needed is a purposeful engagement in practical theology or as Browning would say, a "critical reflection on the church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action towards social and individual transformation." [64] In this regard, a careful separation of what the people considered as a tradition transmitted from God through the ancestors to them and practices acquired in its expression could be a step towards a

<https://assignbuster.com/the-practice-of-oracular-consultation-theology-religion-essay/>

practical theology that could address the situation. The role of the local catechists, who are considered as neither lay faithful nor member of the clergy (an awkward position in the church's hierarchy) is significant in the dialogue between the church and the pressure [experiences] seeking for expression

Conclusion

The experiences of some Nigerian Yoruba Catholics with full recognition of that fact, expressed in their cultural consciousness, buttress the thesis of Tilley that traditions cannot be rightly reduced to tradita [what is transmitted]. The practice of 'enquiry' either of the Lord, as more pronounced among the adherents of the African Indigenous Churches or generally of the oracles, has become one of the main feature of Christian practices among the Yorùbá people, hence a call for a careful practical theological intervention that will address such yearning and aspiration. It was observed in this paper that the people dig into the scripture and perhaps see traces of practices that do not bracket their socio-cultural (religious) practices of enquiring as inimical and unchristian. Whether their efforts are sufficient for the practice or not begs the issue, rather attention should be paid to what such inclination connotes. It calls attention to the response [or lack of it] of the ecclesial hierarchy that seem to dominate the piloting of matters of faith but has remain most inaccessible on such issues, hence the double dealing and border crossing of their flocks. By using Tilley's five standards in appraisal of the peoples' attempt to fashion a tradition that will help facilitate being authentically Christian and proudly Yoruba, it is discovered that the oracular consultation is not totally an authentic practice

and that its grammar need be subject to further studies in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition where " the institutional authorities do not and cannot ' set' the rules for its boundaries.[65]