MERCY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION (ATR)

Francis Anekwe Oborji

For the celebration of the Jubilee Year for Mercy (2016), declared by Pope Francis, it is pertinent that we look at the concept of the term "mercy" in the African Traditional Religion (ATR) in its relation to the Christian teaching on the term. What is the meaning of the word "mercy" in the worldview of the adherents of African Traditional Religion? This is what we are to examine in this brief write-up. Already, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), to mark the Jubilee Year for Mercy, had published a small document entitled: *Celebrating Mercy with Believers of Other Religions*.[1] The PCID document discussed traditional religions in general, and made some salient points that pertain also to the African Traditional Religion (ATR). As a way of definition, by the term "traditional religion" today we normally mean the so-called primal religions that used to be practiced (and/or still practiced) by indigenous and ethnic peoples of the southern continents before the advent of Christianity or Islam in those areas. Because of their primordiality, that is, in relation to the historical or universalist religions, they were at one time erroneously described as "primitive religions" by the evolutionists, European explorers and authors. We may think for instance of the African Traditional Religion (the subject of this essay), that is typical of the people, ethnic groups or communities living in traditional societies of the continent. Most Christians we see today from the continent of Africa are either descendants of the followers of ATR or were converted from the traditional religion. In other words, African Christians we see today had ancestors who depended on the traditional religion for their religious dealings at the time.

Moreover, as a Christian theme, the term "mercy" does not have a direct and immediate correlation as such in the languages of most of African traditional societies associated with the traditional religion. But it is evident that mercy is not something strange to the vocabulary or religious consciousness and cultures of the Africans of societies of the traditional religion. It is also evident that the term "mercy" in its general sense and significance is not something peculiar to the Christian thought alone. People of African traditional society, religion and culture have their own ways of expressing and practicing mercy according to their own understanding and reality. Mercy is both religious and cultural in its meaning and expression. It is a basic cultural and community expression of the society and therefore of the adherents of the traditional religion. In what follows, we shall discuss mercy in ATR from two perspectives, namely: a) The African Traditional Religion's conceptions of God as creator and sustainer of universe, b) African Traditional Religion's teachings on community life and sharing.

a) African Traditional Religion's conceptions of God as Creator and Sustainer of universe

In the first place, mercy in the ATR can be deduced from the way God is conceptualized in this traditional religion as creator and sustainer of the universe and the human person. It could also be seen from the way ATR accentuates the universe with profound religious meaning. There is among the Africans of the traditional religion, a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of

---

[1] Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, *Celebrating Mercy with Believers of Other Religions*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2016.

human life. There is a presence and strong recognition of a Supreme Being, or still more of *a Father.* This deep awareness and recognition results in a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense.[2] They believe that He is the High God, a Supreme Being and Creator; He has no equal, is not subjected to any power, but controls the entire cosmos. He is not isolated from His creation; rather He is involved in the life of the human beings on earth. He is not visible to mortal eyes but he manifests himself in various ways. The sun, the moon, the stars, rain, rainbow, lightning and thunder are seen as the manifestation of his powers. Therefore, in ATR, there is this great notion of God as the first and ultimate cause and sustainer of things. In reality, a living sense of God as the Supreme personal and physical Being pervades the whole of culture of the Africans of the traditional religion.[3] Scholars distinguish five ontological levels in the African Traditional Religion, in descending order: God, spirits, including both extra-human beings and deceased humans, living and nascent human beings, the remainder of biological life, and lifeless objects. There is also a sixth sort of being, a power or energy pervading all things. God controls this power, as do spirits to a lesser extent.[4]

Therefore, when Africans of the traditional religion explain the universe as having been created by God, they are automatically looking at the universe in a religious way. In the view of the people of traditional religion, the universe is profoundly religious and treat it as such. It is also a widespread view among adherents of ATR that God continues to create. Thus, the creation of the universe did not stop in the distant past: it is an ongoing process, which will probably never end. In many African societies of the traditional religion, it is believed that the universe is divisible into two. These are the visible and the invisible parts, or the heavens (or sky) and the earth. Some people, however, hold that the universe is in the form of a three-tier creation, namely: the heavens, the earth and the underworld, which lies below it. However, the Africans of traditional religion do not think of these divisions as separate but see them as linked together. The heavenly part of the universe is the home of the stars, sun, moon, meteorites, sky, the wind and the rain, with, all the phenomena connected with them such as thunder and lightning, storms, eclipses of the sun and the moon, 'falling stars', and so on. It is also thought to be the home of God, although people cannot quite locate where he dwells, other than saying that he lives in 'the sky', meaning 'heaven', or 'beyond the clouds', or they simply say that 'God does not live on the earth like men'. God is often believed to have other beings living with him or close to him. Some of these are in charge of different departments of the universe, others are his messengers and servants or ministers, and some are like his children. However, other adherents of ATR say that God dwells completely, alone and does everything himself, since he is all-powerful. It is generally held that the heavenly universe is not empty but that it has its own population. It is teeming with its own kinds of life in addition to the visible objects mentioned above. This means that it is more or less the counterpart of the earth, even though what goes on there is invisible to us.

The keyword here is that God cares for the people. God is the creator and origin of the universe and everything that inhabits the earth, including man and woman. God not only created the universe but he cares, and that is why he shares in every detail in the affairs of man and woman and the community through the mediation of the ancestors and God's omnipresence. In other words, ATR has anthropomorphic interpretation

---

[2] VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Nostra Aetate,* Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 28 October 1965: *AAS* 58 (1966) 740-744: 2.

[3] PAUL IV, *Africae Terarum,* Apostolic Message to the Peoples of Africa, 29 October 1967: AAS 69 (1967) 1073-1102: 8.

[4] Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, Kenya 2005, 13ff.

of the universe where the human person is at the center of the created world and he or she is conceptualized as the being that receives the greatest attention of God the Creator. As the Creator of the universe, God is outside and beyond it. At the same time, since he is also its sustainer, a just judge and upholder, he is very close to the universe. However, humanity has been put at the center of the universe. Humankind is also like the priest of the universe, linking the universe with God, its Creator. Humanity awakens the universe, speaks to it, listens to it, and tries to create harmony with the universe. It is humanity who turns parts of the universe into sacred objects and who uses other things for sacrifices and offerings. These are constant reminders to people that they regard it as a religious universe. Since human person thinks of himself or herself as being at the center, he or she consequently sees the universe from that perspective. It is as if the whole world exists for human person's sake. Therefore, traditional religion people look for the usefulness of the universe to human person,what the world can do for man, and how man can use the world for his own good. This attitude towards the universe is deeply engrained among the people of traditional religions. Man sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavors to live in harmony with it. Man is not the master in the universe; he is only the center, the friend, the beneficiary, the user. For that reason, he has to live in harmony with the universe, obeying the laws of natural, moral and mystical order as laid down by the traditions and customs handed down by the ancestors. If these are unduly disturbed, it is the human person, who suffers most. Traditional religion people have come to these conclusions through long experience, observation and reflection.

b) African Traditional Religion's Teachings on Community Life and Sharing

Secondly, mercy in African Traditional Religion can be deduced from the concept of community among the people of the traditional religion. ATR is basically, community cultural religion. To say this is to recognize that as a traditional religion, ATR functions as the life wire of the community and its component families. In this sense, community just like the concept of family in African culture and traditional religion, includes all living members of these groups, besides being mystically connected to the ancestors and, through social pacts, to outsiders such as friends and others. Besides, membership within the community (clan or tribe), is usually brought about by special initiation rites showing thereby the sacredness of the community. In other words, the category "community" in societies of African Traditional Religion evokes not only blood communal membership of few living members, but also the themes of clan, tribe, affinity, maternity, *patria potestas*, priesthood, ancestors (thereby including the themes of mythical time, arch-types, heroes, founders), initiation and hence fecundity, life, power, sacrality, and so forth. This extensive concept of community in traditional religion shows that, although, the formal content of the term "community" is identical in African societies of the traditional religion as it is in many other societies, the mode of its integration in its cultural contexts is different. It is particularly in this concrete mode of integration, that is, in the local coloring of the cultural themes, that the originality of African traditional religion's concept of the community lies. This means that the concept of community in ATR has very rich meaning. One of which is that the community is not made up of only those who are still living in the flesh. The unseen ancestors and those yet to be born are part of the community and are every inch interested in it. In addition, ATR's sense of the community extends beyond the immediate members of the neighboring families. It is an extended community, which includes all the descendants of a particular progenitor (ancestor). A typical example would be the extended patriarchal community composed of the community head and council of elders. The concept of community in ATR and African culture derives from the extension in time through matrimonial links of relationships between parents and children of a particular extended family or clan. Besides, it includes individuals without any parental relationships, but who, having been put under the care of a family head of one of the families that make up the community, end up been considered members of the community.

Moreover, in African societies of the traditional religion, living community system is seen as culturally binding. It is seen as a fact of life. Through the family, each person is born into a community. People practice extended family system through which every member of the family is taken care of in moments of joy or trials of life. People are at home both in the nuclear family and in the extended family in African societies of the traditional religion. The sense of family belongingness is rather strong. For instance, among the Africans, many of their languages have the same word for brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces, the same word for grandfathers and uncles, and sometimes even the same name for fathers and masters. For example, the Igbo of Nigeria have one word for which they use to translate the following English terms: brother, sister, cousin or nephew. As in many African languages, the Igbo have just one word for these English terms and it is "*nwannem.*" The word *nwannem* has three roots. The first is, "*nwa*", which means, son or daughter (child of …). Secondly, there is the word, "*nne*", which means, mother. Finally, the word "*mu*", which means, my or me. Thus, the expression, "*nwannem*" (brother or sister), in its Igbo culturally coloring, refers to someone who, in an African sense, is regarded as "son or daughter of my mother." In other words, for the Africans, my nephews, nieces, and cousins in all their categories, are all my blood relations, and therefore, my brothers and sisters. I must relate with them in all respects just as I relate with my siblings from the same biological father and mother. The sense of family belongingness pervades all these scales on the genealogical ladder. In other words, it is in the sense of genealogy that the system is built.[5]

Therefore, in the extended family all the members of the same generations are "brothers" and "sisters" (what others may refer to as distant cousins); in Africa, for instance, they can only marry outside the family where there are no blood links with their family. Furthermore, any member of the extended family is free to visit the other household and feel at home. In many cases, children of the extended family need not be sent by their "biological parents" to the other household before they can visit there. They are free to visit any household of the extended family at any time and be accepted as well. One does not even need to write or phone the other household before visiting. Such is seen as being too formal in a house where one is considered a member.

Therefore, in African societies of the traditional religion, the stress on family is not on legality but rather on togetherness, on communion, on respect for traditions and on unquestioning acceptance of what the ancestors have practiced, sanctioned and established as the way things are done. From this standpoint, one can reaffirm that the stress is on community. Community life is the soul of many societies of African traditional religion and culture. Again, family in the societies of the traditional religion has a strong sense of the divine. It is true that the father is taken as the head of the family, yet his function has a link with the ancestors. The father is regarded as the family priest. He is regarded as the loving provider for the family unit and as the reference point for tradition and the link with the ancestors. Moreover, the African traditional religion's sense of the family brings out the complementarity of the role of the members of the family. Each member of the family knows his or her role. There are certain duties as well as obligations expected of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children. The emphasis is on communitarian living. The husband or father is appreciated as the protector and symbol of unity. The mother or wife is all the more appreciated as the one who disseminates love, tenderness, care, calm and peace. The children are considered a blessing from God, and as comforters of the parents and helpers of the aged or sick parents and grandparents. According to a general rule, the division of work between family members is done on the bases of two criteria: sex and age; the boys learn their job gradually in company of their father, the girls learn in company of their mother. In other words, the traditional religion sense of the family has room for all its members: parents, children, grandparents and grandchildren, sick and healthy, old and young, hard-working and handicapped members.

---

[5] Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation* (2nd edition), Leberit Press, Rome 2005, 202ff.

Family affairs are settled through dialogue. None of the members of the family would dare to expose the failings of his or her family to outsiders.

In another vein, it is through the family that the individual is progressively integrated in the society through the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood, the rites which make the youth a real member of the society.[6] In societies of the African traditional religion, rites of passage (initiation rites) are done through tough schooling made of sacrifices, denials and various physical tests, under the guidance of a master and in an unconditional obedience to the elder brothers already initiated. At initiation, the young people take up the apprenticeship of death and they learn to dominate passions and emotions. To accept to go through the initiation rites is to learn with pain, that the passage through death is itself the condition for fertile life. One must die to be reborn. In societies of the African Traditional Religion, to be a newly initiated person, is truly, to experience newness, to be a new *person*. Again, like the bonds of family relationship, the bonds of an initiation lived together creates among the participants, a solidarity which nothing can destroy. Normally, young people of almost the same age are received together for the initiation rite. After initiation the group is proclaimed an Age Grade. They are now recognized as adults and corporate body in the community. It is from now that they can participate fully in the community development. Where any of them fails to participate in the community's assignment to the Age Grade, he receives the appropriate penalty laid down by the customs. Consequently, through the rites of initiation, the young learns that the human person is defined by the community. That one can not fulfill himself except in the fulfillment of his duty within the community. Furthermore, they learn that there are certain duties and rights, in the midst of the group where one must live; that one's first duty is to ensure the survival of the group while respecting the traditions, customs and secrets of the process of initiation. At the family level, the children have already received the apprenticeship of all these. The various members of the family have taught them the roles of adults. It is from the family that the children learn the first elements of tradition, in an atmosphere of love, trust and of friendship, characterized by an absolute respect to the elders of the family.

As regards marriage, this is a family affair. This means that marriage involving a member of the family is considered not just the affair of the young man and his fiancée (or the young woman and her fiancé), but a long process between both families (entailing the marriage payment by the fiancé, religious ceremonies and sacrifice, and the celebration of the marriage itself). The long process is often carried out on behalf of the intending couple by their families. One of the major reasons of the family's strong involvement in marriages stems from the fact that the children that would result from marriages are already counted members of the family. In fact, only the family head can give *his* daughter in marriage and receive wives for *his* sons. Marriage in turn, creates new relationships between couples and between them and their various in-laws and the two families thus allied.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, one can virtualize the cultural meaning of "mercy" in traditional religions. This is found in the people's constant search to live in harmony with God, nature and with one another through community living as laid down by their ancestral traditions and customs. The breach of any aspect of the customs and traditions for harmonious living as laid down by the ancestors by any living member of the community or the community itself is regarded as an offence against the ancestral tradition and the supreme God, the Creator of the universe. To appease God and the ancestors and restore harmony for the well-being

---

[6] A typical example of African initiation rite – the passage from adolescent to adulthood, can be glanced from Camara Laye's account of his own initiation in his native village in Guinea, in his autobiographical novel. See Camara Laye, *The African Child*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1954.

of the individual or the community, sacrifice is needed. Sacrifice in this sense becomes the way adherents of the traditional religion use to welcome back an offender into its main fold after a period of estrangement caused by negligence or evil acts committed by the offender. In ATR, an offence of this kind has both personal and communitarian dimensions. Any offence by any member of the community is seen as an infringement against the community and its ancestral traditions. In this sense, every offence has a religious interpretation and so needs religious response to reestablish the offender once more into the mainstream of the life of the community. This helps to remove the sense of guilt both for the offender and the community as a whole. Again, the strong sense of the community in ATR helps to protect and take care of the weak and needy of the society as laid down by the traditions and customs of the people. This practice brings out the cultural sense of mercy as compassion, forgiveness, care and solidarity as virtualized in the way of life of adherents of African Traditional Religion.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BRELICH, A., *Introduzione alla storia delle religioni,* Roma 1966.

CLARK, P. (ed.), *Traditional Religions*, London 1988.

MBITI, J.S., *Introduction to African Religions*, Heinemann Books, Oxford 1991.

MBITI, J.S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann Books, Oxford 1990.

OBORJI, F.A. *Christianity and Traditional Religions: Orientations for a Pastoral Approach*, Leberit SRL Press, Rome 2009.

OBORJI, F.A. *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, Kenya 2005.

VISCA, D. "Traditional Religions", in: LATOURELLE, R. – FISICHELLA, R. (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 1994, 844-849.

Francis Anekwe OBORJI, a Catholic diocesan priest from Nigeria, holds the Chair of Contextual Theology and Inculturation in the Faculty of Missiology of the Pontifical Urban University, Rome.