Religious Experience: The Perspective of African Traditional Religion

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To cite this article:
Johnson Uchenna Ozioko. Religious Experience: The Perspective of African Traditional Religion. *International Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 9, No. 4, 2021, pp. 186-192. doi: 10.11648/j.ijp.20210904.12

Abstract: The question of religious experience constitutes one of the most topical issues in contemporary philosophical reflections on religion. The multiplicity and diversity of beliefs and religious phenomena have rendered any attempt at arriving at a consensus on the meaning of spiritual experience and on what experiences legitimately fall within its purview an arduous task. This essay explores the nature of religious experience in African Traditional Religion. The African finds himself in a sacred universe where he is inextricably immersed in a network of relationships. He constantly relates with spiritual, animate, and inanimate beings which overtly or covertly affect his life and well-being in the world. Since each being in the hierarchy has some religious significance, his spiritual experience may broadly be construed in terms of the experience he makes of all these beings, which together make up his sacred universe. In the more strict sense, it is the religious subject's experience of the spiritual beings in his religious world, and this takes multiple dimensions. Beginning with a clarification of the meaning of African Traditional Religion, the essay presents theAfrican traditional religious pantheon, enunciates what constitutes spiritual experience in African Traditional Religion, its understanding, and its multifaceted expressions.

Keywords: Africa, Religion, God, Ancestors, Spirits, Divinities, Experience

1. Introduction

Let me commence with an African paradigm prayer that encapsulates many elements that express the reality and substance of religious experience in the context of African traditional religion. It is a libation prayer offered by an Igboman of Nigeria in which he invites different spiritual beings to which he is inalienably related, in their hierarchy, to participate in his offering [1].

Chukwu bi n'igwebiataaoji (The Most High God, come and eat kola)

Alabiataaoji (The earth goddess, come and eat kola)

Nnambiataaoji (My father, come and eat kola)

Ndiuwa m, bianutaaoji (Forces benevolent to me, come and eat kola).

Religious experience seems to have been generally acknowledged as a common phenomenon of all religions. However, because of the multiplicity and diversity of beliefs and spiritual phenomena, undeniable complexity attends any attempt at specifying what exactly is religious experience or which experiences authentically fall within this category's

semantic area [2]. Even within the same religious context, the similar difficulty seems evident in offering a commonly shared notion of spiritual experience. Be that as it may, our intention here is not to detail the different nuances presented by the idea of religious experience. In the briefest compass, we assume its most common understanding as the experience the human religious subject has of something that is extra-human. In other words, the human subject's encounter with something that transcends him. Different religious cultures have used different names and categories to denominate this extra-human reality – God, the sacred, the divine, etc. Thus, religious experience may be commonly understood as the human experience of God, the sacred, the divine, or other supernatural and transcendent realities. If we may borrow from Heidegger [3], to have an experience of something means that something happens to us, meets us, comes to us, upsets, and transforms us.

Our interest in this essay is with what constitutes religious experience in the context of African traditional religion, how it is understood, lived, and expressed in the traditional African religious milieu. Its originality and novelty lie on the

fact that though much studies have been done both on the theme of religious experience and on African Traditional Religion, attention has never been directed to the discussion of religious experience from the perspective of African Traditional Religion. Different scholars have cautioned against the tendency among scholars who are not adherents of African Traditional Religion to discuss this reality from the lens of their particular religious backgrounds. We have to acknowledge the difficulty posed by the differences between the Western conceptual schemes and the conceptual schemes of traditional African thought [4]. In that light, we shall, first of all, try to illuminate a correct understanding of African Traditional Religion. Secondly, we shall give a sketch of the African Traditional religious pantheon, outlining the hierarchy of beings that make up the religious world of the African. This will lead us to the climax of our discourse, where we shall adumbrate and reflect on how religious experience is lived and manifested from the African traditional religious perspective. A remarkable difference which has been observed betweenWestern and African thought schemes is that, in their points of departure, whereas the Western thought is essentially ontological, the African thought is sort of aetiological-vitalogical. In other words, the African thought scheme tends to respond to the question of the "sense" and the "how" of things, and thus privileges the phenomenological-descriptive method of argumentation [5]. Our discourse will also principally adopt this method.

2. Meaning of African Traditional Religion

Philosophers of religion are now so much acquainted with the difficulty posed by the question of the meaning of religion that it seems a cliché continuing to reiterate the problem. Perhaps, their only consensus in this regard seems to be their univocal acknowledgment that providing a commonly shared definition of religion is a highly complex and challenging task. William James [6], in the face of the diversity of human belief structures and religious phenomena, expressed deep skepticism about finding a coherent essential definition of religion. However, leaving aside all the difficulties and complications encountered in trying to define religion, let us adopt a general definition of religion as "the set of experiences, beliefs, ritual acts, and moral behaviors, both individual and collective, which refer to and are addressed to one or more divinities, that is to one or more personal realities endowed with a power that dominates man, which the latter adores and towards which he nourishes total devotion in view of his own salvation" [7]. But even with this working definition of religion, one still runs into further complications when one tries to respond to the question of the meaning of African Traditional Religion since one is inevitably confronted with so many other questions. Among other things, it may first be asked, to which Africa is one referring? Africa is not a tiny village made up of a homogeneous group of people. It is a vast

continent comprised of highly diversified and heterogeneous cultural, ethnic, language, and even religious groups. The difficulty becomes if it is possible to treat all these groups with their differences, idiocyncracies and peculiarities as just a group or as different groups. Moreover, given the divergences in terms of beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, etc., is it legitimate to talk about African traditional religion instead of religions? Should it not have been rationally safer to denominate the spiritual reality of Africa in the plural instead of in the singular, that is, saying traditional religions and not just religion? By the way, why should it be qualified as traditional? Does this qualification not relegate the spiritual reality of the Africans to an anachronism of the past? These are just some of the immediate questions that arise in considering the meaning of African Traditional Religion. However, we shall not enter the full details of the debates that some of these questions have generated; we shall only assume some of the more reasonable and more generally accepted positions.

Though an evidently very vast continent, in discussing African Traditional Religion, our attention is particularly directed to sub-Saharan Africa, the central area lying between the Sahara Desert and South Africa, whose cultural unity has been persuasively defended by different African scholars [8]. Regarding whether we have to talk about religion or religions, two schools of thought have emerged, each adducing solid arguments in favour of its claim. Those who claim that the African spiritual reality is to be denominated in the plural argue that "religion in Africa is a folk or ethnic religion arising from the community-minded nature of Africans. Every tribe, clan or community has her separate religion and mode of worship and practice" [9]. Consequently, when we talk of "traditional religions", the accent is to be placed on what is specific to each environment, people, and land. According to John Mbiti, who is the leading champion of this view, "We speak of African Traditional Religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African Peoples (tribes), and each has its religious system" [10]. Other scholars advocate a denomination of the African traditional religious reality in the singular. They argue that we talk of traditional religion when we want to underline the common denominator. This position places accent on the ethical-mythical core that is the basis of all religious expressions in Africa which distinguish them from the nucleus of other religions with universalistic claims like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc" [11]. BolajiIdowu is the chief protagonist of this view. He contends that even though Africa is made up of many tribes, they have many traits in common because they all originated from the same stock. So, their religion is one, even though it is espressed in different ways based on socio-cultural factors. According to him, "it is on this identical factor that we can speak of African Traditional Religion in the singular" [12]. The renowned African traditional religious scholar, EmefieIkenga-Metuh [13], has suggested that the controversy here seems a fundamentally academic problem with little practical significance since those who practice the religion

are not inany way interested in whether it is denominated in the singular or plural; it is only a problem for religious scholars. In his opinion, sociologists and anthropologists privilege the denomination in the plural. They are interested in studying every group of religious beliefs in its social and environmental context. Theologians and perhaps philosophers may be more inclined to denominate African religious reality in the singular since their accent is somewhat on the transcendent validity of religious beliefs to express a human relationship with God. On the question of the qualification "traditional", we consider it entirely misleading to understand African Traditional Religion from the perspective of something belonging to the past or overtaken. The qualification is instead better understood from the perspective of its constituting all the acquisitions that successive generations have acquired from the dawn of time in both spiritual and practical spheres of life. Even though there is an essential reference to the past, it is not a static or closed reality, but a dynamic phenomenon constantly restructured depending on relationships and changing historical circumstances. African Traditional Religion is at the same time ancient and modern, old and new. Its present and even its future cannot be extricated from its past, and they are all intimately intertwined. The Nigerian prelate, Francis Cardinal Arinze explained that by traditional religions, "we mean those religions which, unlike the world religions that have spread into many countries and cultures, have remained in their original socio-cultural environment. The word 'traditional' does not refer to something static or unchangeable, but rather denotes this localised matrix"[14].

In light of the above clarifications, we may agree with J. O. Awulalu [15], who affirms that we mean the Africans' indigenous religious beliefs and practices when we say African Traditional Religion. It is the religion that resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans. It is practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by many Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians. Clarifying the meaning of "traditional" used to qualify the African religious reality, Awulalu explains that "the word means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as connecting the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a 'fossil' religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women". For Ikenga-Metuh [16], by African Traditional Religion is meant the "institutionalized patterns of beliefs practiced by various African Societies from time immemorial in response to the 'Supernatural' as manifested in their environment and experience". This understanding of African Traditional Religion, of course, unequivocally belies and exposes the misguidedness of such names as animism, totemism, fetishism, paganism, etc. which anthropologists, ethnologists, and missionaries have used in the past, and sometimes even in the present, to denominate African Traditional religion. A careful analysis of such epithets reveals them to be misnomers. Even though African Traditional Religion may have some elements of what is connoted by these denominations, they prove diametrically reductive in characterizing the entire African traditional religious phenomena [4]. Instead, seen through a more holistic and comprehensive prism, African Traditional Religion is a lived reality that involves and permeates the totality of African life. It is a cultural heritage that determines the spontaneous and subconscious relations of the African peoples and their interpretation of reality [17].

3. African Traditional Religious Pantheon

The observation by the prodigious African religious scholar, John Mbiti, that "Africans are notoriously religious" [10] remains irrefutable. Religion so suffuses and penetrates every aspect of the African world and life that the whole African world can be considereda religious world. In fact, in Africa, religion and culture are so intertwined that African religion has been called a cultural religion and African culture a religious culture. As Mbiti would say, "It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe" [18]. When we talk about the African religious universe, we do not refer only to the visible material world. According to the African worldview, the universe embraces both the visible and the invisible, the sacred and the profane, all arranged in their hierarchy and chained to the human being's well-being or oppression, happiness or unhappiness as the case may be. In the African religious pantheon, the visible and the invisible, the profane and the sacred, are so intimately united that they become like the two sides of the same coin. They are inseparable and in constant interaction [19]. The two worlds and their inhabitants are united by participation in a common life force. This explains why for the Africans, life remains the preeminent value. The Igbo people of Nigeria would say, "*Ndubuisi*" – "life is supreme". The conception of the life force remains undoubtedly the best key for entrance into understanding the African traditional religious universe, since every reality in the african world, at every level, is read from the point of view of the life force.

At the highest echelon of the hierarchy of beings in the African religious universe is the Supreme Being, God, recognized by most African peoples and cultures as the source of life and the creator of all that exists. He is conceived as a Supreme personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, and just. Different African peoples have different names for this one Supreme Being, and this also explains why some people have erroneously considered African religious beliefs as polytheistic. From the Supreme Being, the life force originates directly and then flows and diffuses to every other being, sometimes directly and most times through different intermediaries. Directly below the Supreme Being in the

hierarchy are different divinities who may be considered the most immediate collaborators of the Supreme Being. They draw their existence directly from the Supreme Being and depend on him for their being and operations. As Onah explains, "Some of them are personified attributes of the Supreme Being, like the thunder divinity, which usually represents God's wrath. Others are God's manifestation in some natural phenomena like the sun (regarded in many African cultures as the God's son), and the earth (which also represents the maternal aspects of the deity), mountains, seas, and so on" [4]. People have often called these divinities gods, which is why some people have concluded that African religious belief is polytheistic, thinking that the Supreme Being is only a *primus inter pares* with the other divinities. But this is mistaken, since, as Ikenga-Metuh rightly affirms, "they are created by God and are subordinate to Him. They are his messengers. Their intimate but subordinate relationship with God is conceptualized in terms of Father/Son, Chief/messenger or lord/servant relationships" [20]. There are also some dead heroes and prominent ancestors who are later sort of divinized and thus share the rank of the divinities. Next to the deities are other spirits who may be good or bad. Some of them are the disincarnated spirits of some dead people who, for some reasons, have not been able to find their place among their ancestors. The most predominant spiritual beings in the African religious pantheon are the ancestors referred to as the "living-dead." This is because, though dead, they continue to form practical parts of their earthly families and clans, constantly influencing their lives, decisions, and choices. They are often targets of African traditional worship. Africans so prize them that people foreign to the culture have often erroneously reduced the entire African Traditional Religion to ancestor worship. There is also belief in the presence genes and other telluric forces and the spirits of witches and wizards who, though coming from living persons, are believed to have the capacity to leave their bodies, inhabiting lower animals and causing havoc to others.

The visible African world is also organized in a hierarchical form. The king or queen occupies the apex of this hierarchy, depending on whether the family system is patrilineal or matrilineal. In some African societies, the king embodies and symbolizes divine authority and community unity. As testified by Olupona, "leaders in traditional African systems impact secular and religious wisdom and guidance to their subjects, while also being custodians and guardians of religious centers such as shrines, temples, and sacred forests. In some cases, kings are also said to possess mystical, life-sustaining poker, with their well-being intimately entwined with the well-being of their people, lands, and institutions" [21]. There are then the clan heads. They are also seen as symbolizing the presence and authority of the ancestors among their descendants. Usually, they hold the sacrificial knife in their clans, becoming the privileged servants at the ancestors' altar. Different families have their family heads who are the center of family life and worship in their various families. They are the direct link between the ancestors and their family members. Of course, family in Africa is not just circumscribed to the idea of parents and children but is instead an extended family which embraces all those linked by the relationship of blood, marriage, and even friendship. It includes the living, the dead, and even the yet-to-be-born. Members of different families are united under the clan head, and they form one community. Below the human being in the African traditional religious pantheon are animals, plants, and other inorganic beings. They are all at the service of man, either contributing to enhancing or diminishing his life [22]. As earlier affirmed, what unites all these beings is participation in life. At the center of the entire hierarchy of beings, both visible and invisible, isman, his life, and well-being. In this light, the traditional African worldview has been considered to be both spiritual and anthropocentric: "It is a spiritual worldview because all the spiritual beings are believed to be constantly in action in the world of humans. It is anthropocentric because the actions of God and the other spiritual beings are generally directed towards humans for their sustenance and well-being; and infra-human realities are thought to be ordered towards the promotion of human life" [4]. The life of man is supreme; whatever enhances and favours his life is good, but whatever harms or diminishes his life is bad and so has to be avoided. The African man worships and seeks a good relationship with the Supreme Being since he is the source and sustainer of life. He worships, placates, and seeks a good relationship with the divinities and ancestors because of their privileged role in mediating between God and man and enhancing man's life. The good spirits are also invoked and befriended for the services they render to man to ensure his well-being. Since they are damaging to man's life and well-being, the evil and wicked spirits are evaded. Divinities, ancestors, and good spirits serve also to protect man from the insidiousness of these malignant spirits.

4. Religious Experience in African Traditional Religion

The African man thus finds himself in a religious universe, immersed in a network of relationships with spiritual, animate, and inanimate beings. These beings overtly or covertly affect his life and well-being in the world. Since each being in the hierarchy has some religious significance, his spiritual experience may broadly be construed in terms of the experience he makes of all these beings, which together make up his religious universe. However, in the more strict sense, it is the religious subject's experience of the spiritual beings in his religious world, especially of the Supreme Being to whom he owes his entire life and well-being. As we have earlier indicated, African Traditional Religion is a lived reality that saturates and permeates every facet and moment of African life. The adherent of African Traditional Religion may not tell you the conceptual meaning of religious experience. But it is something he lives out every day and finds expression in his prayers, sacrifices, dances, and other

ritual activities and attittudes that define the reality of African Traditional Religion. As evidenced in our opening prayer, for instance, the religious subject in his libation invokes the Supreme Being, the divinities, ancestors, and spirit. He is united in communion with all of them in his offering. While some experiences are direct, some others are through intermediaries; moreover, while some beings are sometimes objects of direct human religious experience, at some other times, they become intermediaries through which the religious subject has experience of a higher being.

Occupying the highest point of the African religious universe, the Supreme Being is the first object of the religious experience of the African. The Supreme being is both transcendent and mysterious; he cannot be fully understood or known. Because of this, it would seem that the religious subject does not have a direct experience of the Supreme Being since some have thought of him as a *dues otiosus*. But that is not true because the Africans also know how to unite transcendence with immanence, distance with closeness, in their conception of the Supreme Being. Different African peoples have various myths that buttress the African concept of God's transcendence and immanence. As some African scholars have rightly observed, "The African traditional religion brought the transcendent God in the sky into everyday life. The transcendent only became immanent. It did this through the innumerable deities who shepherd different aspects of the African life" [23]. The consciousness of the transcendence of God in African religious conception does not negate the consciousness among Africans also of his immanence in their daily affairs. This consciousness explains the constant expressions of dependence on Him by the Africans in all their undertakings. In every situation of life, traditional Africans show profound reliance on God, who, in their eyes, is at the same time near and approachable. Oscar Bimenyi [24] has, for instance, in his study of the religious experience of the Africans, spelled out the interior attitude of the Africans with God, which brings to light the African conception of God's immanence. This attitude finds its first expression in terms of a child uncertain in his walk but daily guided by God's caring hands. Secondly, the African is confident of God's perpetual presence. God is the one who provides for his everyday life, always providing him with good things. Thirdly, the African is conscious of his belonging to God and enjoying a preeminent relationship with God. Finally, the African sees himself as God's privileged interlocutor. God has given him the gifts of word and knowledge with which he can communicate directly with God. However, because of his transcendence, the African also considers the Supreme Being distant from man and does not always have direct experience of him. In fact, in Africa, public worship is not usually directed to the Supreme Being, and in most cases, it may be difficult to find shrines dedicated directly to him [25]. It remains true, however, as Francis Cardinal Arinze, "that He rarely receives sacrifices but is regarded the ultimate recipient of the sacrifices offered to the inferior spirits" [26]. The Supreme being does not usually speak or appear to

people directly. He makes himself and his actions present through the different divinities and spirits who are sort of his messengers and intermediaries between him and man.

Therefore next to the Supreme Being are the divinities and spirits as objects of religious experience in African Traditional Religion. They are mediators between the Supreme Being and man and usually figure as direct and immediate targets of African prayers and sacrifices. In different African communities, there are shrines dedicated to the different divinities and spirits who are invoked for the various necessities of the people. In this respect, the mediating role of the clan heads, who are often also the priests of these deities, is very significant as they usually have to consult with them and communicate their intentions to the other religious subjects. In traditional African societies, such consultations were usually paramount in the face of calamities and disasters, wars and sickness, or if someone has committed an abomination. The priests of the deities needed to hear from them to know what action to be taken. In Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, there is the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves addressed as "Agbala" who was consulted in the wake of such incidents. Ikemefuna, who was brought to Umuofia in compensation for the killing of an Umuofia woman by their neighbouring village, was himself eventually killed by the Umuofians because "the oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it" [27]. Okonkwo, the novel's chief protagonist, struck at his youngest wife during the week of peace. This act was prohibited because it offended the great earth goddess that ensured a bountiful harvest. The priest of the deity, Ezeani, was unequivocal in his rebuke to Okonkwo: "The evil you have done can ruin a whole clan. The Earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" [28]. At his instruction, Okonkwo had to offer one she-goat, a hen, a length of cloth, and a hundred cowries to placate the earth goddess. Thus, the priests of these divinities have immediate and direct experience of them as they directly talk to them and give them instructions. How this happens and whether the priests practically hear the voices of these divinities and spirits, only the priests may be able to tell. Diviners in the African traditional religious context are also often privileged to have direct experience of the divinities and spirits. Olupona relates that, "Research among the Sukuma in northwest Tanzania concludes that mediumistic divination involves spirit possession, the agency of the human's spirit. It is the reception of un-foretold knowledge revealed either through dreams or directly from an ancestral guide. The guide communicates with the diviner at the height of his altered state" [29]. Mediumistic divination is common in many traditional African societies, and the diviners are believed to communicate directly with the gods and spirits and subsequently relate their minds to the religious subjects.

Besides the divinities and spirits, the ancestors or the living-dead occupy a privileged and preeminent position in the religious experience of Africans. Of course, as earlier pointed out, some prominent ancestors already find their place in the ranks of the divinities. According to Olupona,

"Ancestors, having transcended the human realm, occupy a higher realm of existence and are equipped to bestow honour and blessings on the living members of their lineage" [30]. Thus, as earlier pointed out, the ancestors are prized very dearly by the living, and they are targets of regular prayers, sacrifice, and veneration. What Arinze testifies of the Igboman of Nigeria is true of many traditional Africans. According to him, "The Igboman, while eating, does not forget to throw out in front of his house little lumps of *foufou* (pounded yam or cassava) dipped in sauce. This morsel is for the unseen ancestral spirits who hover around, especially at supper time. And lest any be forgotten the father of the family generally adds: '*Lizuenu, kezuenu, onye o fielunkeyaka'* (eat all of you, divide it up all of you; he who gets no share let his share be the greatest" [31]. The ancestors are ever-present to share in the life of their earthly family, monitoring their affairs, intervening in various critical moments of their lives, and ensuring that they adhere to their traditions and customs. Sometimes, some living members of the family report receiving messages directly from their departed ones, hearing their voices, and talking with them. Sometimes, there have been reports of food items or drinks offered to the ancestors being practically consumed. These may be isolated incidents, but generally, it is believed that the family heads who hold the sacrificial knife of the family have direct communication with the ancestors. A spectacular way through which the ancestors usually manifest their presence among many African societies is through the masquerade cult. For instance, in the Igbo religious tradition, masquerades represent the ancestral spirits, and it is believed that the ancestral spirits communicate through them. Though underneath the mask is a human being, the mask has transformed the person into an ancestral spirit for the Igbo man. That is why unmasking a masquerade is akin to killing the ancestors. Chinua Achebe, still in his *Things Fall Apart,* recounts a particular religious ceremony held annually in honor of the earth deity. During this ceremony, the masquerade "Egwugwu" – an ancestral spirit – used to dance to grace the celebration. Enoch, a zealous and energetic Christian convert, unmasked an "Egwugwu" on one such occasion. This was reckoned a very grievous offense to the clan since he had practically killed an ancestral spirit in doing so.

Another prominent African religious phenomenon where religious experience is made manifest is the rite of coming-of-age initiations. Initiation rites among the Africans effectively ensure their harmonious integration in society and favor their contact with the invisible world. They are nothing other than the official incorporation of young men and women of the clan into the community generated by the ancestors. The principal purpose is to make the initiated assume indestructible bonds that bind them to the ancestral laws, customs, and traditions. Anybody who breaks with these laws and customs *ipso facto* puts himself against society [32]. A very important initiation rite among many African communities is the puberty rites. As Olupona explains, these rites "transition a person from childhood to adulthood when younger members in society learn ancestral knowledge from their elders. The events transpire in seclusion, usually in a natural place (e.g., forests or grasslands) beyond the community's perimeter. Wild areas and natural places – the 'bush' – are places where powerful occult forces dwell and can be accessed" [33]. Puberty rites both for young men and women are thus rites of passage from childhood to adulthood and initiation of these young adults into their societies' social and communitarian life. The candidates are usually separated from the profane world, symbolized in some African cultures by putting off their old clothes and undergoing circumcision. They are kept in a secluded place where they receive different instructions, after which they are ceremoniously reintegrated into society. The secret place where the initiation takes place symbolizes both the tomb where the candidate's old existence is consummated and the maternal womb where he is born to new life. Thus, even though it is still the same person, the initiation ceremony effects an ontological transformation in him, signified in some societies by an imposition of a new name on the person. This religious experience is very profound. It may not have meaning to the non-initiate, but it is full of signification and value to those initiated.

5. Conclusion

Religious experience is thus a very diffuse phenomenon in the African traditional religious context. It is not just restricted to the experience of the Supreme Being, extends also to the experience of the numerous spiritual entities inhabiting the African sacred universe. While some religious subjects like kings, priests, elders, and diviners are often privileged to have direct experience of these spiritual entities, the common religious subject often has to rely on the mediation of these intermediaries. How the experience occurs is not usually the object of public knowledge. Often, even those who have the experience may not explain how it happens, and they only know they have experienced something. We have tried to adumbrate some manifestations of these experiences; there are yet many other instances. But the primary task that confronts philosophers of religion in this respect may be to reflect more on these experiences and try to understand what happens and which ones genuinely fall within the purview of religious experiences.

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