



## Research Article

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## African Traditional Religion (ATR): Interrelatedness of Beings and Purification Rites -The Golden Rule for Societal Harmony

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**Abstract:** Most cultures or traditions globally do not recognize the dual nature of the universe. Religions of different sects especially those that see the Ultimate Reality as outside the human habitation; higher and above the physical world; residing in the Supersensible or the Supra-mundane world make a contraction of the human world from the invisible abode-the 'residence' of the spiritual forces. A major religion which has much to do with the metaphysical world is the African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Religion and African world-view recognize a dual world. The physical and the metaphysical; the human and the spiritual. While the spiritual or metaphysical world consists of the Deities, spirits, spirit forces, divinities, ancestors and the likes, the physical world is made up of human beings and other creatures both animate and inanimate. Interestingly, in the African world-view, man in the physical world must constantly behave to attract the favours of the spiritual world or forces for his survival. Man must worship God, woo, lobby or placate the divinities and his ancestors including other mystical powers regularly if he must fulfill and enjoy his destiny on earth and even beyond. To consult with the divine forces, he must appear before them prepared, clean and of no blemish. Appearing before the divinities may be in the form of a traditional medicine practitioner or simply as a worshipper asking for one form of favour or the other. A worshipper or litigant as it were, is required to perform some rites or rituals of cleansing/purification of himself or his environment if his supplications must be heard by the divine for the betterment of all. This work has therefore considered the various approaches and reasons for approaching the divinities and the preparations preceding the approach, which make up the Golden Rule-coming clean or purifying oneself before encountering the divinity. This work is a phenomenological study makes use of documented, observation and interview methods of data gathering and analysis. To approach the divinities, humans going by the African world-view must purify themselves. This is the Golden Rule.

**Keywords:** Approaching, Cleanliness, Demand, Divinities, Physical, Spiritual.

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## INTRODUCTION

African Traditional Religion, like other theistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) recognize and appreciate a world of duality or dualism. A natural and a supernatural world. A mundane and a supra-mundane world. A sensible and a super-sensible world. This concept of two worlds seeks to answer for the African, fundamental questions about the place and relationship of man with the universe and especially with nature and spirits. Answers to these fundamental problems provide man with the blue-print for controlling his environment and for establishing his social and political institutions (Metuh, 1987).

The visible world, "terra firm" (solid earth) is populated by man and all material surroundings familiar to man – sky, earth, rivers, forests, mountains and so forth. The invisible world consists of the heavenly realm, said to be the home (place) of the creators and deities which is thought or believed to be located somewhere in the sky; and the 'Spirit land, said to be the home place of the ancestors, etc. By the Consequential composition of this African Cosmology or world-view, there is therefore a continuous exchange and interaction between beings in

the universe irrespective of the realm (visible or invisible) to which they belong. Man could be possessed by spirits and spirits sometimes incarnate themselves in visible objects. Metuh further observes that man can influence the deities and the spirits through sacrifices, prayers and spells. Conversely, the deities can intervene in human affairs to bring good fortunes to their devotees or misfortune if their laws are flaunted.

Temples (1969) posits that in African world-view, beings are linked by a network of retentionship. No being including man is an Island, nor are beings a juxtaposition of independent forces, each operating on its own. All creatures are found in relationship according to the laws of the hierarchy. Temples reiterates "Nothing moves in the universe of forces without influencing others by its movement. The world of forces is held like 'spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network'. In this wise, the African man tries to maintain this harmony with the supernatural forces; tries to maintain harmony with his family and the human society through Ancestral cult and rite of passage; through divination and magic, he relates with the lower-forces and protects himself against forces of disintegration like witches, sorcerers and evil spirits.

In any attempt to approach these spirit forces, man must come clean through the purification.

## TRADITIONAL PRIESTHOOD AND PURIFICATION

The priest in African Traditional Religion is a mediator between man and the spiritual world. In the African concept, he is a public figure as well as a religious figure usually attached to some cultic centre – a shrine or a temple where he performs certain prescribed forms of rituals on behalf of the people whom such centres are supposed to serve and himself who is also part of a family and of a larger African traditional society. Mbiti (1969) argues that strictly speaking, priests are religious servants associated with everyone who performs religious duties whether in temples, shrines, sacred groves or elsewhere, with different methods of training; from very simple to highly elaborate accompanied with “possession” by the divinity. It is therefore this possession that makes priests a special human – spiritual and human, making any attempt to approach them momentous and epoch and requiring the needed purification and sanctification. Mbiti (1975) posits that the training to become a priest involves various prayers, dances, songs, rituals and crafts and all aspects of religion forming part of the Rites and ritual for his consecration through purification. In the opinion of Arinze (1970), a priest “Is the official servant of a determined spirit who offers sacrifices to the spirit and in general ministers at his or her shrine”. This makes him a candidate of the Golden Rule of regularly engaging himself or herself in the all-important purification Rites.

The duties of a priest according to Anyanwu (1999) are mainly making sacrifices, by offering prayers, conducting public and private rites and ceremonies, administering oaths, caring for the temples and shrines and most importantly, fulfilling their duties as religious intermediaries between man and the divine.

In all of these, it remains the Golden Rule that the priest should firstly prepare himself to be able to occupy this all important office. Thus, there are rites and rituals of initiation into traditional priesthood and those of purification to make him suitable to commune with the metaphysical and the physical worlds. These rites or rituals are also known as purification rites in African Traditional Religion. Priests do not just ascend or mount on the priestly stool without being initiated through rites and rituals as prescribed by tradition to make them fit and proper for the job. Those rites symbolically remove every stain of impurity in readiness to become spiritual agents, made whole to meet the deities and commune with them. The importance of this is better appreciated in the Levitical priests of ancient Israel which also falls into this rule as they were required to be without physical defect and ritually pure before performing their duties. According to Collins (1994), the Levitical priests followed strict guidelines related to physical condition

when going before God in their temples or tabernacle duties.

Leviticus 21 outlines the requirement for the purity that God required of them. A descendant of Aaron had to be pure, unspotted and without physical defects before he could offer sacrifices or offering to God. These defects include blindness, lameness, a marred face, a limb too long, a broken foot, a broken hand, hunchback, dwarfed, a defective eye, eczema, a scab and castration (Leviticus 21:17-23). They can be further categorized into four basic areas: injury, deformity disease and surgery.

Just as the traditional African priest could not go to the shrine to perform religious rites if he is profaned, the ancient Levitical priest could not go near the veil or approach the altar if he had a defect profaning God’s sanctuary. These defects represent the effects of ungodliness or transgressions (sin) which separate man (physical) from the Ultimate Reality (Spiritual) (see also Isaiah 59:1-8). It is to be noted further that when the building of the Temple of God in Jerusalem was completed in 515 BC, the priests followed the instruction given by God in Leviticus for purifying themselves. Notice that in Ezra 6:20 “For the priests and Levites had purified themselves, all of them were ritually clean.

The duties, and responsibilities of traditional priests, ancient Israel’s Levitical priesthood and the spiritual royal priesthood of God are similar in that purity is absolutely required, it is the Golden Rule. The ritual purity of the traditional African priest, and that of the Levitical priesthood were accomplished by such physical activities as ritual washing and sacrifices representing the metaphysical spiritual nature and spiritual cleansing of the mind and attitude.

### African Man's Purification

Awolalu (1976) notes that among Africans, purification is a positive approach to the cleaning and removal of sin and pollution. It involves an outward act which is consequently believed to have a spiritual inner cleansing. The cleansing may be of the body, or of a thing or of a territory or community. Adewuya (2009) adds that if one is aware or is made aware by a diviner that he or she has committed an offence which has resulted in the disruption of his/her neighbours by the interplay of forces or what the researcher calls interaction of Beings, the person will have to undergo a ritual cleansing. This may include ritual shaving of the hair, followed by ritual bathing in a flowing stream. The “washing off” of stains as undertaken by the sinner under the guidance of a priest – on an appointed date, time and place. The sinner provides what the priest directs him/her to bring for the “washing”. This is the golden rule. The whole event is symbolic and dramatic.

Sin by man is here portrayed as a stain and a filthy rag which can be washed off and cast off

respectively. The disappearance of this transgression brings new life just as the rejuvenated person takes on a clean white cloth and casts off the old one. This is done on the belief and back-drop that man in African cosmology radiate a spark of the supersensible world. He succeeds in his journey on earth only when he is in harmonious relationship with other forces of nature. Any pollution of his person separates him from the harmonious relationship with the spiritual world, exposes him and his neighbourhood to the calamities of sickness and death, and leaving him with the sole solution of purification, which restores him and his neighbors including the entire society to blissfulness, concord and tranquility.

The significance of purification rites among many African societies is evident in the words that are used even amongst the Zulu people of Southern Africa. Adewuya notes that among the Zulu purification is called either as 'ukuhlambulula' or 'ukusefa' both of which mean "to make thin", to make a person free, loose, unbounded' and derive from the word 'ukuhlamba' which means "to wash (Sundiker, 1961). In Zulu traditional life, purification rites are the processes through which a person is made "free and refined of dross and imperfection (Bryant, Zulu-English Dictionary). Thus, from the practice of ritual, in the figure of impurity, a concept of guilt develops and, as such, purification often emerge without a break. For traditional Africans, purification is also a social process. To belong to a group requires one to conform to its standard of purity, the outsider, the uninitiated, and the non-member are considered unclean. Therefore, the emotionally charged activities that accompany purification or cleansing constitute a ritual demonstration.

### **A Breach of the Social Order**

Adewuya (2009) observes rightly that society as conceived by Africans is a creation of the Supreme Being and it is a moral society. It is because of its morality that Metuh refers to the activities that go on in it as interaction of Beings, which interaction either leads to the reinforcement or weakening of the beings involved. It is an interaction between natural forces, as they are created by God and as they could be tapped by those who know their workings, just as a chemical compound could be produced by those who know the properties of its component elements. The goal of interaction of beings in African world-view is the maintenance of the integration and balance of the beings in it. Harmonious interaction of beings leads to the mutual strengthening of the beings involved, and enhances the growth of life. A pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the harmony and integration of the whole. When this harmony is broken, there are sanctions recognized as the approved standard of social and religious conduct on the part of the individuals in the society who are found culpable and that of the community as a whole. A breach of, or failure to adhere to the sanction is sin, and thus incurs the displeasure of

the deities and their functions. Sin, is, therefore, doing that which is contrary to the will and directives of deities. It can be in the form of any immoral behaviour, ritual mistakes, any offences against the deities or man, breach of covenant, breaking of taboos and doing anything regarded as abomination and polluting. African do not speak of sin in isolation. It has to be related to the deities and the metaphysical world. If the disequilibrium so caused by the breaking of the taboos must be dislocated, the Golden Rule remains that purification rites must be performed by the culprits to appease the gods.

### **The Purity of the Supersensible World**

Why must the African not pollute or defy himself? Idowu (1962) observes that there is an unspoken awareness of sinless perfection of the Supreme Being that pervades traditional Africa. Firstly, such awareness is evident in the various names that man uses for God in different parts of Africa. The Yoruba people speak of God as 'Oba pipe to ko lo bawon', that is, "the perfect king who is without blemish", or 'Oba mimo', that is "the holy God". Secondly, the awareness of God's holiness is demonstrated by the strict rules which must be followed during rituals having to do with God. To get into and maintain relationship with God, an African must necessarily enter into a covenant with the divinity (Idowu, 1962). Such a covenant is usually based on a number of demands and sanctions. This is later accompanied by strong belief that fulfilling or not fulfilling the demand of covenant relationship produces consequences that affect not only the individual but the whole community. That is why the Igbo people of Nigeria will say "Out aka ruta mmanu, O zuo aka nile", that is "when a finger dips into an oil, it contaminates the whole five fingers".

On the whole therefore, it may be said that as far as African Traditional Religion is concerned, morality arose because of one's consciousness of belonging to the Divine Being/the Supersensible. Consequently, moral values are seen in African context as the offspring of African traditional religion, the basis for purity (which is the golden rule) being to maintain a healthy and harmonious relationship with God, which Carpenter (n.d.) writes that "the historical beginning of all morality is to be found in religion or that in the earliest period of human history, religion and morality were necessary correlates of each other. Smith (1914) agrees that in ancient society all morality, as morality was then understood, was consecrated and enforced by religious motives and sanctions. These sanctions when contravened must be atoned through purification rites, if man must maintain harmony with the Divine, since this divine in African context is pure and sinless.

## **CONCLUSION**

African traditional world-view displays a close link between the spiritual and the material realms. Beings in the spiritual realm are archtypes of beings in the temporal order, while the latter are regarded as carbon

copies of the former. There is a network of relationship linking all beings which make them interact amongst themselves irrespective of the order to which they belong and this strengthens all the beings (Metuh, 1987). However, a pernicious influence from one being results in the disruption of the harmony among beings and leads to the beings closely connected to it. This disorderliness must be corrected and smoothened. African man as the aggressor and the victim must purify himself through rites and rituals, if the metaphysical or the supersensible world must aid him. These purification rites become the Golden Rule which man abiding the physical world must perform, if he must live out his years and fulfill his destiny on earth and even the here-after.

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