

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVINATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND ITS LESSONS FOR CHRISTIAN RELIGION

By

Aliegwu Thomas

Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos

Lagos State, Nigeria.

Email: thomas44856@gmail.com

and

Ochaso Godwin

Department of Theology,

Seminary of All Saints,

Uhiele-Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria.

Email: peterogheneror@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the concept, role, and importance of divination in African Traditional Religion (ATR), with particular attention to its cultural expression among the Isoko and Urhobo peoples of Delta State, Nigeria. Moving beyond descriptive analysis, the study situates divination within lived religious experience as a structured means of interpreting reality, addressing misfortune, and maintaining cosmic balance. The paper further engages the relationship between divination and Catholic Christian ministry, identifying both points of convergence such as mediation and the search for divine guidance and fundamental divergences,

especially concerning revelation, prayer, and doctrinal boundaries. It argues that while divination as a practice cannot be adopted within Catholicism, certain anthropological and spiritual insights embedded in it can enrich pastoral theology when critically appropriated.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Divination, Catholic Theology, Isoko, Urhobo, Mediation, Prayer

Introduction

African Traditional Religion (ATR) represents the indigenous religious worldview of African peoples prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam. Far from being a monolithic system, African Traditional Religion is by nature diverse and usually informed by the ethnicity of the people among whom it is practiced.¹ Despite this diversity, certain elements remain foundational across various African societies, one of the most prominent being the practice of divination. Divination, in its broad sense, refers to the process of acquiring knowledge about present circumstances and future possibilities through interaction with spiritual realities, including deities, spirits, and ancestral forces. While it is often narrowly understood as the attempt to predict the future through supernatural means, such a view fails to capture its deeper significance. Within the framework of ATR, divination functions not merely as a tool for foreknowledge but as a structured means of interpreting reality, diagnosing the causes of misfortune, and restoring balance within both the individual and the community. Moreover, divination occupies a central and indispensable place in African Traditional Religion, serving multiple roles that extend beyond the purely religious into the social, moral, and even therapeutic dimensions of life. These insights, when critically examined, present significant points of reflection

for the Christian ministry. This paper, therefore, examines the concept of divination in African Traditional Religion, its role and importance within the religious and cultural life of the people, and evaluates the lessons it offers for the Catholic Christian ministry.

The Concept of Divination in African Traditional Religion

Divination is a spiritual phenomenon and it holds a pride of place in African Traditional Religion. According to J.C. Woodfork, "Divination is an attempt to form, and possess, an understanding of reality in the present and additionally, to predict events and reality of a future time."² It has to do with the practice of attaining knowledge of reality, both of the present and the future, and utilizing such knowledge to carry out certain actions based on the need for a desired outcome. In other words, Divination refers to "the practice of determining the hidden significance or cause of events, sometimes foretelling the future, by various natural, psychological, and other techniques."³ Those who carry out the practice of divination are referred to as 'diviners.' "A divination system constitutes a people's book of knowledge wherein their history and cultural guidelines are maintained."⁴ This portends that divination is very practical in nature; that is, it is concerned with practical issues, whether private or public, and the knowledge gotten through divination is often utilized to address practical problems in the community. Divination is practiced by a people with the aim of discerning the messages or mood of the deities they worship. Thus, divination is a process through which adherents of traditional religion access sacred knowledge of gods or deities or of the world.⁵ Not everyone within African Traditional Religion is capable of engaging in divination. The role of the diviner is usually restricted to individuals

who are specially chosen, initiated, or trained. This calling is often believed to come from spiritual forces and involves rigorous preparation. It is important to note that there are different types of divination that are practiced by different people in their different cultures, that is, not all divinations practices are the same in all cultures; they differ from culture to culture. Notwithstanding, the various types of divination can be grouped into three main categories namely: Possession divination, wisdom divination, and intuitive divination.

The first category which is Possession divination is the category of divination that is characterized by the use of “oracular mediums, the reading of omens, and the movements of sacred animals or objects.”⁶ It is not as common in the African Traditional Religion as it is common in the folk religion; it is the dominant form of divination in the Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western folk religions. Possession divination more often than not, employs “divine or semi divine agents as heightened symbolic mediums within a universe filled with hieroglyphic events and objects.”⁷ This divination involves the possession of the diviner or sacred object by spirits; the diviner therefore enters a state of shamanic trance through various ritual performances and begins to speak in the spirits’ voice and what is said is interpreted by the assistant of the diviner.⁸ Therefore, possession divination, basically, has to do with the presence of gods and spirits, and also the presence of a vessel – the diviner or the sacred object that is possessed by the spirits.

The second category of divination is that of wisdom divination. In this type of divination, the diviner seeks a complete detachment from all sensible realities in order to attain a transcendental spiritual objectivity. This is all in the bid to reach a full grasp of the forces at work in the

universe. It is important to note that in wisdom divination, the gods, spirits and the human personality are all subordinated to a higher cosmic order. In an attempt to gain such wisdom of the forces at work in the divine order, the diviner reaches the conclusion that there is a supreme being or ultimate reality that governs all phenomena in the world. "An underlying assumption of wisdom divination is that the forces ordering events are not whimsical or personally willful, as might be the case with gods or spirits, but that they express a plan, a law or the universe governing all persons, with its root in transcendent divinity."⁹

The third category of divination is that of intuitive divination. This form of divination is believed to be a more elementary form of divination and the one with the greatest antiquity than the first two forms. This antiquity is however typological rather than historically confirmed. However, it is held to have elements of both possession divination and wisdom divination.¹⁰ In intuitive divination, the diviner has the ability to identify the problems of those who come to him. The diviner has the ability to discover the cause of their problems and in their spiritually heightened state, proffer solutions to their problems. The diviners who practice intuitive divination are well versed in social interactions and human character; and are said to possess extrasensory abilities which enables them piece the puzzles brought to them by their clients without any scientific tool or aids, which means that it is not a matter of guessing the problems and solutions. An example of this intuition divination is the *Ifa* divination of the Yoruba people. In this practice, clients consult the *Ifa* priest for solutions; and the priest in turn throws divining chain (*opele*) and recites incantations after which a deity appears. The priest listens to the message of the deity and

relays the message to the client as the solution to their problems and also prescribes the necessary sacrifices to be carried out.¹¹

Divination therefore, is a process through which knowledge of the cosmos is attained and solutions to problems are gained. It involves a connection and communication between the human and the divine or spiritual, meaning that it is something that involves transcendent realities. The diviners are seen as a link between the physical realm and the spiritual realm; this is because they are special people, who are able to establish communication between the physical and spiritual realms, and through them, the deities speak to the people and solutions to problems are also proffered.

Divination in Isoko and Urhobo Cultural Context

Among the Urhobo and Isoko peoples of Delta State, divination commonly referred to as *Eva* occupies a central place in religious and cultural life. It is understood as a sacred means of communication between the visible world and the invisible realm of the gods, ancestors, and other spiritual forces. To “*Gba eva*” (consult the oracle) is therefore not merely a ritual act but a profound spiritual engagement aimed at uncovering hidden truths about life’s uncertainties.¹² In both Urhobo and Isoko traditions, divination is often sought in response to unusual or troubling situations. These may include persistent illness, misfortune, mysterious deaths, infertility, disturbing dreams, or strange occurrences within the family or community. The belief underlying this practice is that such phenomena are rarely accidental; rather, they are expressions of deeper spiritual realities that require interpretation through supernatural insight. The diviner known among the Urhobo as an *obo* (witch doctor or

priest) is a specialist believed to possess a unique relationship with the spiritual world. This individual serves as a mediator who can access hidden knowledge through rituals, chants, incantations, and sometimes music. The diviner's role is not only to diagnose the cause of a problem but also to prescribe remedies, which may include sacrifices, appeasement of offended deities or ancestors, or moral correction. A distinctive feature of Urhobo and Isoko divination is the use of sacred objects. Common instruments include *ibi-ghabe* (cowries tied together with string) and kola nuts, particularly those with four lobes. During the divination process, these objects are cast onto a tray, and their pattern of fall is carefully observed. The arrangement is believed to carry symbolic meanings, which the diviner interprets based on inherited esoteric knowledge and spiritual inspiration.

In Urhobo religious thought especially, systems such as *Epha* (a structured form of divination) further elaborate this practice, incorporating a complex symbolic language that conveys messages from the spiritual realm. Through such systems, divination becomes not only a diagnostic tool but also a form of sacred knowledge transmission, preserving the cosmology and worldview of the people. For both Urhobo and Isoko communities, therefore, *Eva* is more than a means of foretelling the future; it is a way of maintaining harmony between the human and spiritual worlds. It reinforces moral order, communal values, and the belief that human life is deeply interconnected with unseen forces. Even in contemporary times, despite the influence of Christianity and modernization, elements of divination persist, reflecting its enduring significance in cultural identity and religious consciousness.

The Role of Divination in African Traditional Religion

Divination plays a consultative role in African Traditional Religion. In African Traditional Religion, people often seek for counsel and solutions to various issues that may arise in their day to day activities. Thus they go to consult a diviner who tries to seek useful insight as it pertains to the matter, through the process of divination. Thus it could be said that divination is a consultative institution.¹³ Through the process of divination, people find answers to their various problems. An example of divination playing a consultative role is the case of an adherent of African Traditional Religion goes to the diviner to seek wise counsel about a particular endeavor he or she seeks to embark on, and the diviner advises the adherent whether or not to embark on that endeavor. In African Traditional Religion, divination serves to guide the adherents in the ways the dispensation of their various duties in the community. In any community that practices African Traditional Religion the adherents are usually very careful of what they do so as not to anger their deities; and the voice of the deities are heard from the voice of the diviners, who speak at the behest of the deities they worship. The voice of the diviner is believed to be the voice of the gods and as such, it serves to guide the members of that community. For example, many of the rules guiding the community are derived from the dictates of the diviner who speaks on behalf of the gods, which guide all their practices in the community. In essence, the process of divination which is used to seek the voice of the gods plays the role of guiding the adherents of African Traditional Religion.

Furthermore, divination is a process of knowledge acquisition, both about the physical realm and the spiritual

realm. As said above, through the process of divination, the diviner seeks to attain the knowledge of the forces at play both in the transcendental realm and physical realm, and how these forces influence the events in the physical realm. “Divination is the effort to gain information of a mundane sort by means conceived of as transcending the mundane.”¹⁴ A typical example of divination being a process of knowledge acquisition is when the diviner makes incantations to the gods in order to understand a particular event that is taking place in the community especially when the event is not favorable. Therefore, in African Traditional Religion, through the process of divination knowledge is acquired and thus divination is able to provide information about the different realities – physical and spiritual.

Also, mediation is one of the roles of divination in African Traditional Religion. As has been stated earlier, divination is a process of knowledge acquisition. Being such, divination is able to attain knowledge from the deities and gods about what their wills and intentions are towards the people or community; and also, through mediation, the wants, needs and intentions of the people are presented before the gods or deities. An example is the *ifa* divination system, whereby the diviner is sought after by people in order to inquire from the god *ifa* whatever it is that they seek. Also the diviner also presents their concerns to the gods in a mediatory manner.

Importance of Divination in African Traditional Religion

In African Traditional Religion, divination is a process of knowledge acquisition. In other words, through the process of divination, in African Traditional Religion, knowledge about events and certain phenomena are achieved. Divination deals with non-formal sources of

knowledge.¹⁵ The diviners who carry out the act of the divination make use of various methods and various materials to gain knowledge about what they seek know. In essence, divination broadens the cognitive horizon in African Traditional Religion in the sense that divination supplies the adherents of African Traditional Religion with knowledge about their reality, about their community, about their situation and also about their future. Divination is also important in area of healthcare. In communities there are various illnesses that may befall the members of that community. This illness may be physical or spiritual. When such happens to an individual, cure for the illness is sought after. When the illness is spiritual, that is, when it is caused by the ancestors, gods, or spirits, only through a supernatural means can such illness be cured. In such a case, a diviner is consulted on how to restore the health of the individual. Moreso, not only is divination important in curing spiritual illness, it is also important in curing physical illnesses. This is because in African Traditional Religion nothing happens without a cause;¹⁶ thus divination is important in finding knowledge about the cause of an illness and the process required to cure it. The diviner also have potent herbal medicines that are used to cure various illnesses; and the knowledge on how to produce such medicine are sometimes gotten through divinatory processes. Divination serves as a guide for the people in a community. In African Traditional Religion, one importance of divination is to attain wise counsel from the deities and employ this wisdom in guiding the adherents of African Traditional Religion in the way they should go and the practices they should carry out. Throughout all the periods of Mesopotamian history, divination very much practiced. It was practiced by kings in order to guide them in making salient decisions with

regards to military campaigns, temple building, court appointments, and many other important matters.¹⁷ Through the process of divination, the diviner gains wisdom and knowledge about events and realities. The members of a community who practice African Traditional Religion are able to know what obtains in their community and with regards to their religion through the divination practices carried out by the diviner. Thus, the people are guided by the wisdom obtained from divination.

The Lessons of Divination for the Catholic Christian Ministry

The Christian ministry has to do with the proclamation of the word of God to all nations. It has as a foundational principle to bring God to every person on earth and also to lead everyone back to God the creator and maker of all things. More so, it essentially entails communication with God and relationship with him, in order for him to guide and direct man in all his ways. It is therefore clear that there is a relationship between divination and the Christian ministry. Divination entails communication with deities and gods to seek guidance and wise counsel on how to live and how to make certain important decision in life. A lesson that this fact presents for the Christian ministry is the pertinence to always have recourse to God in life's journey. In other words, only God can direct the course of lives in the proper way because he sees and knows all things. Therefore, just as in divination, there is recourse to the gods and deities for guidance, the adherents of the Christian religion can learn the lesson of seeking the will of God in all their life's endeavors so as to be able to do the right things and make the right decision because one who seeks God first in all they do will receive great gifts and blessings and will never be misguided, (cf. Matthew 6:33).

Furthermore, through the process of divination, people seek answers to their problems. This is because the adherents of African Traditional Religion believe strongly in their gods and their ability to solve their problems. As such, where there is a situation that is unfavorable, the people have recourse to their gods through a diviner in order to solve their problems. An immediate lesson from this, which can be useful in the faithful practice of the Christian religion, is that there is need, as a Christian to always have trust and belief in God in times of trials and tribulations. There is no problem that is bigger than God, and as such, Christians need to learn to trust God to help them deal with their problems. The Christian life is one that should be lived in total faith in God; one cannot be a true Christian without faith and trust in God. Therefore, in Christianity, faith and trust in God in paramount and should be carved in the hearts of all adherents of the Christian faith that God can solve all their problems if they believe in him. Divination, which involves communication with God, makes it clear that in any religion, being in communion and communication with the Divine is of utmost importance. What then does this portend for the Christian faith? It simply means that prayer to God is a *conditio sine qua non* for living well. Put differently, the Christian life cannot be lived without prayer. It is an important aspect of the Christian ministry, just as divination is important in African Traditional Religion. Prayer is not a form of divination but a distinct mode of communion with God in order to seek his guidance or to hear him speak to us and imbue us with wisdom and knowledge. While both involve engagement with the divine, prayer and divination are fundamentally distinct. Divination seeks hidden knowledge through techniques or intermediaries, whereas prayer is a relational act grounded

in faith and surrender to God's will. Prayer does not aim to predict or control outcomes but to foster communion with God.

Therefore, divination presents the lesson of the importance of prayer to the Christian faith. A Christian who does not pray to God will eventually be disconnected from his source and will therefore lack God's guidance and end up making terrible decisions in life. The diviners in African Traditional Religion play a mediatory role between the people and their gods. The diviner takes the message of the gods to the people and the diviner also takes the peoples supplications to the gods of the land; and all these happen through the process of divination. While certain functional similarities exist, the Christian minister is not a diviner but a servant of revealed truth, a mediator between God and man. In the Christian ministry therefore, the lesson of mediation can be learnt from the process of divination in African Traditional Religion. Christian leaders have the duty of bringing God's message to God's people and also praying for the people to God and raising their prayers and petitions to God in order that God may hear and answer their prayers and grant their desires. Being a Christian leader should not be a position of power and material acquisition; rather, it is a position of service to God and to his people. The Christian leader can learn from the process of divination to always be ready to attend to the spiritual needs of the Christians under his care, and seek solutions to their problems from God, on behalf of the people. None of the three forms of divination; possession, wisdom, or intuitive, can be adopted in their original form within Catholic Christianity. However, an analogical parallel may be drawn with wisdom divination in its orientation toward an ordered universe governed by a

supreme reality. This resonates with Catholic teachings on divine providence and natural law.

Conclusion

Divination involves the process of communication with gods, spirits, and deities in order to seek wisdom and knowledge about present situations and future events. It has to do with making use of various objects and tools in carrying out divinatory practices. Divination plays the role of guiding the people in a community where African Traditional Religion is practiced and also serves to provide solutions to various problems that the people may be faced with. It is important to note that diviners are often sought for various reasons by people in order to address their issues by seeking knowledge about their situations through the process of divination. This makes divination very important in African Tradition Religion. Its importance in African Traditional Religion cannot be overemphasized and it also has important lessons that can be learnt for the Christian ministry, owing to the fact that there are certain features and elements of divination that are of key importance to the Christian ministry. As such, the adherents of the Christian religion can draw from these lessons in the practice of their Christianity in order to enhance their service and devotion to the Christian God.

Endnotes

- ¹ Anthony Chiorazzi, "The Spirituality of Africa," in *The Harvard Gazette*, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>, [Accessed on 13/05/2022].
- ² Jacqueline C. Woodfork, *Culture and Customs of the Central African Republic*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), p.31.
- ³ Park, G. Kerlin and Gilbert, Robert Andrew. "Divination." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 16, 2001. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/divination>. [Accessed on 04/05/2022].
- ⁴ Philip M. Peek, "The Silent Voice of African Divination," in *Religion in Africa and the Diaspora*, (Summer/Autumn, 2013) <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-silent-voices-of-african-divination/>, [Accessed on 02/05/2022].
- ⁵ "African Traditional Religions," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, *Encyclopedia.com*. (April 25, 2022). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-traditional-religions>, [Accessed on 04/05/2022].
- ⁶ Evan M. Zuesse, "Divination and Deity in African Religions," in *History of Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (November, 1975), pp.158-182, p.159.
- ⁷ Zuesse, "Divination and Deity in African Religions," p.160.
- ⁸ "African Traditional Religions," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, *Encyclopedia.com*.
- ⁹ Zuesse, "Divination and Deity in African Religions," p.160.
- ¹⁰ Zuesse, "Divination and Deity in African Religions," p.161.
- ¹¹ African Traditional Religions," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, *Encyclopedia.com*.
- ¹² M.Y Nabofa and Ben O. Elugbe, EPHA: An Urhobo System of Divination and its Esoteric Language, (Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, Vol 1, June 1981) 3-19
- ¹³ Park G. Kerlin and Gilbert, Robert Andrew, "Divination," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- ¹⁴ Park G. Kerlin and Gilbert, Robert Andrew. "Divination," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- ¹⁵ Philip M. Peek, "African Divination Systems: Modes of Cognition," in *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing African Systems of Thought*, Philip M. Peek, (ed.), (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), P.199
- ¹⁶ Salifu Abukari, *Reading the Mind of the Spirits: Divination and Health-Seeking Behaviour Among the Dagomba in the Northern Region of Africa*, in University of Ghana <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh>, p.124.
- ¹⁷ Shmuel Ahituv, and Louis Rabinowitz, "Divination," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *Encyclopedia.com*, (April 25, 2022), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/divination>, [Accessed on 10/05/2022].