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Why Culture Resists Change: An African Perspective on Missionary Influence

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex interplay between African culture and Christianity, emphasizing the resilience, transformation, and syncretism that mark their interaction. It examines how African spiritual and cultural traditions continue to influence Christian practices and how cultural resistance to change reflects deeply held values and worldviews. Drawing from field experiences, scholarly sources, and theological reflections, the paper highlights both challenges and opportunities that emerge when African cultural heritage encounters Christian evangelization. It concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive pastoral approaches and robust training for evangelizers in Africa.

Keywords: African culture, Christianity, syncretism, resistance to change, evangelization, pastoral ministry

1.1 Study Background

Mbiti (1969, p.1) in his book “African Religions and Philosophy” states that “Africans are notoriously religious and that African religion permeates all departments of their lives”. This opening statement indicates the depth of connection with the Divine in their daily activities and interactions. African culture, with its rich traditions, deep spirituality, and communal values, has long been the bedrock of identity for its people. Christianity, introduced through missionary activities and colonial expansion, brought profound changes to this cultural landscape. The encounter between the two has been marked by both tension and transformation, as African communities navigate the interface between their ancestral heritage and Christian faith. While some cultural practices have remained resilient, others have adapted or been replaced, leading to a dynamic interplay of continuity and change. This interaction has also given rise to syncretism, where elements of African spirituality and Christianity merge, creating both opportunities for mutual enrichment and challenges for theological purity. This article explores the complex relationship between African culture and Christianity, focusing on the diviner as an African

specialist and how their works influence Christian faith. This article consists of three key areas namely: continuity and discontinuity of African cultural belief, the diviner as a cultural specialist, and an assessment of why culture resists change and recommendations for pastoral agents in general.

Africa is a continent of profound spiritual heritage and intricate cultural systems that have withstood the forces of colonization, globalization, and religious transformation. Long before the arrival of Western missionaries, African communities lived within well-structured social, moral, and religious frameworks. These traditional systems—built upon the foundation of communal solidarity, ancestral reverence, ritual practices, and spiritual cosmology—were not just cultural expressions but comprehensive worldviews that offered meaning, identity, and moral direction to entire societies (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997).

With the advent of Christian missionary activity during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Africa experienced a significant religious upheaval. Christianity, often presented as a superior or “civilizing” faith, challenged deeply embedded African traditions. Missionaries sometimes sought not just to evangelize but to replace indigenous religions and customs with Western forms of spirituality and social behavior (Scherer, 2001; Bediako, 1995). In this process, elements of African life—such as veneration of ancestors, the role of diviners, initiation rites, and indigenous moral codes—were often dismissed as pagan, superstitious, or incompatible with Christian doctrine (Mugambi, 2003). While some Africans embraced the Christian message wholeheartedly, others resisted what they perceived as a wholesale attack on their identity and way of life.

However, this encounter did not result in a clean break from traditional spirituality. Rather, it gave rise to a complex religious dynamic marked by dual allegiance and syncretism. As Mbiti (1990) keenly observed, “even when Africans convert to Christianity, they do not completely abandon their traditional religious practices.” Many African Christians continue to engage in traditional rituals, consult diviners, or seek ancestral intervention, especially during times of crisis or uncertainty. This spiritual blending is not simply a matter of confusion but reflects a holistic worldview in which the visible and invisible realms are intertwined, and where spiritual care must address emotional, relational, and existential needs. In many African communities, the figure of the diviner remains deeply respected and trusted. These cultural specialists serve not only as spiritual guides but also as healers, counselors, and custodians of moral wisdom. They are accessible, empathetic, and often operate with a clarity of mission and a mastery of cultural knowledge that resonates deeply with their communities (Parrinder, 1976; Meyer, 2015). Their services are rooted in the lived realities of the people—offering answers, rituals, and healing methods that feel immediate and contextually relevant. For many, especially in rural or underserved regions, the diviner becomes a bridge between suffering and meaning, between crisis and resolution.

This continued reliance on diviners, even among professing Christians, raises critical pastoral and theological questions. Why do so many continue to consult traditional spiritual agents despite strong church teachings against such practices? Is this persistence merely a sign of spiritual immaturity, or does it reveal deeper gaps within Christian ministry in Africa? Evidence suggests that many pastoral agents—priests, catechists, and lay leaders—struggle to match the availability, empathy, and cultural competence exhibited by diviners. In some cases, Christian rituals are perceived as too abstract, bureaucratic, or detached from daily struggles (Magesa, 1997). Where faith formation is shallow, and where pastors are hard to reach or disconnected from communal life, people naturally turn to what is familiar and accessible.

From a psychological standpoint, culture resists change because it offers stability, identity, and a sense of belonging. As Festinger (1957) explains in his theory of cognitive dissonance, people experience mental discomfort when confronted with ideas that contradict their ingrained beliefs and behaviors. This discomfort often leads to rejection or selective adaptation of new information. In African societies, where religious belief is not a compartment of life but the very fabric of existence, the introduction of new doctrines is experienced not just as intellectual debate but as an existential threat. According to Shorter (1987), cultural values—especially those perceived to originate from ancestral or divine authority—are not easily negotiable. Change, therefore, is not resisted out of ignorance, but out of a desire to protect what is seen as sacred and essential to communal wellbeing.

Moreover, African cosmology perceives the universe as a dual system where the spiritual governs the physical. Illness, misfortune, and even success are often interpreted through this spiritual lens. Rituals, taboos, and the intervention of spiritual agents are integral to navigating life's challenges. Attempts to displace this worldview without offering contextually relevant alternatives are often met with resistance. The resilience of traditional practices, therefore, reflects both the inadequacy of imposed religious systems and the strength of cultural identity.

This article is born out of these complex realities. It seeks to explore the resilience of African culture in the face of Christian missionary influence—not from a place of confrontation, but from a position of understanding and theological reflection. It investigates why culture resists change, why diviners continue to attract even devout Christians, and what this reveals about the shortcomings in Christian pastoral outreach and catechesis. The study also reflects on the need for inculturation—the respectful integration of Christian faith into African cultural forms—as a necessary path forward for meaningful evangelization (Sanneh, 2003; Bujo, 1998).

1.2 Justification of the Study

Despite over a century of Christian missionary presence in Africa, traditional religious practices such as divination, ancestral veneration, and ritual offerings remain deeply entrenched in many communities. This persistence presents a theological and pastoral paradox: Why do many African Christians—baptized, catechized, and actively involved in Church life—continue to seek the services of diviners and spiritual intermediaries who often operate in contradiction to Christian doctrine? The issue is not limited to rural or uneducated populations; even in urban, highly educated, and seemingly Christianized environments, traditional practices continue to thrive, often operating in secrecy and tension with Church teachings (Mbiti, 1990; Magesa, 1997). This spiritual dualism, in which individuals profess faith in Christ while simultaneously engaging in rituals rooted in African traditional religion, signals a deeper disconnect between Christian evangelization efforts and African cultural realities. It also points to a potential failure in catechesis, pastoral care, and inculturation. If the Church cannot effectively address the existential, emotional, and spiritual needs of its members, people will inevitably turn to more accessible and culturally resonant alternatives—such as the diviner—whose methods, though spiritually ambiguous, offer tangible and immediate relief (Meyer, 2015; Parrinder, 1969). The problem is further compounded by the perception that Christianity is a foreign or imposed religion, detached from the lived experiences and cultural rhythms of African communities. In many cases, the pastoral approach of the Church remains overly intellectualized, institutional, and disconnected from the holistic, relational, and symbolic worldviews that characterize African spirituality (Bujo, 1998; Sanneh, 2003). As a result, traditional spiritual specialists continue to occupy significant social and religious roles, often filling

pastoral and emotional gaps left by the formal Church. This study is therefore justified by the urgent need to explore why African culture continues to resist transformation in the face of Christian evangelization, and what this reveals about the effectiveness of the Church's pastoral mission. It seeks to understand the appeal of traditional diviners among Christian communities, and how their accessibility, clarity of mission, cultural fluency, and empathetic presence challenge the Church to reexamine its own practices. By critically analyzing the strengths of diviners, the resilience of African cultural beliefs, and the theological tensions therein, this article offers fresh insights into how the Church might respond more meaningfully to the spiritual landscape of Africa. The findings of this study are significant for theologians, missionaries, catechists, and pastoral agents seeking to foster a more inculturated and effective Christian witness in Africa. As Pope John Paul II (1994) stated in *Ecclesia in Africa*, "A serious effort is needed to ensure that the Gospel takes deep root in the soul of Africa without compromising the essential truth of the Christian message." The study also provides direction for theological formation, youth catechesis, and lay empowerment programs that are sensitive to African cultural values while remaining faithful to the Gospel. Ultimately, this study is not merely about cultural criticism or religious comparison. It is a pastoral reflection on how Christianity can engage Africa's deep spiritual heritage with humility, authenticity, and contextual relevance. Addressing this problem is not only essential for the credibility of Christian ministry in Africa but also for the integrity of African Christians who daily navigate between two worlds—one inherited from their ancestors and another received through the Gospel.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and critically examine the enduring tension between African cultural practices—particularly traditional spiritual expressions—and Christian faith, with a focus on understanding why these cultural elements continue to resist transformation despite sustained missionary efforts. The study seeks to unpack the theological, sociocultural, and psychological dimensions that underlie the persistence of practices such as divination, ancestral veneration, and ritual healing among Christian populations in Africa. This exploration is not intended to demonize traditional culture nor to romanticize it, but rather to illuminate the deep-seated worldviews and lived realities that shape African spiritual consciousness. In doing so, the study aims to offer pastoral and theological insights into how Christianity can more effectively engage with African cultural identity in a way that is both authentic and contextually relevant.

Specifically, the study intends to:

- i. Understand why Christian converts often continue to participate in traditional spiritual practices despite doctrinal teachings to the contrary.
- ii. Examine the role of the African diviner as a cultural and spiritual specialist whose relevance persists within Christianized contexts.
- iii. Identify the pastoral gaps and weaknesses within Christian ministry that allow for syncretism or spiritual dualism to flourish.
- iv. Explore how culture, as a repository of meaning and collective identity, inherently resists change—especially when that change is perceived as threatening or alienating.
- v. Propose culturally sensitive and theologically sound responses that affirm African cultural values while remaining faithful to the core message of the Gospel.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the wider discourse on inculturation, evangelization, and the renewal of Christian ministry in Africa. It is driven by a pastoral concern: to empower Christian leaders, catechists, and theologians with the insights needed to foster a Church that listens, learns, and lovingly

engages with the cultural realities of its people. In doing so, the study aspires to bridge the gap between Christian doctrine and African spiritual experience, and to promote a faith that is truly at home in African soil—deeply rooted, yet constantly growing.

1.4 Methodology

This study employed a desk review and survey data collection methodology, drawing upon a wide range of existing scholarly literature, theological reflections, field-based interviews and cultural analyses to examine the complex interaction between African traditional religion and Christianity. The desk review was chosen as the most appropriate approach given the conceptual and reflective nature of the topic, which requires an in-depth engagement with historical, cultural, and theological texts rather than empirical fieldwork. The review focused on both classical and contemporary sources to trace the evolution of African religious identity in the face of missionary activity. Foundational works by African theologians such as John S. Mbiti, Laurenti Magesa, Kwame Gyekye, and Lamin Sanneh provided a rich backdrop for understanding the African worldview, traditional spirituality, and syncretism. Key ecclesiastical documents, including *Ecclesia in Africa* by Pope John Paul II and the *Lineamenta* of the Synod on the Word of God, were also consulted to explore the Church's official stance on culture and evangelization. Field studies incorporated surveys conducted through interviews with African Diviners as custodians of cultural knowledge, spiritual intermediaries, and emotional anchors for many communities. In addition, the study incorporated insights from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies to understand why culture resists change. Works on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), neuropsychology (LeDoux, 1996; Doidge, 2007), and cultural adaptation (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977) enriched the analysis by offering interdisciplinary perspectives on belief systems and resistance to ideological transformation. The desk review process involved a thematic analysis of the literature, identifying recurring patterns and insights related to African spirituality, missionary strategies, syncretism, and the pastoral challenges faced by the Church in Africa. Emphasis was placed on extracting practical and theological implications from the reviewed materials to inform current pastoral practice and future theological discourse. By using a desk review methodology, this study was able to synthesize diverse bodies of knowledge, offering a holistic and multidimensional understanding of the cultural and religious dynamics at play. This approach also allowed for critical reflection on both historical trends and contemporary realities without the limitations or ethical complexities of primary field data collection.

1.5 Desktop review, Field interviews and reflections

Continuity and Discontinuity of African Culture

African culture and religion continue to play a crucial role in shaping the spiritual, moral, and social lives of the people across the continent, and their influence remains strong even in the face of modernization and the rise of global religions like Christianity and Islam. The resilience of African cultural practices is evident in the everyday lives of people, even among the youth, who frequently recount their experiences with traditional religious customs in their homes and communities. This highlights the deep-rooted nature of African cultural practices and beliefs, which persist across generations despite the widespread influence of science, technology, and new religious ideas and particularly Christianity. Since the missionary era, there has been a visible conflict between traditional beliefs and Christian faith.

Contrary to the claims of some scholars who suggest that African religion and culture are on the verge of extinction due to the spread of Christianity, Mbiti (1990, p. 14) challenges this view when he asserts, “even when Africans convert to Christianity, Islam, or other faiths, they do not completely abandon their traditional immediately”. He notes that many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register or be counted in the census as adherents of only one religion. According to him, African converts often bring their traditional religious practices with them, resulting in a form of religious syncretism. His observation affirms the ongoing influence of African traditional religion, which continues to shape the worldview and daily practices of converts, often unconsciously integrating these practices into their new religious frameworks.

Mbiti (1990) further elaborates on the enduring presence of African religion by asserting that, even in the context of conversion, the changes that occur are often superficial and material rather than deeply transformative. This duality is particularly evident when African Christians turn to traditional religious practices in moments of crisis, such as seeking the assistance of diviners or engaging in ancestral veneration. Such practices continue to offer comfort and solutions to those affected. Magesa (1997) explores this dual religious experience by highlighting how African religious life is often characterized by a blend of "official" Christianity and "popular" Christianity. The former refers to formal religious practices such as attending church and participating in Christian rituals, while the latter involves recourse to traditional beliefs and practices, particularly during times of crisis. This duality suggests that, for many Africans, religion is not neatly compartmentalized; instead, it is fluid and encompasses both Christian and traditional beliefs, creating a dynamic interaction between the two.

The persistence of African religious practices is rooted in animism, the belief that spiritual forces pervade the world, influencing both the material and spiritual realms. As Osabuteh (2001) explains, animism encompasses both necrolatry (the worship of ancestors) and naturalism (the worship of spiritual beings), both of which are central to African traditional religion. Mbiti (1990) further elaborates on the African worldview, noting that the visible and invisible worlds are intricately connected, and that spiritual forces such as ancestors, gods, or witchcraft affect human life. This belief in spiritual interaction shapes how Africans understand illness, misfortune, and other life challenges. In these contexts, traditional religious practices such as sacrifices, rituals, and the consultation of diviners continue to play a vital role in addressing the uncertainties of life.

The continued reliance on traditional spiritual practices, even among those who profess Christianity, often leads to syncretism. According to Magesa (1997) and Mbiti (1990), syncretism occurs when individuals blend beliefs from different religious systems, creating a hybridized form of religious practice. This is especially evident in instances where Christians continue to consult diviners or use protective charms, even as they maintain their faith in God. For example, in some African communities, individuals wear charms or visit traditional healers for protection, even though they may also pray to God for healing. This dual approach to spiritual care highlights the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices alongside Christian faith. The dissonance between traditional African religion and Christianity is rooted in the different approaches to life, death, and the sacred. African traditional religion does not formally separate the sacred from the secular, as Mbiti (1990) notes, but rather views religion and culture as inseparable from everyday life. This worldview stands in contrast to the Christian emphasis on the exclusive power of God and the rejection of practices such as divination and ancestral veneration. As a result, many African Christians experience a conflict between their traditional religious practices and the

Christian teachings they have adopted. This conflict is particularly evident in the resistance to abandoning traditional healing methods, ancestral rituals, and the belief in spiritual forces, which continue to offer practical and emotional support in times of need.

The relationship between Christianity and African culture has been further complicated by the history of European missionary activity, which often sought to displace or undermine African religious practices. As Mugambi (2003) observes, missionaries viewed African traditions as "pagan, heathen, savage, primitive and barbaric," and sought to replace them with Christianity. However, this colonial approach to evangelization failed to recognize the deep spiritual and cultural significance of African religious practices. As a result, many Africans resisted the imposition of Christianity, not because they rejected the gospel message but because they felt that their traditional practices were being unfairly denigrated. This resistance was also practical, as traditional religious practices provided concrete solutions to life's challenges, which Christianity was perceived as unable to replace (Adrian, 2000). Healing and other health practices are one area of tension between African culture and Christianity. At the center of this conflict is the diviner.

Why Does Culture Resist Change?

The human mind's resistance to change is deeply rooted in its cognitive and emotional frameworks, shaped by the need for stability, familiarity, and predictability. According to Festinger (1957), when individuals encounter new ideas or change that conflict with their existing beliefs, they experience cognitive dissonance a psychological discomfort that compels them to either reject or adapt to the change. This resistance is further reinforced by habitual behaviors, as the brain governed by the basal ganglia tends to default to familiar routines unless new neural pathways are created through repetition and reinforcement (Duhigg, 2012). Emotionally, change can trigger fear and anxiety due to its unpredictability, which activates the brain's amygdala and initiates a "fight-or-flight" response (LeDoux, 1996). However, as Doidge (2007) notes, the brain's neuroplasticity allows individuals to adapt and form new connections when change is approached incrementally and meaningfully. Thus, although resistance is a natural response, it can be overcome through motivation, consistency, and by framing change as a path to growth.

African history illustrates a deep-rooted cultural identity that existed long before the arrival of Western missionaries. Pre-colonial African societies were grounded in organized social, religious, and moral systems. However, the missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries disrupted these indigenous frameworks by introducing new religious ideologies and social practices that often conflicted with traditional beliefs. The missionaries' educational model, for instance, often removed children from their families, replacing the African mother's role as a cultural educator with Western religious instruction (Mbiti, 1999). This pedagogical shift not only introduced Christian doctrine but also aimed to reshape African worldviews by promoting Western customs, values, and societal structures (Scherer, 2001). Conversion to Christianity was not merely religious but cultural, often demanding a break from traditional values and social affiliations.

One of the most significant barriers to cultural change is the interwoven nature of religious belief and cultural identity. As Shorter (1987) explains, cultural norms operate at the most profound levels of a community's worldview, making them particularly resistant to alteration. While external aspects of culture such as, clothing or entertainment may evolve rapidly, deeply held spiritual values and communal

beliefs are far more resilient. Resistance is especially pronounced when change is perceived as alien or as undermining sacred traditions.

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) outline key barriers to cultural change, including entrenched values, ethnocentrism, the desire to maintain one's identity ("saving face"), and incompatibility between proposed innovations and existing cultural traits. These barriers were often encountered by missionaries and reformers who, lacking cultural sensitivity, attempted to impose change without contextual understanding. The result was widespread resistance, particularly in communities where traditions are viewed as divine or ancestral mandates rather than human inventions. A critical element of this resistance is rooted in the African cosmological view, which perceives the world as a duality comprising both visible and invisible realms. In this worldview, the spiritual is considered the origin and governor of the physical, and this duality underpins all facets of life from moral conduct to communal rituals (Collins, 2018). Practices such as ancestor veneration or spiritual consultations are not seen as mere traditions but as vital connections to the metaphysical order. Thus, any alteration in spiritual customs is seen as a direct disturbance to the cosmic balance and is fiercely resisted. Moreover, African cultural systems are sustained by both transcendental and mundane values. Transcendental values, believed to originate from divine or ancestral authority, include taboos and rites such as circumcision, marriage protocols, and moral restrictions. As Gyekye (1997) observes, violating these values is considered not only socially disruptive but spiritually perilous. Mundane values like hospitality, justice, and communal loyalty also reinforce social cohesion and are upheld through socialization and ritual. Disregarding them risks ostracism, curses, or even perceived divine punishment.

The inseparability of culture and religion further explains the resistance to change in African societies. In traditional settings, religious belief permeates every dimension of life political, social, economic, and familial (Mbiti, 1969). Change is therefore not viewed in isolation but as a total disruption to an integrated system of living. Missionaries who failed to appreciate this interconnectedness often imposed Christianity as a replacement rather than as a complementary faith. Had they approached African spirituality with contextual understanding, much of the hostility they faced might have been mitigated (Bediako, 1995). Elders too play a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity. As custodians of oral traditions, ethical wisdom, and spiritual knowledge, they serve as the community's memory and authority. According to Nyerere (1968), elders embody the values and experiences of past generations and ensure their transmission. Therefore, any societal change that bypasses the input of elders is likely to be viewed with suspicion or outright rejection. Including elders in change processes can lend legitimacy and continuity to innovations that might otherwise be resisted.

Globalization adds another dimension to the dynamics of cultural change. The influx of foreign media, consumerism, and technology introduces values that often conflict with traditional norms. This results in what Appadurai (1996) calls "cultural disjuncture," where global flows of information threaten to erode local identities. In urban African settings, particularly among youth, global values may be adopted enthusiastically, while elders and rural communities resist them in an effort to safeguard cultural heritage. This tension underscores the selective nature of cultural adaptation.

Economic development also exerts pressure on traditional ways of life. As Mazrui (2004) points out, modernization efforts often lead to shifts in agricultural, social, and occupational practices. While economic incentives can facilitate acceptance of new practices, they also risk marginalizing indigenous

methods and undermining communal relationships. For example, land privatization and wage labor may improve material conditions but simultaneously fracture kinship systems that rely on communal resource sharing.

Formal education, especially in its colonial and missionary forms, has played a dual role—both as a vehicle for empowerment and as a tool for cultural alienation. While it opened avenues for literacy and modern knowledge, it also often devalued indigenous education systems, oral literature, and native languages (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). Today, efforts to decolonize African curricula aim to restore balance by integrating indigenous knowledge systems into formal education. Despite these challenges, African cultures are not static; they demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Over time, African communities have selectively integrated aspects of Christianity, modern governance, and technology into their cultures without abandoning core values. As Sanneh (2003) observes, African Christianity has evolved unique expressions that blend Christian theology with African spirituality. This adaptive process affirms that resistance is not always opposition but can be a strategic negotiation that seeks to preserve cultural identity while embracing beneficial change.

African traditional Religion continues to be a powerful force in shaping resistance to change. Because African religious practices are integrated into daily life, governing morality, relationships, and social obligations any disruption in religious norms can cause existential anxiety. Rituals, taboos, and ceremonies function not just as spiritual acts but as frameworks for communal coherence and moral order (Parrinder, 1969). Thus, religious and cultural resistance are inextricably linked, forming a holistic defense against changes that threaten the social and spiritual equilibrium.

The Diviner as a Cultural Specialist

Diviners in African traditional religion are not merely healers or seers. They are custodians of cultural knowledge, spiritual intermediaries, and emotional anchors for many communities. As Parrinder (1976) observes, diviners are specialists who diagnose illnesses, offer spiritual insight, and provide solutions to problems by means of inspirations, rituals, or manipulation of sacred objects. They are, in essence, cultural and religious practitioners who occupy a central place in African cosmology. Their role is far more complex than often acknowledged in Christian circles, and their influence continues to permeate even highly Christianized societies. During a field interviews with various diviners, a striking revelation emerged: many of their clients identified as Christians. For instance, one female diviner shared candidly that a large number of her clients were practicing Christians who would consult her under the cover of darkness or at dawn to avoid being seen (Diviner 01, February 2008). To accommodate and retain this clientele, she designed her consultation space with a separate back door used either for discreet entry or exit depending on the situation. In that hidden room, she placed a counterfeit image of Jesus Christ. When questioned, she admitted that the image was deliberately used to create a comforting illusion for Christian clients, making them feel that her services were not opposed to their faith.

This encounter opened a deeper reflection in me as a researcher: “Why do people especially Christians continue to seek the services of diviners despite strong church teachings against such practices?” “Is it merely superstition, or is it an indication of something deeper, a pastoral and cultural vacuum within Christian ministry?” With this reflection and observations, I would say this about diviners:

a. Clarity of Calling

Diviners have an unmistakable sense of calling. They articulate their vocation with confidence and consider their work as being entrusted to them by the ancestral world. Their allegiance is firm, their rituals well-rehearsed, and their mission clearly understood. One diviner stated emphatically, “I am a priest at the level of the Pastor in charge of this parish... I have a special role to play just as much as he has” (Diviner 04, March 8, 2008). She added that attempts to hinder her work were not just disrespectful but offensive to the spiritual authority that commissioned her. This presents a striking comparison to some Christian ministers who may struggle with vocational clarity or display lukewarm commitment. Christianity is also a divine calling, and when Christians especially pastoral agents fail to live out this calling with conviction, people naturally gravitate toward those who appear more spiritually assured, like the diviners.

b. Dedication and Availability

Diviners are often found at home, readily available for clients from dawn till dusk. They do not work with appointments or charge consultation fees as doctors might; rather, they are attentive, present, and patient. Clients receive full focus, often with a level of empathy that can be deeply comforting. By contrast, many Christian ministers have become hard to reach, overly institutionalized, or distant from the day-to-day realities of their flock. This raises a pastoral question: Are ministers of the Church sufficiently available and emotionally present to the people they serve? Effective pastoral care demands more than sermons and sacraments. It requires genuine presence, listening, and time.

c. Vision and Mission

The diviners interviewed possessed a strong sense of mission: to diagnose, to counsel, to heal, and to protect their communities. Their work is not seen as mere occupation but as a spiritual obligation. They operate with a communal sense of responsibility and regard their role as essential to the survival and well-being of society. If Christians, especially leaders, were as clear and passionate about their own spiritual mission, the Church would undoubtedly experience a renewal of relevance and resilience. Vagueness about Christian mission often leaves believers vulnerable to spiritual confusion and syncretism.

d. Mastery of Cultural and Religious Knowledge

To become a diviner, one must undergo training and immersion into traditional cosmology. This includes understanding the symbolism, rituals, taboos, and moral codes of the community. They are not novices, but cultural experts. This contrasts with the often superficial knowledge many Christians have of their own faith. In many African churches, catechesis remains underdeveloped, and young people may receive sacraments without a deep understanding of Christian beliefs. There is an urgent need for catechists, religious educators, and clergy to be thoroughly grounded in both Christian theology and African cultural anthropology. Christianity has its own sacred stories, values, and rituals but they must be taught meaningfully.

e. Radical Hospitality

Diviners are welcoming. They do not screen clients by tribe, status, or religion. They listen without rushing, offer individualized attention, and express deep compassion. Their ability to welcome all who come resonates with Christ’s own inclusive ministry, which embraced tax collectors, lepers, and outcasts. The Christian Church should strive to replicate this radical hospitality. In some parishes, people feel judged, misunderstood, or ignored. Diviners win hearts not only through solutions but through warmth, openness, and human understanding.

f. Patience and Resilience

My time spent with diviners revealed a profound patience. While I, as a researcher, would grow tired after hours of observation and interviews, they remained attentive, calm, and unhurried. They demonstrated a resilience that made them approachable and trustworthy. This is a sharp lesson for Christian ministers who may be overwhelmed with schedules and programs but forget the human element. Pastoral care, like divination, requires time, silence, presence, and emotional stamina.

g. Simplicity of Life

African diviners often live in modest homes and wear simple attire. Their lifestyle is not driven by consumerism or material wealth. They focus on being effective in their vocation. In a time when some religious figures live opulently or associate spirituality with prosperity, diviners offer a counter-cultural witness of simplicity. This simplicity is deeply attractive because it mirrors the lives of the saints and Christ Himself, who had “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Pastoral agents must reflect on the message their lifestyle sends.

h. Exploitation of Christian Weaknesses

Interestingly, some diviners admit to exploiting gaps in Christian formation. The presence of a fake picture of Jesus in a diviner’s shrine, used to deceive Christian clients, reveals how diviners understand Christian psychology and use it to build trust. This tactic works because many Christians lack a grounded understanding of their faith. This exposes a serious weakness in catechesis. It is not enough to tell Christians not to consult diviners; they must be taught, formed, and accompanied in their spiritual journey.

i. Affordability and Accessibility

Diviners are generally affordable, sometimes accepting gifts in kind. Their services are not designed to enrich themselves but to meet community needs. In contrast, some churches or Christian events have become commercialized, with fees for healing services, “anointed items,” or consultations. The Gospel must be freely given (Matthew 10:8). When the church becomes expensive or complicated to access, the poor turn elsewhere.

j. Holistic and Contextual Solutions

Diviners approach problems as multi-dimensional. They offer counsel not only for physical illness but for emotional, relational, and spiritual crises. Their solutions integrate dreams, rituals, community values, and spiritual insight. Many Africans, whose worldview is holistic, find this approach deeply satisfying. This presents a challenge and invitation to Christian ministry. Pastoral care must be contextual, holistic, and responsive to real-life needs offering not only spiritual comfort but practical accompaniment.

k. Use of Immediate and Practical Methods

The methods of divination are tangible and involve visible rituals throwing bones, using water, invoking ancestors. This sensory engagement creates a strong emotional connection and the impression of immediate results. Smith (2012) explains that this practical element whether true or imagined helps clients feel that their needs are being addressed directly.

Christian rituals—sacraments, blessings, and healing prayers—must also be meaningful, experiential, and accessible. If they feel distant or overly abstract, people will look elsewhere for help.

l. Adaptation to Modern Realities

Modern diviners are not frozen in time. Some use mobile phones, WhatsApp, or even Facebook to reach clients. They incorporate modern insights into herbalism or psychology. Their ability to evolve with the times makes them highly relevant in both rural and urban settings. The Church must likewise adapt

without compromising doctrine. Evangelization must go digital, pastoral care must reach the streets and smartphones, and Christian leaders must become conversant with both tradition and technology.

m. Cultural Irreplaceability and Pastoral Gaps

Diviners often describe themselves as irreplaceable cultural figures. And indeed, for many, the diviner fills a void that the Church has not yet adequately filled. When asked who will perform the ritual or offer a solution, the diviner confidently responds, "I will." This readiness contrasts with bureaucratic or hesitant church responses. Meyer (2015) rightly asks: Who has replaced the African diviner in their spiritual and cultural role? As priests, sisters, pastors, and evangelizers, do we offer the same immediacy, understanding, and holistic care? If not, people will continue to turn to those who do.

Risk Factors in Christian Consultation with Diviners

traditional African spirituality and Christian doctrine. While diviners are deeply respected within many African communities for their perceived ability to diagnose spiritual problems and offer practical solutions, their practices often stand in sharp tension with the core tenets of Christianity. This tension, if unexamined, can lead to spiritual dualism, weakened faith, and even spiritual bondage.

i. The Ambiguous Source of Power

A major theological concern surrounding diviners is the ambiguity of the spiritual powers they invoke. In interviews with several diviners, it became evident that they attributed their spiritual gifts to ancestral spirits or other undefined forces, not to God. One diviner plainly stated: *"In my ministry, I have no knowledge of Jesus, and He does not feature in my work."* This clear rejection of Christ and His Spirit makes it evident that whatever spiritual interventions occur in their sessions do not emanate from the Holy Spirit. This stands in stark contrast with Jesus' own teaching on the nature of the Holy Spirit. In John 16:13–15, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the one who reveals divine truth, glorifies Christ, and speaks what He hears from the Father. This passage affirms that the Spirit of God always points to Jesus and operates in full harmony with the divine will. Any spirit that does not acknowledge or glorify Christ cannot be of God (cf. 1 John 4:1-3).

ii. Spirit Worship and Sacrificial Offerings

Diviners frequently offer sacrifices to appease spirits, especially when clients are believed to be afflicted or possessed. Among the Akamba people of Eastern Kenya, for example, diviners are known to keep sacred drums, each dedicated to a specific spirit. The most feared of these is *Kathambi*, a spirit believed to cause possession during traditional kilumi dances. Diviners are the only ones perceived to have the power to calm such a spirit. These practices conflict with the biblical command to worship only the one true God. Jesus, when tempted by Satan, replied, *"It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only"* (Luke 4:8, cf. Deuteronomy 6:13). Offering sacrifices to spirits whether ancestral or otherwise is a form of veneration that compromises the exclusive worship due to God alone. Furthermore, animal sacrifices performed in divination rituals carry deeply theological implications. In many African traditions, such sacrifices are understood as substitutionary: the animal dies in the place of the afflicted person. Its blood is believed to be consumed by the spirit, thereby saving the individual from death. This practice mirrors, but also competes with, the Christian doctrine of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. As 1 Peter 2:24 teaches: *"By His wounds you have been healed."* Therefore, no other blood sacrifice is needed or acceptable in Christian faith, as Christ's offering is both complete and sufficient.

iii. Persistence of Animism and Spiritual Dualism

The continued reliance on charms, rituals, and protective amulets among some African Christians reveals an underlying animistic worldview. While the Church has made significant inroads into African societies, the residual influence of traditional beliefs remains strong, especially in times of crisis. People

may attend Sunday Mass but still seek a diviner's help during illness, misfortune, or personal struggle. This spiritual dualism, believing in God while simultaneously trusting in spirits or diviners undermines Christian discipleship. Pope John Paul II (1994), while acknowledging that ancestor veneration might prepare individuals for understanding the communion of saints, also warned that sacrifices and libations directed to spirits are incompatible with Christian worship. Similarly, Mbiti (1969) affirmed that while African religion contains profound truths, some practices, particularly spirit sacrifices and blood rituals stand in opposition to the Christian faith.

iv. *Ritual Violence and Blood Covenants*

A more serious risk involves certain ritual practices that use human blood or bodily incisions. During some divination sessions, diviners cut their clients, drawing blood which is offered as libation to the spirits. These practices, often undertaken without full understanding by the client, constitute a form of spiritual dedication to entities other than God. In some cases, diviners even enter into blood covenants with clients—binding agreements that are difficult to break spiritually and emotionally. From a Christian perspective, such acts are occultic and dangerous, violating the command to offer one's body as a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). The New Covenant established by Jesus through His own blood (Luke 22:20) replaces all previous sacrificial systems. Blood belongs to God alone and must not be used in rituals that contradict His holiness.

v. *Theological Consequences of Diviner Dependency*

When Christians regularly consult diviners, no matter how seemingly helpful the results, they place their faith and salvation at serious risk. The foundation of Christian life is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to entrust one's spiritual wellbeing to an agent who denies Christ is to jeopardize one's relationship with God. As Jesus warned: "*No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and mammon*" (Matthew 6:24). The same principle applies to spiritual allegiance. A Christian torn between Christ and traditional spirits will eventually be consumed by one and abandon the other. Spiritual confusion, guilt, and estrangement from God often follow such dual loyalty.

vi. *The Need for Vigilance and Faith Formation*

The phenomenon of Christians seeking out diviners reveals a gap in catechesis and pastoral care. Where churches fail to address people's spiritual, emotional, and existential needs, others will step in to fill the void. Christians must therefore be well-formed in their faith, understanding both what they believe and why. Pastoral agents must also confront this issue with compassion, clarity, and cultural sensitivity. Condemning traditional practices without understanding their underlying meaning alienates believers. Instead, the Church should offer holistic, culturally contextual alternatives rooted in Scripture, prayer, sacramental life, and communal support.

1.6 Discussion and Reflections

The findings of this desk-based study underscore a persistent tension between African cultural spirituality and the Christian faith, a tension that continues to shape the religious lives of many African Christians. Despite the spread of Christianity across the continent, traditional beliefs and practices remain deeply embedded within African societies, often coexisting alongside Christian convictions in a form of spiritual dualism. This complex coexistence is not merely a product of ignorance or resistance to Christianity but a reflection of deeply rooted worldviews, unmet pastoral needs, and the historical missteps of missionary strategies.

One of the most striking insights to emerge is the enduring relevance of the diviner. Far from being an obsolete figure relegated to the periphery of modern religious life, the diviner remains a central spiritual

agent in many African communities. Their accessibility, empathy, and intimate knowledge of cultural values allow them to address people's fears, questions, and crises with immediacy and relevance. They provide counsel, healing, and rituals that align closely with the African cosmological understanding of life—a worldview that sees the visible and invisible as deeply intertwined (Mbiti, 1990; Parrinder, 1969). In contrast, the institutional Church is often perceived as distant, overly doctrinal, or emotionally detached, especially where ministers are few, overburdened, or insufficiently trained for contextual pastoral care.

This dynamic calls for serious reflection. If Christians continue to consult diviners, it is not necessarily because they reject their faith, but because they are trying to meet needs that the Church has not adequately addressed. As Meyer (2015) observes, when cultural specialists step into roles that spiritual leaders have failed to fill, it reveals a pastoral vacuum—one that is theological, emotional, and even structural in nature.

Furthermore, this study highlights how cultural resistance to change is rarely a passive act. Rather, it is often a conscious or subconscious effort to preserve communal identity, moral frameworks, and spiritual security. African culture does not easily separate the sacred from the secular, nor does it compartmentalize religion as a Sunday affair. Spirituality in Africa is holistic and constant, informing how people relate to illness, success, conflict, and misfortune. Any attempt to transform these practices must therefore engage not only the intellect but the heart, the community, and the ancestral consciousness. As Shorter (1987) argues, religion in Africa is culture, and culture is religion. Change that ignores this inseparability is likely to be resisted.

Theologically, the persistence of syncretism raises critical questions about formation. Are Christians adequately catechized to understand the exclusive claims of the Gospel? Do they grasp the implications of calling Jesus Lord while also venerating spirits or engaging in ancestral rituals? The presence of counterfeit Christian symbols in diviner shrines—such as fake images of Jesus—reveals both the ingenuity of diviners and the vulnerability of poorly formed believers. Faith without formation is fragile. As the *Lineamenta* (2007) of the Synod on the Word of God insists, the Church must invest in the formation of clergy and laity alike—not only in biblical literacy but also in cultural awareness and spiritual discernment.

This study also invites a renewed focus on inculturation. The Gospel must be allowed to take root in African soil—not by negating African identity but by transforming it from within. This requires pastoral agents to affirm what is noble in African culture: its respect for life, its communal ethos, its reverence for elders, and its deep sense of the sacred. At the same time, they must guide believers to relinquish practices that are incompatible with the radical message of Christ. This is not an easy task. It calls for discernment, dialogue, and deep theological reflection. As Sanneh (2003) notes, Christianity thrives in Africa not by imposition but by translation—by speaking the language of the heart and the culture.

On a broader scale, the Church must also reflect on its institutional practices. If pastoral agents are unavailable, if sacraments feel abstract, if prayer is not contextualized, or if ministries are monetized, then the faithful will inevitably turn to alternatives. Diviners succeed where the Church is silent. They listen where the Church is procedural. They heal where the Church explains. This is a challenge not only of belief but of pastoral presence and spiritual authenticity.

The reflections offered here are not meant to idealize traditional practices or minimize the theological risks involved in syncretism. Rather, they are an invitation to a more honest, compassionate, and culturally grounded engagement. The Church must not only preach Christ but also embody His presence—approachable, healing, understanding, and deeply aware of human struggles.

In conclusion, the African Church stands at a crossroads. The resilience of traditional religion, the ongoing consultation of diviners, and the cultural resistance to change are not signs of failure but calls to deeper reflection and renewal. If evangelization is to be effective, it must be rooted in respectful dialogue, pastoral closeness, and the courageous integration of faith and culture. The goal is not to erase African identity, but to elevate it through the light and truth of the Gospel. Only then will the Church speak not just to Africa, but with Africa—and become truly at home in the hearts of its people.

1.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of African cultural beliefs and practices cannot be overstated. These traditions continue to shape both individual and communal identities, offering frameworks for meaning, resilience, and social cohesion. When people engage deeply with their cultural belief systems, they experience growth on both personal and collective levels. It is essential to recognize that African culture is not inherently opposed to Christianity; rather, it contains seeds of the Gospel that, when nurtured appropriately, can enrich the Christian message. Resistance to cultural change should not be misconstrued as mere stubbornness, but often reflects the inadequacy of Christian alternatives in addressing deeply rooted traditional needs. When the Church adopts a position of listening, learning, and respectful engagement with culture, it enhances its credibility and becomes a more authentic bearer of the Good News.

1.8 Recommendations for Christians

Drawing from the insights of this study, particularly from observations of the traditional practices of African diviners, several key recommendations emerge for the Christian community. These recommendations are aimed at strengthening Christian identity, reinforcing sound doctrine, and enhancing the effectiveness of pastoral ministry in the African context. They are essential for fortifying the Church against the subtle allure and perceived efficacy of traditional spiritual practices. They also serve as a roadmap for inculturating the Gospel authentically affirming African cultural values while remaining firmly rooted in the teachings of Christ. As Pope John Paul II (1994) emphasized, authentic evangelization in Africa must involve the purification of culture through the light of the Gospel, not its rejection. Thus, the Church must prepare ministers and laypeople alike to navigate this tension with wisdom, compassion, and unwavering fidelity to Christ. The researcher recommends the following:

Proper Training of Agents of Evangelization: The effectiveness of evangelization is directly linked to the quality of formation received by its agents. Training equips bishops, priests, religious men and women, catechists, and lay leaders with the theological knowledge and pastoral skills necessary for meaningful ministry. As affirmed by the African Synod Fathers (1995), those involved in evangelization must undergo thorough preparation to understand both the faith and the cultural context in which they minister. This call is reinforced by *Verbum Domini* (Lineamenta, 2007), which raises crucial questions: “Are future priests, consecrated persons, and those responsible for various services in the community properly formed and periodically updated in the biblical aspects of their pastoral ministry? Are there

ongoing formation programs for the laity?" These questions highlight the urgency of establishing continuous and structured formation at all levels of church leadership.

Intentional Preparation for Ministry: African diviners do not casually enter their vocation. They undergo rigorous training, usually guided by experienced elders or spiritual mentors, during which they acquire not only technical skills but also spiritual knowledge specific to their roles. Similarly, those entering Christian ministry must be deliberately and thoroughly prepared. Such preparation involves theological, biblical, liturgical, and pastoral formation, as well as a deep understanding of the cultural dynamics in which ministry occurs. This preparation is necessary to equip ministers to respond adequately to the complex spiritual and cultural needs of their communities. Furthermore, the Church must address the shortage of pastoral agents. As Jesus reminds us: *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few"* (Luke 10:2, NRSV). Without sufficient laborers, the Church risks leaving many spiritually unserved or vulnerable to syncretistic practices.

Catechesis for Children and Youth: Children and young people are particularly susceptible to the cultural influences around them, including those of diviners and traditional healers. This vulnerability calls for a robust and age-appropriate catechesis rooted in Scripture, Catholic teaching, and inculturated theology. Programs such as Sunday school, Pontifical Missionary Childhood (PMC), and Young Christian Students (YCS) provide platforms for nurturing the faith of the young. These initiatives must be strengthened with contextualized teaching methods, participatory learning, and moral guidance. Through these, children and youth can grow into mature Christians who understand and confidently live out their faith.

Support and Growth of Lay Movements: The lay faithful have a critical role in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Encouraging their active participation through well-structured spiritual movements enhances faith formation and communal witness. Movements such as the Catholic Men's Association, Catholic Women's Association, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, choirs, and various prayer groups are vital in strengthening Christian identity and deepening spiritual life. To ensure doctrinal integrity and pastoral effectiveness, these groups should be guided by trained chaplains and governed by clear constitutions. This structure guards against doctrinal deviation or syncretism, which may arise from unmonitored spiritual enthusiasm.

Culturally Sensitive Ministry: Evangelizers must understand the cultural worldview of the communities they serve. This includes acknowledging the significance of spiritual healing, community belonging, and ancestral ties. Rather than simply condemning traditional practices, the Church must engage them theologically and pastorally, affirming what is good and transforming what contradicts the Gospel.

Accessibility and Availability: Ministers should strive to be accessible, just as diviners are. Over-institutionalization can alienate the faithful. Pastoral presence should be visible, welcoming, and personal. This includes being present in homes, local gatherings, and daily life, not just within church walls.

Prayer for Vocations and Pastoral Strength: The success of Christian ministry, especially in challenging cultural terrains, depends largely on the spiritual vitality of its ministers. The Church must continually pray for an increase in priestly and religious vocations. Furthermore, those already in

ministry require both spiritual and moral support to persevere in their mission. Many pastoral agents travel long distances to serve communities, sometimes in isolated or difficult environments. These arduous journeys and the spiritual battles they face demand prayers, encouragement, and practical support from the faithful. As St. Paul exhorted the early Church: “*I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me*” (Romans 15:30, NIV).

Integration of African Cultural Values: Cultural values such as hospitality, community, respect for elders, and reverence for life should not be lost but integrated into Christian life. The inculturation of the Gospel must continue, allowing Christianity to take deep root in African soil.

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