1 Introduction

This article examines processes of initiation from the viewpoint of traditional non-Western cultures. We consider practices relating to both the African religio-cultural and Christian contexts. Rites of passage encompass ritual processes that accompany the transitions of life from one social status to another. In non-Western contexts, the changes in human life are usually interpreted through religious ideas and therefore, these transitions are marked by ritual; hence the reference to “rites of passage.” Although Africans have practiced these rites of passage since antiquity, their academic study with the discipline of anthropology is attributed to the Belgian scholar Arnold van Gennep (1909) [1960]. He defined the total ritual processes as constituted in three phases: first, the original status; second, a liminal period in which candidates are in between statuses; and third, the conferment of a new status on the candidate. Perhaps, one of the most important things we have learnt from anthropologists with respect to rites of passage is the importance of the “liminal periods” during which the candidates experience a sense of communitas, that is, an “intense awareness of being bound together in a community of shared experience” (Davies 1994, 4).

Africa is a culturally diverse and multiethnic continent. This means descriptions of rites of passage provided here only serve as a generalized picture, but one I hope which is still representative of what these rites are and why they are performed. Traditional non-Western cultures are noted for their sense of the presence of the supernatural in everyday life and the dependence of human wellbeing and flourishing on the maintenance of harmonious cosmic relationships. Some key features of indigenous religions include belief in a Supreme Being who is creator, provider and sustainer of the universe and whose representatives in the earthly realm of existence include small community-owned deities. There is also a general worshipful reverence for clan ancestors – the “living-dead” as John Mbiti refers to them – whose beneficent presence may be invoked at appropriate times as needed (Mbiti 1989). These ancestors are also the custodians of public morality and initiation rites and traditional festivals are designed to celebrate them as part of the African world. Africans have strong worldviews of mystical causality in which evil is caused by malevolent spirit powers such as witches. Initiation rites, accompanied by religious sacrifices therefore constitute important means by which humans sustain relationships with the world of spirits or even seek to live in harmony with the ancestral worlds for existential benefits and blessings. Such harmonious relationships are enhanced through the performance of rites of passage.
2 Initiation Rites and Rituals

In Africa, tensions often arise between Christianity and traditional religions over the appropriateness or not of various initiation rites. African traditional religions regard rites of initiation as being important for human wellbeing, communal identity, spiritual security, and wholeness. These rites have embedded in them processes and ends directed towards human flourishing. Initiation rites serve as means of pastoral care because refusal to perform them, it is believed, could lead to negative ontological consequences not just for the individual, but for the family too. Religious specialists – male and female clan elders, diviners, seers, and priests – preside over initiation rites because they are adept at performing them in prescribed and appropriate ways.

African Christians, especially those belonging to the evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic traditions, frown on initiation rites, damning them as sources of spiritual contamination and inimical to human flourishing (Meyer 1996, 214). Thus, practices of exorcism in these newer streams of Christianity include deliverance from demonic spirits who intrude into lives through initiation rites. The educational value of rites of passage – which some scholars lament that Africans have drifted from – lays emphasis on character building, respect for the self, family, and community (Opoku-Agyeman 2012, 97). Tensions emerge between indigenous cultures representing tradition and Christianity, and representing change, because in traditional Africa, human beings are spiritually incomplete and vulnerable in terms of belonging and identity without the appropriate traditional rites of initiation. Indeed, some misfortunes, physical deformities, and illnesses, are explained in terms of punishments from ancestors for the neglect or even improper performance of initiation rites. Christians generally contest the performance of these same rites on account of their being considered inconsistent with biblical teaching.

In the religious context, initiation ceremonies consist of the rites and rituals through which human beings solicit the help of transcendent powers for holistic living and cosmic harmony. James L. Cox defines “ritual” as “a repeated and symbolic dramatization directing attention to a place where the sacred enters life thereby granting identity to participants in the drama, transforming them, communicating social meaning verbally and non-verbally and offering a paradigm for how the world ought to be” (Cox 1998, x). There are, Cox notes, “correct and incorrect ways of performing rituals which determine their efficacy as sources of transformative power” (Cox 1998, x). Rituals as defined by Cox come with certain general characteristics and they include the fact that: first, they point towards sacred realities through acts and symbols; second, they are repeated according to fixed patterns; third, they occur within sacred and sacralized spaces; fourth, they provide shared identity for participants and foster a sense of community; fifth, they operate within symbolic modes of communication; and sixth, they have a transformative power (Cox 1998, 60).
Initiation rites also take place at specific sacred spaces and sites recognized by the community, that is, mountains, forests, river sites or shrines, and they are normally held out of public view. It is during these liminal periods of seclusion that the candidates are educated in social obligations and responsibilities associated with the status to which their age entitles them. In African traditions, there is rarely doubt about who one is, because identity formation is always a crucial part of education (Opoku-Agyeman 2012, 97). Initiation ceremonies are constituted by religious ‘rites’ and the way they are coordinated through words and symbols is what gives them their ritual character. Our discussion is restricted to initiation and its associated ceremonies occurring within African traditional religious contexts and its intersections with Christian pastoral practices in Africa. Getting the timings, procedures and processes right is considered critical to the effectiveness of these initiation ceremonies.

3 Christianity Encounters Tradition

In both the biblical and African cultural traditions, initiation ceremonies are critical to living. Funerary rites in the Old Testament were important for ushering the dead peacefully into the realm of the ancestors. Similarly, among the Igbo Amasiri of southeastern Nigeria, funerary rites ensure smooth transitions into the spirit world. If these rites are not performed, the deceased, it is feared, return as ghosts to trouble living relatives (Obinna 2013, 6). In the African Christian context some of these initiation ceremonies – the dedication of infants, circumcision, and baptism – have been adopted in relation to the confession of faith and church membership. God instituted circumcision as a sign of his covenant with Israel through Abraham (Gen 17:9–14). Those who failed to observe the rite were to be cut off from among the people of Israel. When Jesus was born, not only was he circumcised, but Jesus was also taken to the temple where the designated sacrifices as outlined by Moses were offered in fulfillment of tradition: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (Luke 2:22–23).

African traditional and Christian initiation rites are both driven by certain pastoral objectives. We have already mentioned their importance as sources of moral instruction and socialization. Child-naming ceremonies, for example, exist both as a means of socio-cultural integration and moral education. Rites of puberty are performed for similar reasons and in most cases, they prepare the initiates for the assumption of adult responsibilities such as marriage. All these pastoral activities are supposed to have implications for moral character formation, health, wholeness, flourishing and communal wellbeing. It is not uncommon for convulsion in infants, for example, to be explained in terms of the neglect of rituals meant to establish them firmly among the living. When such rituals are overlooked, infants are said to be caught between the physical and spiritual realms representing life and
death, or between the communities of the living and the dead but not settled in either of the two.

Mercy A. Oduyoye notes how puberty rites are performed to make young people members of both their immediate families and extended communities as they take on adult responsibilities. Oduyoye laments the dehumanizing aspects of initiation ceremonies but does not discount their importance in the holistic development of women in African societies (Oduyoye 1995, 9–24). Certain aspects of traditional widowhood rites for example, have been cited as demeaning women. However, the symbolic principle of spiritually severing relationships with deceased spouses through widowhood rites serve important pastoral purposes in removing fear from surviving spouses and restoring them to proper functioning order following bereavement.

Christian attitudes towards initiation rites range from outright denunciation as demonic to various attempts to ‘Christianize’ such ceremonies because, as we have noted, traditionally they are seen as being inconsistent with biblical faith. In many African communities, missionaries created the Christian quarters, called Salems in places, where members of the church lived separately, away from the ‘heathens’ to prevent them from patronizing traditional initiation rites and the services of priest-healers. The other part of the town thus became ‘pagan’ or ‘heathen’ quarters. Traditional rules and regulations were not applicable at Salem and those who lived there were forbidden from undergoing traditional initiation rites or participating in any festivals. Despite the Christian denunciation of initiation rites, it is well known that in times of desperation the services of traditional priest-healers are also patronized by Christians (Soyinka 2012, 110–111).

4 Initiatory Rites of Passage and Ancestors

Initiation rites or life-cycle rituals, as they are sometimes referred to, are associated with religion and culture because they are carried out in fulfilment of ancestral obligations. The presence of ancestors is invoked during critical moments in the history of communities such as festivals, calamitous occasions, and initiation ceremonies. Whether we are talking about naming, circumcision or other puberty rites, marriages, or funerals, the ancestors play a critical role and indeed, the rites performed are those that must have been orally scripted by them.

Akan communities for example, ‘feed’ their ancestors during festivals and through rituals of libation prayer and, as occasions demand, these ancestors are invited to participate in whatever celebrations are in place. During libation pouring, a representative list of ancestral names would be mentioned, and their blessings solicited for general communal wellbeing and flourishing. The most important point is that not only is the presence of the ancestors invoked during the performance of initiation and other ceremonies, but the process of becoming an ancestor itself is an initiatory one that requires elaborate rites and rituals.
5 Select Initiation Ceremonies

Humanitarian and communal values are very important to African societies. The aims behind initiation ceremonies thus include the affirming of communal belongingness through moral instruction on roles in society. The values of godliness, respect, honor, moral integrity, hospitality, humility, gratitude, and a strong sense of community are all highlighted during initiation ceremonies. We now consider just a select few of the most common initiation ceremonies in African societies:

5.1 Child Naming Ceremonies

In the Akan traditions, naming new infants takes place on the eighth day of birth. When babies survive the first week of birth, it is a sign that they have come to stay and are formally initiated into the life of the living. Early in the morning on the eighth day, the immediate families of the couple together with members of the community gather wearing bright apparel, signifying the mother’s victory in childbirth. Childbirth signals victory for families because infertility is considered a curse. The child is laid on the lap of the family elder and the initiation rites are conducted with water and some liquor. The officiants dip an index finger into the water and the liquor alternatively and let a drip of each fall onto the tongue of the baby accompanied by the words: “[Name] if you say it is water, let it be water; and if you say it is drink, let it be a drink.” After three drops of each liquid, the rest of the liquor is passed round for each member of the community present to take a sip and pronounce a blessing on the child.

Child-naming here is not merely a ceremony for giving the name to a newly born infant. It is also a period of moral education in which the child is instructed to learn to distinguish truth from falsehood. The ritual of naming initiates the child to the essence of truthful and discreet speech, the need for care, truth, firmness, and social sensitivity in the exercise of the spoken word. As the child reacts differently to the tastes of water and liquor “the child thereby demonstrates potential sensitivity to the vagaries of social experience, and the need to comply with the cultural rules of communication” (Yankah 1995, 46–47).

The name is an identity marker that links the newly born infant to a particular family, clan, or ethnic group. The names chosen tells stories. It links individuals to families; indicates the day of the week in which the child was born; shows where the child falls in the lines of births; and tells the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. In some societies, infants also receive “tribal marks” which like names, connect individual persons to larger communities. An infant’s umbilical cord may be buried on the family compound as an act that connects this person spiritually to a community. Thus, unlike in Western contexts, Africans do not hail from
where they are born. People connect to ancestral homes depending on whether families practice patrilineal or matrilineal systems of inheritance.

### 5.2 Circumcision

Circumcisions mark the transition of boys and girls from infants into boyhood and girlhood and prepare them for active sexual life. Traditional circumcision rituals have largely been discontinued. Circumcision, whether for boys or girls marked the natural order of growing up. In the Sene-Gambia regions of West Africa, *Kunang* is the name given to this surgical rite. Circumcision required sequestration in the bush for varying numbers of weeks and the rite was at once a test of bravado and a preparation for one’s teenage years. In the bush, and away from public view, the rite is a test of individual endurance and back home, the circumcision was a communal celebration of coming of age (Sanneh 2012, 53, 54).

### 5.3 Puberty

Initiation rites of puberty are related to fecundity, marriage, and childbirths. Female initiation ceremonies among the Chewa of Malawi are considered very important because they are also the contexts for sex and moral education (Phiri 1998). Isabel Phiri identifies four stages in puberty ceremonies. The first, which marks the transition between girlhood and womanhood is called, *chinamwali cha nkangali* and takes place on reaching puberty. The second is performed on reaching the age of marriage and the third involves newlyweds receiving matrimonial counsel on their union. The fourth, *chinamwali cha chisamba* deals with issues around pregnancy and the sorts of taboos and observances associated with childbirth. These initiations of transition from puberty to marriage take place under the tutelage of the officially recognized traditional women who were required to be adept at moral norms, customs, and beliefs of Chewa society (Phiri 1998, 133).

In Ghana both the Krobo and Asante have elaborated nubility rites for girls that prepare them for marriage and motherhood. Female initiation rites are embedded in cultural notions about cleanliness, pollution, and what it means to be a woman in, and to be part of, a particular society (Steegstra 2005, 1). Peter Sarpong, a Catholic archbishop, and anthropologist says he prefers the expression “nubility” to “puberty” because “they are a means whereby Ashanti girls are introduced into the adult society of their sex and are given access to marriage both as a sexual union and as a social institution” (Sarpong 1977, x). A good portion of the period of the nubility rites are devoted to instructing the neophyte on lessons in sexual development, marriage and tribal traditions involving the female gender. The rites are held after first menstruation, but it takes about three consecutive menstrual periods to go through
the rites. There is a moral side to the performance of Ashanti nubility rites as the girls are supposed to remain virgins until they have gone through them.

In Ashanti tradition, the girl is given a bath of ritual cleanliness and the eating of ritual eggs as a sign of life. Her hair is cut in a prescribed style and the hairs kept in the crack of a wall and sealed. Part of the ritual bath takes place in the river with an elderly woman. The officiant dips the neophyte three times in the water and committing her wellbeing into the custody of the river deity. From this point, the girl’s new life begins. She is reclothed in traditional handwoven kente cloth, puts on new sandals and is given a loincloth, which is tucked in the strings of precious beads with which her waist has been adorned (Sarpong 1977, 30). Following these riverside ceremonies, the initiand is carried home ceremoniously.

She takes her seat in public, usually at the family compound as the community comes around to congratulate the girl and shower her with gifts. Finally, the Ashanti girl must go through the anoka (touching the mouth), in which the traditional festive food of mashed yam with eggs are used in touch her lips three times before eating a few morsels. The prayerful declarations that are made as various food items are used to touch the mouth of the girl are very instructive: the mashed yam and egg, “this is what God created first”; pepper, “may you never taste misfortune”; salt, “may you always be happy and hear news as sweet as salt”; elephant’s skin, “may you have many children”; and so on and so forth. Ultimately, these are prayers of goodwill for success in life, marriage, and childbirth (Sarpong 1977, 33–34).

5.4 Chieftaincy

In African societies, chieftaincy has continued to exist alongside modern political systems of government. Traditional chiefs govern on behalf of the ancestors. The installation of chiefs consists of very elaborate religious rites and rituals that are meant to achieve two things: first, to confer on the candidate the blessing of the ancestors; and second, to sacralize their personality leading to a life of prescribed taboos. A chief should not see corpses; strike anyone or be struck; eat in public; walk barefooted; and on no account must his buttocks touch the ground. Indeed, among Akan tribes, the easiest way to de-stool chiefs is either to remove their sandals in public or to forcibly place their buttocks on the ground when performing some public function. In other words, certain forms of public humiliation de-sacralize chiefs, rendering their positions as representatives of the ancestors untenable.

When the candidate for chiefship is identified, they are placed in quarantine for prescribed periods of time. The quarantine period is for instruction on the role of

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1 This is done so that if the girl passes away in another geographical location and the family is unable for some reason to receive the dead body, the head and pubic hairs could be used in the performance of funeral ceremonies.
chiefship and the ancestral ceremonies required to carry out the functions of the position. The chief is the moral, political, and religious leader of the community with responsibilities that require wisdom, probity, and a deep knowledge of traditional customs. Every step of the process requires prayer through libation pouring and the candidate is taken to a stool room of the ancestors where various rites and rituals including sacrifices involving the blood of sheep are undertaken. They swear oaths to be truthful and honest in their dealings with the ancestors and pledge not to undermine the sacred customs bequeathed by these ancestors. On the day of inauguration, the chief also swears publicly to protect the community and serve them in truth, honesty, and integrity. The installation of the chief involves lowering the candidate three times on the stool of the ancestors whose name they will bear and from then on, the candidate’s real name is dropped as they adopt what the Akans refer to as a ‘stool name’.

One of the most important roles of the chief is to be the main celebrant of traditional festivals through which African communities acknowledge their ancestors. The rituals of installation, which legitimizes the position of the chief, signals the transformation of the personality of the candidate. This transformation from an ordinary mundane personality into an extraordinary sacred individual is what legitimizes one’s position. Religious and political power are said to be invested in the person of the Oba of Benin. The Oba mediates between the two worlds envisioned by the people of Benin and communicates with both the visible world of human beings, agbon, and the invisible world of deities and spirits, erinmwi. The Oba is said to personify the living realities of spiritual beings and deities and in his awe-inspiring personality, presides over the agrarian festivals through which gratitude is expressed to the ancestors for their provision (Kaplan 2000, 116 – 117).

The taboos that we have outlined in connection with chiefship act as the regulative principles that protect the office of the chief from abuse and defilement (Akrong 2006, 196). Among the Akan of Ghana, the title of Nana is conferred on newly installed traditional chiefs. This is the same title that the ancestors bear and so among the Akan, the ancestors are referred to collectively as nananom and that is how they are addressed during libation prayer. The status of the chief as a sacred personality or a de jure ancestor implies that anytime his actions contradict the norms and values that regulate his office, he ipso facto ceases to be a chief and must be de-stooled (Akrong 2006, 198).

5.5 Priesthood

The initiation into priesthood begins when the spirit of a deity takes possession of individuals indicating a calling into cultic duties. The modes of calling into priesthood include inexplicable illnesses, sudden possession by the deity or disappearance into forests. Each of these modes of calling is a means to an end (Ekem 2008, 49). The training that follows a certified calling ushers the candidates for
priesthood into the mystical world of the deities in whose services they have been called. The process of initiation which occurs at the end of training at a shrine includes rituals that covenant the life of the priest to that of the deity and this means priests, like chiefs, live by certain taboos depending on the religious identity of the deity to be served. Priests serve in mediatory capacities to bring communication from the supernatural realm into the physical realm and offer sacrifices on behalf of communities to the deities. Their functions include divination and medical services.

From an African pastoral perspective, genuine religion is about salvation or liberation that occurs within daily life (McKenzie 1997, 525). It is not for nothing that among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the priest-diviner is referred to as the Babalawo, the ‘father of secrets’ because they are the ones who bring information and answers to existential questions from the spiritual to the physical realm. The popularity of the healing and prophetic roles of traditional priests and diviners has its equivalent, especially within African initiated Christianity. In traditional thought, the pastoral roles of priests include the supply of therapeutic and other sacramental substances that people use to protect themselves against evil. In the traditional world, rain and fertility, wellbeing, long life, protection from evil and helping women in childbirth are some of the issues that the priests deal with (McKenzie 1997, 527–528).

6 Initiation Ceremonies of Incorporation and Identity

African rituals constitute powerful and effective modes of religious expression and are critical to both incorporation and identity formation (Grillo 2012, 112–126). People are communal beings and cannot belong without going through proper processes of incorporation through the prescribed rites of initiation of their society. In other words, initiation rites constitute forms of pastoral care within traditional societies. It is the reason why these initiation rites are always an occasion for bringing the living and the living-dead together as one community. It shows how a strong sense of community is required for the maintenance of social and psychological stability in human life. Cosmic harmony through the performance of appropriate rites is needed for human wellbeing and flourishing in traditional African societies.

A study of three Bantu peoples, the Bashi of central Kivu in the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi revealed that participation in a common life is the main basis of family, social, political life and religious institutions and customs. Life is lived in the communion of its members. The “vital union” has been described as the non-negotiable link that unites both the living and the living-dead in a vertical and horizontal relationship. It is said to result from “a communion of participation in the same reality, the same vital principle, which unites a number of beings with one another” (Mulago 1996, 138). The primary concern of the Bantu, life, is both empirical and super-em-
pirical because it encompasses life beyond the grave and the two remain inseparable (Mulago 1996, 139).

On the traditional front, therefore, non-Western cultures have inherited elaborate ancestral initiatory religious rites and rituals by which members of the society are made communal beings because individualism such that known in the West is considered inconsistent with traditional philosophical understandings of modes of being. Further, although there are social sides to initiation ceremonies, primarily, they have a religious orientation. The pragmatic nature of African religions means they are oriented towards the view that humans must vigilantly maintain harmonious relationships in both this-worldly and other-worldly realms for prosperity (Grillo 2012, 112). The African worldview asserts the “ontological primacy” of the community, which means, “the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories” (Gyekye 1997, 37). African philosopher Kwame Gyekye argues that human beings are born into societies and cultures and this communitarian conception of the person implies that community life is not optional, but obligatory (Gyekye 1997, 38). What distinguishes a community from a mere association of individuals is the sharing of a common way of life and of values (Gyekye 1997, 42).

In traditional Africa, initiation ceremonies are related to concepts of power. Africans live in a spirit world, a world associated with power, health, protection and mystical knowledge for survival and vitality. Thus, especially in quests for success that relate to leadership, ownership of property and survival, it is not uncommon to seek initiation into traditional secret societies in search for the securities from supernatural realms. Fisherfolk seek protection against hazardous and perilous fishing expeditions and farmers seek spiritual protection against dangerous forest creatures. Hunters seek the help of medicine men or enroll in cults that provide fortification against bullets, for, it is not uncommon for competitors to “mistake” one another for game. Some opt for powers that enable them to vanish at the sight of danger with the recitation of appropriate incantations. All these modes of acquisition of mystical power require one form of initiation or another.

The acquisition of these powers often requires ingesting medicines by eating, swallowing, or inserting them through the anus. If one’s traditional vocation requires the use of a powerful vision of sight, the liquid preparation may be dropped into the eyes. Most of these processes require initiation ceremonies, that also must be renewed periodically for the supernatural powers to retain their potency. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar also document instances in which modern African politicians enroll in secret societies in search of security and for the spiritual leverage needed to protect them and give them whatever advantages they seek over competitors, opponents, and enemies (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 75–88). Thus, “secret rituals are a feature of initiation into societies that are considered repositories of esoteric knowledge and power that are often regarded as mainstays of morality and social order” (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 81).
Exclusivity is critical to initiation ceremonies that relate to the membership of secret societies. Secret societies—whether local or imported—Ellis and ter Haar note, impress on members during their initiation a sense that they are gaining access to forms of knowledge to which others are not privy. These initiation rites incorporate acolytes “into a transcendental world of power” (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 84). In other words, in these initiatory ceremonies, access to power and privileged information requires the observance of certain ethics of secrecy in the performance of duties.

In addition to the rites of transition, Africa is also home to many secret societies.² Medicine cults have for example been part of traditional African cult systems for generations. The membership of these cults requires prescribed initiation ceremonies. Gabon, for example, has a secret society called Njobi which is a traditional-style religious exclusive patriarchal society. There is also Bwiti, known in many parts of Central and Western Africa. Here, in these secret societies, the patriarchs of the community “govern community affairs and interact with the spirit world” (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 77).

7 Christianity and Initiation

Despite their acknowledged importance, some of the initiation rites and sacred customs discussed here have either lost their significance or undergone various changes under pressure from the forces of modernization, democratization, urbanization, and the influence of Christianity. Phiri writes that the initiation of Chewa women in Malawi was considered among Presbyterian missions to be ‘pagan’ and ‘sinful’. Chewa girls and their families were therefore counseled to pull out of these traditional rites in favor of Christian initiation rites developed by the church and devoid of any of the rituals associated with the traditional culture (Phiri 1998, 135, 136). Among the Bafodea Limba of Northern Sierra Leone, the circumcision rite takes place within the context of male secret societies, but today, Christians will circumcise boys at a modern clinic, a change that upholds tradition but strips it of its sacredness (Ottenberg 1994, 364).

In Ghana the tensions between tradition and Christianity are felt within chieftaincy (Asante 2006, 234). The installation of traditional chiefs tends to be very much a religious affair involving clan ancestors and rituals associated with local deities. The debate on whether a traditional chief can be a Christian or not continues to rage. In many Christian traditions, a chief could be in church, but may not be allowed to participate in Holy Communion. According to the churches in which chiefs are excluded from Communion, initiation rituals of chiefship put candidates in situa-

² In the colonial era several secret societies originally set up for Western elites, accepted into members some African compatriots. Masonic and other lodges therefore became part of African life attracting the new local elites and these became contexts in which the powerful and influential of African societies met to do business and plan political activities.
tions of double allegiance – ancestors and Christ – and therefore chieftaincy is deemed to compromise allegiance to Christ.

Initiation ceremonies are not limited to traditional societies and new religious movements. Although they may not be described as “initiation” as such, there are several ceremonial transitions that occur in the lives of Christians as part of the requirements for their belonging to the church. A number of these like baptism and confirmation take place at the beginning of life and at the point of entry into adulthood respectively. These rites came with the missionary package of what it means to be a member of a church. However, in Africa, churches have sought to use them as initiation rites that mark a person or family’s renunciation of traditional religion and the embracing of faith in Christ. At the beginning of the missionary era, the parents of infants brought for baptism were required to provide a ‘Christian name’ and in case they did not have one, the pastor or priest had a list for families to choose from.

Baptism has gradually developed as an initiation ceremony for children of Christians. Confirmation in the historic mission denominations has also developed in many African contexts as a Christian alternative to rites of puberty. This is because in Africa, Christian conversion has often meant breaking with the African past in traditional religion. Traditional initiation rites have in Christian discourses been presented as linking or tying individual and families to a spirit world that is considered demonic and dangerous. African traditional names, as a result of their linkages with dead ancestors and not in a few cases with the deities that made pregnancy possible, were considered ‘satanic’ or ‘demonic’. The so-called ‘Christian names’ many of which come from the Old Testament – Joseph, John, Samuel, Benjamin, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Peter, Andrew and the like – have either replaced traditional names or were used as first name as a mark of conversion to faith in Christ.

8 Conclusion

African religions are not inscribed in canonical texts but lived out in embodied experiences. Thus, the rites and rituals we have discussed constitute symbolic reenactments of human aspirations and the importance of flourishing as a critical definition of what abundant life means. The communal nature of these initiation rites – whether Christian or traditional – and their relationship with the transcendent powers are indicative of the important role that the supernatural plays in African life and existence. That communities believe that the non-performance of initiation rites could lead to negative mystical consequences means that traditional worldviews are not that easily discarded in the attempts to replace them with Christian ones.

Anthony Ephirim-Donkor who is traditional chief and a scholar in African traditional religions bemoans the fact that in child naming ceremonies, the liquor used is now replaced with soda drinks by Christian communities. His claim is that by this change, neonates are denied their first psychosocial rite of sharing in the long continuum of an ancient Akan rite (Ephirim-Donkor 2011, 93).
Traditionalists bemoan the way Christianity has displaced traditional sacred initiation rites. The observation that Christian groups arbitrarily demonize traditional rites and replace them or usurp the powers of traditional families in the performance of naming and puberty rites is a valid one. In the formulation of pastoral practices and strategies for example, the intersection between the biblical material and the traditional beliefs ought to be accessed carefully to reformulate and regurgitate these initiation rituals in ways that respect human rights and also help those who have opted for the Christian faith to still fulfill their responsibilities towards the communities in which they are nurtured.

References


