

**INTERMEDIARIES IN AFRICAN AND WESTERN THOUGHTS:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

*The notion of intermediaries is an existential phenomenon both in African and Western thought systems. Both systems of thought affirm the reality of intermediaries. But the way and manner the notion of intermediaries is perceived in the religious sphere has been a source of concern to the rational minds of the researchers. Some people with Western mentality believe that the notion of intermediaries in African thought is purely fetish and as such should be discarded. African notion of intermediaries is seen as one that lacks rational justification. The pertinent questions that bother the minds of the researchers are: What is the basis for the rejection of African notion of intermediaries? Is there any essential difference between African and Western notions of intermediaries? Therefore, employing the philosophical method of hermeneutics, this study observed that the rejection of the reality of intermediaries in African religious sphere by the West lacks rational foundation. It further observed that there is no essential difference in the two systems of thought. Hence, this study calls for proper application of human reason in religio-socio-cultural relationship in order to enhance good and cordial relation among all men and women irrespective of religious, cultural, political or geographical affiliations.*

**Keywords:** *Intermediaries, Priests, Ancestors, Saints, Religion*

## **Introduction**

The human person is not only a social or a political being but also a religious being. This is a fact of life. It will not be an overstatement to say that the human person is a religious being. Religion, as we know, has to do with a relationship between the human person and the divine. It is a kind of belief in a divine reality that is worshipped by the believer. One thing that is clear is that every religion, irrespective of its origin, points to the reality of a divine reality a being that is transcendent. But for the fact that religion is a relationship an interaction, the question now is: How does the human person interact with the divine person? Most religions of the world provide opportunities for the human person to easily interact with the Supreme Being. This is what brought about the idea of intermediaries. Most world religions talk of intermediaries in one way or the other. We therefore make bold to say that the notion of intermediaries is an existential reality both in African and Western religious systems of thought. However, experience has shown that the notion of intermediaries in African thought has been downplayed by western mentality. Some people tend to easily accept the reality of intermediaries in Western religions and reject African notion as fetish or irrational. This kind of attitude, in the views of the researchers, is a misconception of reality. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to address this misconception. The paper is also geared towards a comparative analysis of African and Western notions of intermediaries. This is to enable us ascertain, from a rational point of view, if there is any essential difference between the two systems of thought and also to foster good socio-religious relationship among believers of both faiths. But before we go further, we shall briefly have a look at the general notion of intermediaries and thereafter we shall move into the crux of the paper.

## **The Notion of Intermediary**

From its etymological meaning, the word 'intermediary' is a derivative of the Latin word 'intermedius' which simply means a 'go-between'. The implication of this etymological understanding is that an intermediary is a person that helps to bridge the gap between two or more persons. According to Encarta Dictionary, "an intermediary is somebody who carries messages between people, or tries to help them reach an agreement". Such a person is an intermediary who understands the parties involved very well and can as well talk to each of them to bring out a positive result with ease. An intermediary is a mediator or a facilitator. He mediates between people and helps to facilitate the smooth relationship among the persons concerned.

The existence of intermediary is very essential to human relation in social, political, economic or religious sphere. The need for intermediaries in the above spheres cannot be overemphasized. There are instances in social life when a person would need to meet a public office holder but cannot do that directly. In this case, he needs a facilitator an intermediary. This is a fact of life not only in the social sphere but also in the religious sphere. Intermediaries in the religious sphere have to do with both human beings and symbolic objects that help the believer to actualize his/her set goals. Intermediaries in the religious sense have to do with people or sacred objects that help to bridge the gap between the material world and the spiritual world. Practically, every religion makes use of intermediaries. Both those that practice rigid monotheism (such as Islam and

Judaism) and those that practice liberal monotheism (such as Christianity and African Traditional Religion) employ one form of intermediary or another. One important thing to note is that intermediaries are commonly seen as having qualities of both worlds (the material and the spiritual worlds) which allows them to work as a bridge.

Having stated a brief understanding of the concept, intermediary, we shall now take a closer look at the reality of intermediaries in African and Western systems of thought.

### **Intermediaries in African Thought**

The reality of intermediaries in African thought has been misunderstood by the Western scholars who measured African Traditional Religion (ATR) with Christianity. These Western-mentality scholars condemn every practice of ATR. For them, African reverence for deities or ancestors is superstitious. This is a misconception of reality! The fact is that Africans do not worship deities or ancestors. These existential realities which the Africans revere can simply be termed intermediaries. This is because they mediate between the African and the Supreme Being. Africans believe strongly in intermediaries. Below are some of the highlights of the reality of intermediaries in African thought:

#### ***Divinities as Intermediaries in African Thought***

Divinities are the spiritual forces regarded as the messengers of the Supreme Being. They are like ministers in God's theocratic government. For Omoregbe (2012, p.65) divinities are spiritual beings who are subordinate to God and also act as God's servants. These divinities are always in communion with God and as such, they mediate between the Supreme Being and the human person. They serve as channels through which prayers, sacrifices and offerings are presented to the Supreme Being. In the view of Mbiti (1985, Pp. 75 78), divinities are regarded as the personifications of God's activities and manifestations. What it implies is that God, who is transcendent and immaterial, makes himself known through various divinities. According to Ugwu (2014), divinities “assume both natural and human forms. Among the Igbos, such divinities include the sun god, moon god, egbe igwe, 'kamalu' as it is called in Imo state, Nigeria, or 'amadioha', sky god” (p. 52). These beings have been given various names by various scholars as gods, demigods, nature gods, divinities. The belief in divinities is a common phenomenon in African ontology. It is this belief in divinities that is misconstrued by the West as Supreme Being. Hence, their misconception that Africans believe in and worship many Gods. Omoregbe (2012) succinctly puts it thus:

... the general practice is that he [God] is not worshipped directly but only indirectly through his chiefs (divinities). Hence there are, generally, no shrines for the direct worship of God. It is important to note that in the mind of the Africans there is no rivalry between God and his chiefs (divinities) who are always loyal to him. Africans do not see themselves confronted with a choice between worshipping God or the divinities since it is God himself that they are worshipping through his divinities. (p. 65).

The fact is that a divinity, in African thought, is not the Supreme Being but a means through whom the African gets easy access to the Supreme Being. Kanu (2015) calls them the deans of the theocratic governance of the Supreme Being. Divinities are only means to an end and not the end in itself.

### ***Spirits as Intermediaries in African Thought***

The Africans believe in the existence of spirits. Spirits are believed to be next to divinities in the order of hierarchy. They are immaterial but real beings. Mbiti (1985) observes that spirits “are the 'common' spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of men. They are the 'common populace' of spiritual beings” (p. 78). According to Idowu (1991) when we talk of spirits in African ontology we are not talking of divinities or the ancestors but those apparitional entities which form separate categories of beings from those described as divinities. One thing that is clear is that these spirits are created by God but differ from God and the human person. They are non-descriptive and invisible entities. This is because they do not possess material bodies through which they could be seen. However, they possess the power to incarnate into any material being in order to make themselves seen or while carrying out certain activities. Spirits act as intermediaries in African ontology. Mbiti (1985) holds that “in many African societies spirits act as intermediaries who convey human sacrifices or prayers to God, and may relay His reply to men” (p. 80). For the fact that spirits can incarnate in material bodies, it then provides the easier access for the human person to communicate with God. Following their nature, spirits communicate with God directly. They do not need intermediaries; rather they serve as intermediaries between the human person and God. The way and manner the African relates with the spirits depends on the particular African society. The most important thing is that the African belief in spirits as intermediaries is, for the African, real, existential and pragmatic.

### ***Ancestors as Intermediaries in African Thought***

In the family of intermediaries in African thought is found the ancestors. Ancestors are therefore, people who have died but who continued to live in the community and also communicate with their family. They are vested with some mystical powers as a go-between that mediates between the world of men and the world of spirit. The ancestors are intimately involved in the affairs of their kinsmen. They are regarded as the closest link the African person has with the Creator God. Africans believe that ancestors continue to interact with the living in many ways. The interaction can be in the form of dream, vision or reincarnation. The fact here is that ancestors are intermediaries in African ontology.

Ancestors are called living-dead. This is because they share both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead (spirits). They lived among men (with body and spirit) and after death they possess only spirit (without body). The ancestors are regarded as the distinguished members of the family. One thing to note is that it is not anybody that died that automatically becomes an ancestor. Ancestors were those people that lived very well while on earth; they led exemplary lives worthy of emulation. It is in this regard that Idowu (1991) remarked thus:

The deceased who are truly members of the families on earth; but they are no longer of the same fleshly order as those who are still in the flesh on earth. They are closely related to the world; but are no longer

ordinary mortals. Because they have crossed the border land between this world and the supersensible world entering and living in the latter, they have become free from the restrictions imposed by the physical world. They can now come to abide with their fold on earth invisibly, to aid or hinder them, to promote prosperity or cause adversity, (p. 184).

In African ontology, the family tie is so tight that even death cannot break it. Ancestral relationship is a continuation of the family relationship. The ancestors are believed to be with God and as such they have easy access with Him. It is on this ground that the African prays through the ancestors for easier accessibility to the Supreme Being. Mbiti (1985) observed that the ancestors are the best group of intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the human person. He argues that ancestors “know the needs of men, they have 'recently' been here with men, and at the same time they have full access to the channels of communication with God directly or according to some societies, indirectly through their own forefathers” (Mbiti, 1985, p.83). This is why the African approaches the ancestors more often for his/her needs. The African believes that his needs will be met easily through the intercessory role of the ancestors.

### ***Priests as Intermediaries in African Thought***

History has it that at one time or the other, the human person sought for a connector between him and his fellow man; between him or his community and the world of the spirits. This is what gave rise to what we have today as priests. The priest stands between his people and the divine. Arinze (2008) observes that the priest is responsible for the “act of worship offered in the name of a community or part of it”, (p.119). It is the priest that carries the offering of the people to God. In this way, the priest serves as an intermediary between the people and the supernatural world God, gods, divinities, ancestors, etc. The priest is a connector and a mediator an intermediary. This is why Basden (1982) holds that the priest “is the accredited agent of the spirits and acts in conformance with their commands,” (p. 59). The implication of Basden's view is that a priest is an agent of two worlds the material and the immaterial worlds. Let us hear what Mbiti (1985) has to say about the African notion of a priest:

Strictly speaking priests are religious servants associated with temples; but in the African situation the word is used to cover everyone who performs religious duties whether in temples, shrines, sacred groves or elsewhere. There are priests reported among many societies including Ankore, Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Shona, Bagand, Basoga, Ewe, Sonjo, and others... The priest is the chief intermediary: he stands between God, or divinity, and men, (Pp. 187 188).

One thing we need to point out from the view of Mbiti above is that anybody that performs religious function can be regarded as a priest. It is in this regard that we can regard rainmakers, diviners, etc. as priests based on the fact that they mediate between the world of human beings and the world of the spirit. Without mincing words, we say that the African believes in the reality of a priest as an intermediary.

Therefore, having briefly highlighted some forms of intermediaries in African thought we shall focus our searchlight on the understanding of intermediaries in the Western thought.

## **Intermediaries in Western Thought**

Intermediaries exist not only in African ontology but also in Western ontology. The reality of intermediaries in Western thought can be understood in this paper within the context of the Christian notion of intermediaries. The implication is that we shall use the Christian perspective of intermediary to stand for the Western concept of intermediary. This delineation is very important because it shows that when we mention Western thought invariably we are talking of Christian thought, unless otherwise stated. Christians believe strongly in the reality of intermediaries. Let us briefly highlight them:

### ***Angel as an Intermediary in Western Thought***

The reality of angel is found in many Western religions especially the Abrahamic religions. An angel is said to be a supernatural being that is said to be a messenger of God. We must note that the term 'angel' is derived from the Greek word 'angelos' which is the equivalent of the Hebrew word “mal'akh” which simply means messenger. Therefore, from this understanding, angels are believed to be spiritual beings that serve as intermediaries between God and man. They bring God's messages to the world and also report to God their observations in the world. Wikipedia (2015) reports that angels are often depicted as benevolent celestial beings that act as intermediaries between [Heaven](#) and [Earth](#) (par. 1). As stated earlier, the belief in angels is found in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other world religions. Gervais is of the view that angels are intermediaries between God and man. He said:

Angels function as intermediaries between heaven and earth. In other traditions, whether it is the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, the Panentheism based faiths such as Naïve American or those that developed on the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism and Buddhism, angels, demigods, spirits and devas act as a guiding influence a guardian spirit or a protector. (Gervais, 2012, p. 63).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) relates Thomas Aquinas' view on angel. Aquinas as cited in CCC said that “angels are spiritual creatures who glorify God without ceasing and who serve his seven plans for other creatures: the angels work together for the benefit of us all” (CCC, 1995, p. 101). For Gilson (1955) angels occupy the summit of the universal hierarchy of being. For the fact that they are incorporeal beings, they enjoy immediate cognition of the divinity, thus, they see the immediate and direct manifestations of God. For him, the hierarchy of beings is: the divine manifestations, the incorporeal beings (angels) and the corporeal beings (man). He went further to say that angels serve as intermediaries between the divine manifestations and man. In his words: “all other creatures participate in the divine illumination through the intermediary of the angel”, (Gilson, 1955, p. 122). The main point we are trying to establish here is that the belief in angels as intermediaries exists in Western thought.

### ***Saints as Intermediaries in Western Thought***

Saints are persons who lived on earth but are no more. Following their good earthly living, saints are believed to be with God; they are in constant touch with God. This belief is a widespread phenomenon throughout many religions especially Christianity. The notion of saints came as a result of the early persecution of Christians. Some Christian believers were killed because of their faith in Christ; they became martyrs. The

early Christians believe that for the fact that those martyrs suffered and died for Christ, they have been received directly in heaven. Consequently, anybody that lived and died for Christ is regarded as a saint. Such a person has the power to intercede for the living.

In the Roman Catholic Church, saints are being venerated because of their spiritual and religious significance. Some Christians believe that they can interact with God directly while others believe that they can get easy access to God through the mediation of the saints who are believed to be with God. In this sense, saints act as intermediaries between the spiritual world and the material. It is believed that since they once lived on earth, they understand the predicaments of men and can therefore present them to God in a way to achieve positive result for the believer.

### ***Priests as Intermediaries in Western Thought***

The term priest is a derivative of the Greek word *presbyteros* which simply means 'elder'. A priest is seen as an elder in the Christian community. A priest is not only an elder but he is also a person designated to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. This is why the general understanding of a priest is the one that acts as an intermediary between God and His people. In the view of Bucher as cited in Ezekona (2008, p. 1), priesthood is seen as a sacred institution in a religious setup whose sacred officiates are ordained and dedicated for the service of a particular cult especially in sacrificial and other allied matters. Bucher's position ties priesthood with sacrifice. A priest is meant to offer sacrifice to God on behalf of the people. Boudinhon as cited in Ezeogu (2008) observed that "every religion has its priest who functions essentially as intermediaries between men and the Divinity," (p. 16). A priest is believed to be a mediator and maintainer of the equilibrium between the sacred and the profane in human society. Again, as agents vested with sacred power, they are believed to have the ability to control and manipulate through rituals, the natural processes and events. Priests are not only to offer sacrifices but also to offer prayers for and on behalf of the people. They also receive information from the divine being and pass same to the people. Priests are the custodians of the divine worship and as such, they are the go-between between heaven and earth. In the Roman Catholic Church and some other orthodox churches, the notion of priest is very prominent; but in some other churches the use of pastors, prophets or elders are prominent. The point is that no matter the nomenclature, they perform similar function in the community of God's people.

### **African and Western Thoughts on the Reality of Intermediaries: A Comparative Analysis**

So far, we have tried to analyze the reality of intermediaries in both African and Western systems of thought. It is undeniable the fact that intermediaries exist in both thoughts. One thing to note is that both systems of thought believe in the monotheistic view of God. Monotheism is the belief in one God. The African believes that there is only one God who is supreme, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good. The African does not believe in many Gods. There is no African word for Supreme Beings. The African can only talk of divinities or gods who serve as intermediaries with God. The Western also share the same belief as the African. It is the same God that is approached differently depending on one's understanding and cultural background. It is the belief in one God who is transcendent that necessitates the notion of intermediaries. But the problem comes

when the Western begins to tell the African that his (African) belief is irrational, unrealistic and fetish. Without mincing words, from our analysis above one will observe that this is a case of 'kettle calling pot black'. Omoregbe (2012) affirms that “Africans acknowledge and worship only one God through his various chiefs who are his ministers and intermediaries between him and men” (p. 66).

It is evident from what we have mentioned earlier that there is a very close affinity between Western and African thoughts as regards the reality of intermediaries. For instance, both systems of thought believe in the existence of angels. In African thought, divinities (angels) play more role than the angels in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. They are accorded more importance than angels in the already mentioned Western religions. The main point here is that both Christianity and African Traditional Religion believe that besides God, the Supreme Being, there are other spiritual beings who are subordinate to God and who act as His servants or agents. Whether they are called divinities by the African or angels by the Western, they all point to one and the same reality.

Again, both African and Western systems of thought have deep regard for the dead that led exemplary lives. Both believe that these people are with God. In Christianity, they are called saints; in African thought, they are called ancestors. Thus, ancestors occupy the position of saints in Christianity. These dead members who led exemplary lives are prayed to in both religions and are also invoked for help since they are believed to be with God. Worthy of note is that in both Christianity (especially the Roman Catholic Church) and ATR the intermediaries divinities, angels, saints/ancestors are represented by images, statues, etc. In both religions, believers pray before these statues or images. By doing so, they are not worshipping the statues themselves. The statue stands as a reminder of the person which the statue represents. Neither the African nor the Christian is so foolish as to pray to or worship images or statues. The fact is that believers pray to God, the Supreme Being through the intermediaries represented symbolically before whom he is praying or kneeling. More so, both systems of thought believe and maintain the office of the priesthood. The priest in both systems of thoughts acts as intermediary between God and the people. The priest leads in public worship. He is the 'mouth', 'ear', 'hand' etc. of God or gods whom he represents. Our analysis so far points to the fact that there is no essential difference in the systems of thought of the African and the Western, especially with regard to the notion of intermediaries.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to make a comparison of the notion of intermediaries in both African and Western systems of thought. In the past, some people erroneously misconstrue the reality of intermediaries in African ontology. There were a lot of prejudices and biases in presenting anything 'African'. For instance, a Catholic kneeling before the statue of St. Peter will condemn an African praying before an image of his ancestor. It does not occur to the Catholic that there is no essential difference between his actions and that of the African. The idea of the Western condemning African system of belief is highly prejudiced. It lacks rational justification as we have discovered from our analysis in this paper. The only 'basis' or 'justification' for the condemnation of African notion of intermediaries is simply prejudice and superiority complex. We therefore



make bold to say that there is no essential difference between the two systems of thought. In actual fact, we can say that there is so much in common between Western thought (Christianity) and African thought that both can be seen as essentially one in different cultural expressions. Hence, this study calls for proper application of human reason in our religio-socio-cultural relationship. This is to enhance good and cordial relation among all men and women irrespective of religious, cultural, political or geographical affiliations.

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