

## CANONICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SENIORITY AMONG THE YORUBA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIESTLY LIFE

Jude Abidemi Asanbe

### Introduction

Modern civilization has improved the lot of human beings and, by so doing, has brought a considerable amount of sustainable development, joy, comfort and progress. It has also brought a wave of aversion for and critical outlook on authority and the traditional structures of the society which hitherto were accepted without questioning. On the one hand, this attitude can be said to be a welcome development. This is because some traditional structures can be adjudged to be retrogressive or repressive and therefore to be dismantled. On the other hand, it has brought a good measure of confusion, lawlessness and disrespect for constituted authority and elders.

In Nigeria, almost every sphere of societal and ecclesial life has been positively or negatively affected. One of such is the sphere of relationship among priests, especially in the area of respect for "senior" members of the presbyterium. Not a few priests argue today that a "priest is a priest" and as such there should not be any class distinctions among priests. Such priests look upon the much older priests as equals, call them by their first names and do not towards them the courtesy that traditional culture demands. There is another side to the story. It is a situation that arises from the fact that some priests, on account of seniority, do not have regard for the younger ones. Some have been known to ill-treat younger priests, especially those who have been assigned to them as assistant priests or reside with them in the rectory. This situation, where it exists, weakens priestly communion, breeds mutual distrust, and lack of cohesion among priests. The apostolate of the Church suffers and the work of evangelization is impoverished.

This essay seeks to respond to the issues raised above. Starting with a brief consideration on axiology, it examines the culture of seniority in traditional Yoruba society and analyzes its relevance to modern times. It also takes a critical outlook at the checks and balances within the traditional social structure in the practice of this culture. This is with a view to underline the fact that seniority, when properly understood, is not a tool for domination, manipulation or oppression. It serves the purpose of direction and guidance and other pedagogical values in the community.

In the course of this study, perspectives will be taken from some other cultures of the Nigerian peoples and from the Code of Canon Law. The argument of this study is that the culture of seniority is very much entrenched in the life of the Church as evidenced by the present legislation (the 1983 Code of Canon law). Hence, it is still relevant today. In fact it can serve as a stabilizing power and an effective instrument towards constructing or reinforcing, where such exists, cordial and cohesive relationship among priests in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church.

### Brief Consideration on Axiology and Bi-Polarity

Depending on the context, that is, the discipline and the particular school of thought to which the discussant belongs, axiology as a term has different nuances.<sup>1</sup> In sociology, it is generally regarded as a value theory, which invariably yields to a value system. This in turn has to do with the set of values that majority of the members in the community adhere to and propagate. It is therefore argued that values are expressed in norms and norms in turn reflect values.<sup>2</sup> Whatever is a value to the community is not only desirable, it also becomes normative, such that every member of the community is made to see it as imperative both for the present and future generations.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. M. "Value, Theory of" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* 22 (1965), pp. 961-963.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. Rich, "Values and Value Systems" in *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, v. 2, Frank N. Magill (ed). (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers), p. 1473.

On the philosophical plane, John Warfield defines axiology as the study of the nature of types and criteria of values and of value judgments, especially in ethics.<sup>3</sup> By and large, the word, axiology is viewed from two related perspectives, namely, ethics and aesthetics. Towards this end, Aladejana explains that while ethics is concerned with the philosophical values of morality and conduct, aesthetics is concerned with value systems in the realms of beauty and art.<sup>4</sup> In traditional African worldview, both are subsumed in the service of good and right conduct. Moemeka, writing from a socio-cultural point of view argues that ethics is much more than a personal choice but a matter of social and cultural demands, which makes for what is appropriate within the social system.<sup>5</sup> In this connection, ethics determines what a senior does. Aesthetics, for its part, is like the proverbial palm oil with which "yam is eaten".<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is the designation of art and beauty which makes the "burden" of ethics bearable as it were. So, while ethics determines what a senior person does to a junior one and vice versa, aesthetics engenders the desirability and effectiveness of the determination.

On the theological axis, ethics is much more than a socio-cultural demand. It is the objective moral order which is superior to art and beauty. Ethics is to judge the dictate and practice of aesthetics. It is only in this sense that the human person in the society is best judged in relation to the demands of the Supreme Being to whom he/she owes his/her existence.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://pespnc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/Axiology.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. I. Aladejana, *An Axiological Analysis of Yoruba Education*. A Doctoral Dissertation presented at the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University of Chicago, 1980, p. 42. To a considerable extent, this work influenced my choice of topic for this research.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. A. Moemeka, "Community and Self Respect as African Values" in *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, C. Christians and M. Traber (eds.) (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 171.

<sup>6</sup> In a typical traditional society, cooked yam is best eaten with palm oil.

### Yoruba Value System of Seniority<sup>7</sup>

The Yoruba are generally regarded as friendly, easy to deal with and accommodating, people who enjoy living together.<sup>8</sup> These qualities make of them a highly organized entity with a well-knit political stratification and a high standard of morality.<sup>9</sup> In the opinion of Atanda, respect for seniority is one of the basic ingredients towards achieving this feat. In fact, seniority is said to have served as a great cohesive force in the social fabric of the people.<sup>10</sup> The result of this is peace, order and stability, which invariably lead to a profitable use of time and intellectual achievement.<sup>11</sup>

The primary locus of this fabric is the extended family known as "ebi". Here, under normal circumstances, the oldest man naturally assumes the headship of the family. Being highly steeped in the family tradition and the norms and mores of the land, he maintains law and order and ensures that the ancestral worship and the worship of other gods by the family are observed as and when due. The Yoruba believe that old age co-terminates with wisdom. In fact, it is generally regarded as an exception for anyone to attain old age without being wise. So, the family head has to be a man of great wisdom, a wisdom derived from experience and deep knowledge. He is assisted in his duties by other senior members in the compound in seeing to the welfare of the other members of the family.

<sup>7</sup> One cannot argue against the fact that the Yoruba society painted here is more appropriately that in which communalism was valued as opposed to the individualism and self assertive tendencies of the modern times.

<sup>8</sup> U. L. Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), p. 8. For a more incisive reading on the Yoruba, consult O. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshops, 1921). See also J. Ferguson, *The Yoruba of Nigeria* (London: Bleichley Bucks, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Read P. O. Ogunbowale, *The Essentials of the Yoruba Language* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 139; read also J. A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> A keen and dispassionate observer can hardly argue against the intellectual achievement of the Yoruba people especially during the pre-colonial era in Nigeria.

The secondary locus of this fabric is the town usually presided over by a king called "Oba", while smaller towns are under the authority of Baale. Here, respect is on account of constituted authority and not of age. The Oba rules with a council known as *igbimo* (a derivative of the Yoruba word for reasoning and planning together). The members of the *igbimo* are the most senior chiefs, who represent certain lineages, bound together by strong ties, either of family or kingship. In theory, the Oba has the power of life and death, hence the name *Kabiyesi*, that is to say, "you are not answerable to anyone". In practice, however, the Oba never takes a major decision without consulting with the *igbimo* whose opinion he takes very seriously. It is therefore what the Oba in Council has decided that becomes unquestionably binding on every member of the town.

In view of the deference paid to age and constituted authority, members of the family are to respect the head and the other elders, the members of the town are to respect, reverence and obey the Oba, all his chiefs, and all the elders in the community. This structure is such that every member of the community knows that respect is sacrosanct. Hence, to go against it amounts to offending the law of the land. On account of this system, there exists a formidable cohesion of social life making for stability and effectiveness.

The culture of seniority has many aspects, namely, old age, eldership (or the state of being an elder), or being born before or arriving before another. There are some nuances about the three elements though they combine to make the same value system. For instance, old age usually refers to being advanced in years. This age would normally begin from 70 years. An elder on the other hand may not necessarily have attained old age. One becomes an elder having attained certain designated height. In this vein, Aladejana explicates four categories of elders, namely, (i) anyone recognized as a foundation member; (ii) anyone recognized for his age and wisdom; (iii) the elite of the society; (iv) a senior, that is, a person born before another.<sup>12</sup> There is yet a subtle determination to being senior; that is arriving before another. This does not necessarily co-terminate with being born before another. For instance, one talks of "senior wife", "senior slave". The most senior wife in a family; nuclear or

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. I. Aladejana, *An Axiological Analysis of Yoruba Education*, p. 42.

family; it is the portion of the elderly. In other words, it is expected that whenever meat is being shared, the choicest part belong to the elders. Conversely, whenever any other thing is being shared among family members, the portions are generally taken in the order of seniority by age. A younger one is not expected to dish or take before those who are senior to him. These gestures are part of the parameters for measuring a well brought up child or a highly cultured person. One who has no respect for old age or and who does not pay obeisance to one who is senior to him/her is regarded as a spoilt brat or a charlatan. And such a person is considered already accursed.<sup>16</sup>

It goes without saying, however, that deference to old age and seniors is not limited to the Yoruba people. It cuts across Black African communities. For instance, among some of the Igbo of the southeastern Nigeria, the senior male citizen is addressed as "Dee" and the female as "Daa" by the younger ones. There is however a generic name for all categories of elders. They are addressed as "Mazi". For the Igbo people, the younger ones are to be under the tutelage of the seniors to which they adhere and conform strictly. And to buttress this claim, there is an adage, which says, "Children who demand to be their own masters sleep in the cold." The Fante of Ghana are more emphatic when they say, "the wiser the elder is more powerful than thunder."

It must however be emphasized that there is a corresponding demand which the value system places on the elderly or the senior. It must be of good behaviour and must act appropriately in order to promote leadership and examples worthy of emulation by the younger generation. If the elder falls short of this, he/she ultimately loses the respect and dignity accorded him/her. For instance, a Yoruba adage says, *Agi aje e weyin, yoo ru igba re dele* which literally means if an elder not leave part of the food for the younger one, he certainly would carry the load home by himself. This point, among others, form the central focus of the next section.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1970), p. 313.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. A. Moeneka, "Community and Self Respect as African Values", p. 1.

extended is the first woman to be married into the family. She may not necessarily be the oldest in age.

These various distinctions notwithstanding, old age is pre-eminent in the value system of seniority and respect to old age is the duty of every Yoruba person. The young must respect anyone who is senior to him/her, especially an elder. This is because the elder is full of wisdom and experience with which the young can be guided and nurtured. No wonder Moeneka avers that the elderly are seen as true repositories of wisdom and knowledge, and, therefore, as assets of great value to the community. This explains why the advice of the elderly is hardly ever set aside or ignored.<sup>18</sup> In view of this overriding fact, for the young member of the community, "it is very natural to be corrected, advised, consoled, scolded, punished or rewarded by an adult".<sup>19</sup>

Faniran, explicating on the features of African communication among the Yoruba especially with regard to respect for old age and the elderly, highlights the form of greeting and the choice of words between the young and the elderly.<sup>20</sup> While a young man prostrates for an elder, a young woman kneels as a form of greeting. It is customary that the younger person does not address his/her senior in the second person singular pronoun. The second person plural, "you", is always employed as a mark of respect. Again, if and when the elderly person is doing something, for instance, tilling the soil, sweeping the floor, or carrying a load, the younger one as a mark of honour and respect is to show willingness in assisting the senior. On the contrary, it is a mark of great disrespect for a younger one to speak before his seniors without taking permission. For example, at a meeting, the younger one is to listen attentively to the opinions of the elderly ones before making his/her own if and when it is required. Furthermore, it is said in Yoruba that "ori buruku ni n mu omode pin itan ewure, agbalagba ni i pin". It is bad head (misfortune) that makes a young person to share the thigh of a goat in the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. A. Moeneka, "Community and Self Respect as African Values", p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. I. Aladejuna, *An Axiological Analysis of Yoruba Education*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. O. Faniran, *Communalism as a Feature of African Communication: An Exploratory Study with Special Reference to the Yoruba of Nigeria*, An Extract of Doctoral Dissertation in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 2003, pp. 48-49.

the high shelf while that of the elder is too big to go into the gourd. This is to explain the complementary nature of the relationship between the young and the elderly. By implication, the elder cannot afford to regard the young as of no consequence, or else, on the day he needs to put his hands into the gourd, he/she will find no one to do that for him/her.

In the political stratification of the Yoruba the Oba is given such enormous powers. However, he does not rule in deference to the advice and admonition of the council of elders. In actual fact, the Oba has to consult some specific persons before taking particular decisions. For example, in the traditional Oka community, there is the "Open" who generally is the eldest in age in the community.<sup>18</sup> He in fact is regarded as senior to the Oba on account of his old age. Thus he seals and signs whatever decisions the Oba makes.<sup>19</sup> It is only then such decisions made by the Oba become binding on the community. However, an Oba that takes laws into his hands, after series of warnings and corrections from the council of elders, is asked to "go and open the calabash", that is to commit suicide. He may also be summarily deposed and banished from the town.<sup>20</sup> This goes to show that even the Oba who is regarded as supreme and next to the gods cannot afford to be arbitrary in matters of morality and social norms of the community.

Another practice, which is invaluable to the argument of this work, is that based on the fact that the elder has to behave accordingly to continue to enjoy honour and respect of the young. For instance, if a senior metes out punishment unduly to the younger one or insults him/her for more than three times, this is regarded as an abuse of privilege on the part of the senior and for this, such a senior may be disrespected.<sup>21</sup> Among

<sup>18</sup> Oka is the hometown of the writer of this essay. It is located in the South West of Akoko South Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria.

<sup>19</sup> Oral Interview by the writer with Mr. Stephen Asanbe aged 63 years. He is the oldest male in the extended family of Late Pa George Abiona Asanbe. It must be remarked however that the case of Open in Oka is an exception to the Oba system in Yoruba culture. In general the Oba is addressed as *Alase*, *Igbakeji Orisa*, that is, he is second only to the "gods".

<sup>20</sup> Atanda submits that nine Alaafins of Oyo were so treated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. J. A. Atanda, *Introduction to Yoruba History*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. I. Aladejina, *An Aristological Analysis of Yoruba Education*, p. 59. See also, A. A. Moeneka, "Community and Self Respect as African Values", p. 182.

### Critique of the Culture of Seniority

A superficial and somewhat cosmetic look at the scenario painted above may lead to the conclusion that among the traditional Yoruba, the culture of seniority, of which respect for constituted authority is a part, is that of domination and power by the elder over and above the younger ones. This appears to be corroborated when one focuses on the excesses, the aberrant behaviour and statements of some of the elders. For instance some *obas* had ruled in the past as if they were absolute rulers. No one dared to question their actions or decisions no matter how rash and unreasonable. Some elders comport themselves before the younger ones as if they, the elders, were above the law, all in the name of the reverence and honour due to them. A look at some adage of the people may also justify this position. For example, one adage says, "*Ari ma le e so, bi ikun imu baale*" which means literally, that one does not say that the head of the house has a running nose. This is conceived to be that the younger one does not point out the ill of an elder to him. Another adage says, "*Agba dida omode ni a fi I reje*". The advantage of being an elder is to cheat the younger ones. This is to say whenever there is conflict situation, the junior is always adjudged to be at fault, even when the opposite is obviously the case.

One cannot argue against the fact that those who hold the position hinted above lay claim to the same value system to prove their point. The argument of this essay here is that such attitudes are not based on the authentic, logical and comprehensive interpretation of the culture of seniority. They are different shades of the bastardization the culture has suffered over time. It is time to refer to statements and practices that serve to counter the excesses that may arise on the account of the use or abuse of seniority. The first is: "*Bi omode ba mo owo we, a ba agba jeun*". If a child knows how to wash his hands well (to comport himself) he will eat with the elders. The point here is that the younger one has to be very prudent in dealing with the elder; either in claiming a right, making a point or even correcting a fault. Second, "*owo omode ko to pepe, i'agbatagba ko wo keregebe*". This is to say that the hand of the young is too short to reach

the Igbo it is said, "if an elder behaves like rice, children will eat him up". The Yoruba also have a saying to buttress this fact; it goes thus, "*agba ti ko ba f'arabale a f'aragbegba*". An elder that does not behave gently will be treated to some lashes. Again, it is said, "*Agba ti ko mo iwon ara re i'odo n gbe lo*". The river carries away an elderly person who does not "know his own weight", that is, who does not know his limit.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the culture of seniority as practiced by the Yoruba has innate mechanism for checks and balances. It does not admit of witch-hunting, oppression or recklessness on the part of any member of the society. The demand is placed on both the elderly and the young. Each has to fulfill his/her role to ensure a stable and cohesive society.

### Contemporary Reinterpretation of the Culture of Seniority

One cannot argue against the fact that the culture of seniority has undergone some notable changes among the Yoruba and within other Black African communities. The picture painted above largely reflects the pre-colonial era in the political and socio-cultural formation of the Yoruba people. With the colonial and post colonial eras, new concepts, patterns and acceptance of seniority in practice have emerged which very often have had adverse effect on the high moral standard and well knitted cohesiveness among the people. This essay now discusses some of these various shifts.

First, in modern times, one hears a kind of proverbial saying: "*olowolagba*" which literally means seniority belongs to the wealthy. In this world, age does not count as much as popularity and wealth. Here, wealth stands for whatever makes one outstanding in the community. This explains why you have some people who die at the age of 50 being addressed as Late Pa... Again, some young people, having attained prominence, find it hard to respect their elders. Without canonizing the past, it has to be said that this was unthinkable in the "good old days". You cannot buy honour with wealth. It is achieved with good name, age and good use of experience.

Secondly, seniority today has come to mean "winner takes all". To be a senior, which naturally entails that you are the first to take your portion whenever things/goods are to be shared among family members means in contemporary times that you do not leave anything for others to take. This is very common in families where the first male child is to take custody of everything the father had in his lifetime. Instead of ensuring that all the children have what they need, very often the goods are appropriated by the most senior. It is also this kind of understanding that makes a young man who becomes king disregard the king makers, the Chiefs and the elders in the community. These are the ones from whom he should take counsel and be tutored.

Thirdly, in view of modernity, there is a tendency toward spurious subjectivism, that is, individual perception of what is good and fair and just and what is unacceptable. Norms and mores of the land are being contested, often without much basis. In this situation, the younger chooses to respect whom he deems fit. It is the younger one who determines and chooses which elders are doing well and which ones are worthy of respect. Any elder who does not fit into this picture is disregarded and very often treated with disdain. There ought to be objective criteria with which to determine these matters. As stated earlier, the culture of seniority, which entails respect for age, experience and constituted authority, is determined by objective norms in the traditional society and not left to the whims and caprices of the individual.

It does not take much to come to the understanding that contemporary change of attitude towards seniority negatively affect the value system of seniority. This largely explains the malaise plaguing our society today. For instance, many elders do not feel obliged to correct the younger ones out of fear of being treated with disdain. The society is then left at the mercy of the young who often lack the wisdom of the elders. The result is usually fatal: increased armed robbery, cultic activities and other social vices generally perpetrated by the younger ones.

These contemporary perspectives on seniority unfortunately seem to have found their way into the priesthood today. The criteria for judging who is senior and as such worthy of respect and obedience are exceptions to the established norms of the society. At times, practices in some dioceses encourage this. For instance, postings are done without due

to take a quick look at Conciliar documents to see if there is any pointer to the issue at hand.<sup>24</sup>

### Conciliar Sign Post

The Council Fathers in the document on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 8 make the distinction between the older and the younger priests in the same presbyterium. While reiterating the sacramental brotherhood between priests, they make no sense of the "priest is priest" syndrome. This is the starting point of seniority culture in the Church that is, recognizing the fact and implications of one priest being older than the other in the same diocese while maintaining a united front. It has been the contention of this essay that this recognition, rather than militate against, does in fact reinforce the unity that should bind the members together.

In ensuring the unity of sacramental brotherhood, or what this essay calls cohesiveness, the Council Fathers admonish older priests to "sincerely accept the younger ones as brothers and be a help to them in facing the first tasks and responsibilities of their ministry". It is interesting to note that the onus is first on the older priests. Their position should be seen in the light of helping the younger ones to be more like the image of Christ in the priestly vocation they have embraced. It is a position of responsibility above all. It can hardly be argued that the primary locus of this first task of accepting and guiding is the parish. This makes the period of assistantship very pivotal in the life of any priest. The document goes further to acknowledge the real dialectical tension that may come about on account of age difference among priests. Here again, it calls for understanding and encouragement especially on the part of the older members of the presbyterium.

Younger priests, for their part, are called to "respect the age and experience of their elders". Furthermore, "they (the younger ones) ought to consult with them on matters concerning the care of souls and willingly

<sup>24</sup> Here, one is referred to the position of the Holy Father, John Paul II, when he argues that the Second Vatican Council can be regarded as the *Magna Carta* for the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

regard for age and experience. Quite often, a younger priest who finds himself in a very "juicy" parish or who is given an important office rides very high on top of his seniors both by age and ordination. Again, some priests who feel they have arrived, either because of wealth, education, or natural talents disregard and despise older priests. Conversely, some older priests neither welcome nor accept younger ones as brothers in the same presbyterium. Rather, they oppress and discriminate against them especially when such younger ones live with them as assistant priests. For instance, allowances are either not paid to them, or, when they are paid, it is at the whims and fancies of the parish priest. This attitude certainly runs contrary to the expectation that senior priests are to care for and support younger ones.

The effects of these practices are bitterness, acrimony, wrangling, in fighting, and at worst disobedience to constituted authority who may be (at times unjustly) perceived as being partly responsible for the situation. A more attentive observation of the culture, even in contemporary times, reveals that there still remains a substratum which gives meaning to whatever comes. The people have internalized this as it were. There could be shifts and variations but the substance remains largely the same. This is what Victor Turner calls the root paradigms.<sup>22</sup> This is to say, people still cherish seniority despite the three forms analyzed above. And of all the forms, old age takes precedence.<sup>23</sup> The more seasoned members of the community still continue to judge civility by this criterion.

### Canonical Perspectives

A search through the 1983 Code of Canon Law reveals some canons that deal with seniority. But before delving into the Code it might be salutary

<sup>22</sup> Cf. V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), especially 64.

<sup>23</sup> In the traditional Yoruba setting, those who occupy positions of authority are generally regarded as elders. For instance, the Oba may not be the oldest man in the town on account of birth but once enthroned as Oba he becomes the oldest man in his kingdom.

cooperate with them". This statement is very interesting. The emphasis is on the age and experience of the older priests. The younger priests are to seek the opinions of the older priests especially in matters regarding the pastoral ministry. The word "ought" is quite instructive here. It does imply some sort of obligation and not a question of personal discretion or choice. It does not matter if they (the older priests) obtained higher degrees or not. This is very consistent with the *mens ecclesiae*. For instance, after stating the academic qualifications for the office of the bishop, n.5 of #1 of C. 378 ends with a proviso, "or at least well versed in these disciplines". This suggests that what a priest does not obtain by going through the four walls of a university for higher degrees, he may acquire through lived experience. This point reinforces the fact that experience may not be set aside in the pastoral ministry and life of priests. This being the case, one may expect that this point be more intensely focused upon and realized in the dioceses in Nigeria. For example, one does expect that the different postings and membership of committees in the particular Churches reflect age and experience in the priesthood. At this juncture, it goes without saying that the mutual demand on both the older and younger priests lends credence to the culture of seniority among the Yoruba and other African communities as highlighted earlier in this work.

### Canonical Provisions

There are nine canons that specifically relate to the issue under review. They are, namely, Cc. 119,1; 395; 415; 419; 421; 501; 502; 541; 544. While c. 119 is collocated within the General Norms, the other canons are found in the second book of the code and concern largely the area of administrative law.

C. 119 deals with a supplementary norm with respect to collegial acts. Hence, it provides for moments or instances where there are no particular laws or statutes. The substance of the provision is that with regard to elections where there are two inconclusive scrutinies among more than two candidates, the two candidates senior by age should be voted for and if after the third scrutiny, it is inconclusive, then the one who is senior by age is considered elected. This is a very incisive canon

notwithstanding its supplementary nature. It grants priority to seniority by age. The norm presupposes the fact that when the chips are down, age and experience count. Interestingly, the code of the Catholic Eastern Churches (CCEO) talks of the one who is senior by ordination.<sup>25</sup> Either way, the *Hauptpunkt* is that seniority has a part to play towards ensuring order and decorum.

C. 415 deals with the administrative procedure to be followed in case of an impeded see by reason of ecclesiastical penalty within an Ecclesiastical Province. Cc. 419 and 421 deal with a vacant see and on the procedure for the appointment of a diocesan administrator. The point of interest to us is the relevance of seniority. In the case of the aforementioned impeded see, when the case concerns the Metropolitan himself or in case where there is none, the suffragan that is senior by promotion is to refer the matter to the Holy See. Another instance where the senior suffragan reports to the Holy See is cited in c. 395, #4 where a diocesan bishop or the Metropolitan absents himself from the diocese/Archdiocese for more than six months. The implication being that the senior suffragan is somehow responsible for the welfare of the particular Church in question.

In c. 421 however, the suffragan who is senior by promotion is to appoint the diocesan administrator if not lawfully elected and the Metropolitan See is vacant. In the case of c. 419, the auxiliary bishop senior by promotion (where there are a number of them) is to govern the diocese until the appointment of a diocesan administrator. By the same token the priest who is senior by ordination presides over the college of consultors prior to the appointment of one who takes over from the impeded or outgoing bishop.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in the case of grave abuse of office by the council of priests, which carries the pain of dissolution, and when the case occurs in a Metropolitan see, the bishop in council must consult with the suffragan bishop who is senior by promotion before the dissolution. It must be noted that the failure of the bishop concerned to consult could result in the invalidity of the dissolution.<sup>27</sup> In all but one of the aforementioned cases, seniority is not by age but by promotion. In

<sup>25</sup> Cf. C. 924, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. C. 502, #2.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. C. 127, #2, 2.

other words, the seniority criterion is by virtue of coming before another into an office and not by birth. This is a very interesting distinction because, as emphasized earlier, seniority is not always according to birth. It is possible to be appointed into an office before another without necessarily being senior by age (or by ordination) to that person. This possibility will be examined later on in the essay.

Cc. 541 and 544 provide for the temporary appointment of a parochial administrator and a moderator in the case of vacancy or impediment to the exercise of office. The former comes about in the case of a parish priest and the latter in the case of *prieests in solidum*. This is the case where a group of priests are put in charge of a parish with a moderator (c. 517). In the case where a parish is vacant or the parish priest is impeded from the exercise of his office, the assistant priest who is most senior by appointment (where there are more than one assistant) takes over the interim governance of the parish. In the other instance, where the moderator is incapable of exercising his office, before another is substantially appointed, the priest of the group who is senior by appointment is to fulfill this office.

Notwithstanding, the fact that in most of the cases where seniority is treated in the code, it comes about as a form of interim measure (an *interregnum*). The work makes bold to draw some implications from these provisions. These are, namely, (i) that the issue is worthy of mention in the very first instance; (ii) the irreplaceable role of seniority especially in difficult moments and whenever some thorny issues are involved. This cannot be more significant considering the fact that old age and experience are usually called for in cases that are not so clear and demand more discerning and careful thinking. Again, the strength of any community is measured by the capacity to confront adversity. So, the culture of seniority can never be outdated; iii) in the point of fact, the culture of seniority reinforces and strengthens the ecclesiology of hierarchical structure in the Church communion. For if the Church is hierarchical, it then means someone comes before another in the order of things even when all are united with one another.<sup>28</sup> In view of the capacity of the Church at different levels to make laws and enact decrees and norms, one then would

<sup>28</sup> Here, one can cite precedence in liturgical assemblies especially during processions.

want to call for an expansive mechanism to give more space to age and experience in the administrative and pastoral ministry of the Church.<sup>29</sup> This essay calls the Church in Yorubaland to tackle more pointedly the questions bordering on hiccups in the seniority value system among priests. The work now gives indications by examining some critical issues.

### Two Specific Questions on Seniority and Priestly Relationship

This work now ventures into some areas that are regarded as troublesome or problematic with regard to priests' relationship. This is with a view to ensuring a better integration of the past and the present, taking the best from the two. It also serves the purpose of assisting priests in forging a better and more Christ-like rapprochement among themselves. To achieve these objectives, the work identifies and discusses two areas, namely, (i) The Period of Assistantship; (ii) better integration of age and experience in postings and appointments.

#### The Period of Assistantship<sup>30</sup>

As reiterated earlier, this is a very significant period in the life of a priest. It usually co-terminates with the early stages of priestly ministry. This period is therefore to serve as a period of testing the waters, that is, under the direction of another, to begin to put into practice the principles and ideals learnt in the seminary. It therefore means that, largely speaking, the assistant priest is in a period of tutelage under a more experienced priest who is to guide, direct, affirm, support, and correct him fraternally if and when need be. The assistant priest, in his stead, is to consult with the parish priest in all matters concerning the administration of the parish, ask

<sup>29</sup> This is not to sacrifice competence on the altar of old age and experience. Rather, the essay argues that in considering the different qualities and circumstances for appointments into various positions and committees, age and experience need be considered among others.

<sup>30</sup> This term is employed on purpose. It is to underline the perspective of tutelage in being an assistant priest, though not exclusively.

for permission and counsel in taking pastoral decisions that are deferred to him.

It is obvious today that the period of assistantship has continued to generate tension and conflicts among priests. Many relationships are strained beginning with the ugly experiences garnered during this period. There are even reported cases of physical assault between the parish priest and the assistant priest to the consternation of the lay faithful of the parish. It comes out that while some older priests do not regard their assistants as brothers, providing for their needs, guiding and correcting them fraternally, some assistants do not regard their parish priests as elders to be respected and obeyed. Some even go to the extent of taking laws into their hands by building their own kingdoms within the parish community.

One can recall the principles enunciated in the course of this work, that of mutual responsibility between the parish priest who is here regarded as an elder and the assistant who is a younger one. There are however other situations that are not exactly like the one painted above. For example, it does happen that a senior priest by ordination is posted to a younger one as an assistant. This situation is assistantship of a special kind. At times such elderly priests have been parish priests before and find themselves in such a posting due to one act of misdemeanor or another. In such a situation, there is need for serious understanding on both sides. While the younger one has to recognize the age and experience of the older one, he in turn has to respect the office of the younger one. It is the considered opinion of this essay that such a situation should be reduced to the barest minimum. It is better to always ensure that the assistant priest is junior at least by ordination to the parish priest. It is needless to mention the fact that the authority considers carefully those senior priests to whom younger ones are sent for "apprenticeship".

There is another area, which does not fall under assistantship, that is, the situation of a priest having his apostolate outside but residing in the parish and offering some pastoral duties when able or available. What has been said above should apply to such priests. Over and above all, it is expected that diocesan regulations will specify clearly the duties and rights of one to the other. These regulations however, are not meant to take the place of grace, love, forgiveness, justice and fairness that should characterize priests' relationships.

### *Age and Experience in Posting/Appointments*

For a diocese to function effectively, a number of organs and committees must be put in place. The code of canon law specifies some of these. While some of these organs are obligatory for the diocesan bishop, some of them are facultative.<sup>31</sup> The intention of this paper is not to discuss the rationale behind whichever organs a particular diocese has to put in place. Rather, it is to argue that whatever organs/committees are set up, age and experience need be regarded as essentials for consideration in appointing people to serve. For instance, these should be considered in appointing Vicars: General, Episcopial, or Forane (Deans).<sup>32</sup> This essay suggests that when the diocesan bishop is relatively young, that is, below the age 50, it is more salutary to appoint a more senior person as Vicar General. This is to act as a *potifex*, bridging the age gap within the *presbyterium*. Again, in setting up the College of Consultors and or the Senate, age and experience should be considered among other criteria.<sup>33</sup> By so doing these organs can mirror the council of elders and chiefs in the traditional Yoruba setting. This will afford the bishop a more balanced, reasoned and wisdom-laden counsel and opinions. So, in discussing at meetings, this factor need be considered in calling priests to address the meeting. This is not to suggest marginalization of the younger ones but to achieve a better focus at the meeting with a view to maximizing results. In this way, the entire *presbyterium* is carried along, conflicts are minimized, and ultimately the work of evangelization is enhanced.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, the Council of Priests and Finance Council are obligatory while the Diocesan Synod and Pastoral Council are to be convoked or established at the discretion of the diocesan bishop.

<sup>32</sup> It is satisfying to note that currently, in most of the dioceses in Yorubaland, the Vicar General is usually among the more senior members of the *presbyterium*. In actual fact, in some dioceses, the Vicars General are senior to the diocesan bishop by ordination to the priesthood. For example, Ibadan, Ondo, Ijebu-Ode, Osofbo, Archa-dioceses.

<sup>33</sup> One is not oblivious of the stipulations of canon law in this regard. However, in fulfilling the conditionality given by the code the particularity of the people is to be considered.

### Conclusion

This essay discusses the culture of seniority among the Yoruba with a view to resolving some conflict situations and crises arising from priests' relationship today. In these essay, a few insights were brought to the fore, namely, (i) that the culture of seniority has ensured the political stability and social cohesiveness of the pre-colonial Yoruba communities; (ii) that this culture is not peculiar to the Yoruba; (iii) that though the culture of seniority is undergoing various shifts and applications the substratum remains, that is, the elderly one must be respected by the younger one. By the same token, seniority is not for oppression or domination of another but to protect, guide and provide counsel for coming generations. Failure to do this amounts to abuse and one who is guilty loses the expected respect and obedience; (iv) that the Church in her present legislation, recognizes and employs the value of seniority especially in resolving certain difficult situations.

In driving home the points, the essay argues that priests are to cherish this value system and employ it to strengthen their relationships with a view to furthering the work of evangelization. By the same token, dioceses are to ensure that in appointments and postings, age and experience are not discounted. The essay recognizes that something is already being done in this regard. Furthermore, it calls for patient understanding between the old, the not so old and the young. The essay calls for the proper canalization of the seniority culture in formation houses for priests.<sup>34</sup> It goes without saying that efforts need be made to give legislative backing to the principles enunciated in the course of this write up. These proposals will hopefully help to strengthen the call to charity, understanding, and justice among priests and further inculcate

<sup>34</sup> As a point of fact, not much has been said about seminaries and formation houses in the course of this essay. There is no doubt that quite a lot happens in these places, cf. *Optatum Totius*, n. 11.

more readily the fact that the seniority culture is not an option but a normative principle of life not only for the society but also for the Church.

