

An African Way of Religious Life



Watawa wa Taa





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As African religious Sisters, can we say there is an African way of religious life?

Sisters gave a wide variety of responses.

Some Sisters responded that there is **not** a different way of living religious life in Africa.

Some Sisters responded that there is no African mode, but rather a **mix** of values between Africa and the West.

Some Sisters said that **perhaps** there is an African mode of religious life.

Some Sisters responded **yes**, there is an African mode of religious life.

What does it look like?

Some Sisters said there is **not** a different way of living religious life in Africa because “we embrace the same vows around the world.”

However, most Sisters identified many characteristics that, in their view, are **hallmarks** of a different way of living **religious life in Africa**.

These hallmarks include a family spirit and the value of extended family, the concept of Ubuntu,



— “
**Ubuntu reminds us that
no one exists in
isolation; our communal
identity strengthens our
religious life.**
” —

respect for elders, and ancestral respect and reverence.

Some Sisters also mentioned that African clothing styles are an important marker of Africanness, while others pointed out that Africanness goes “deeper” than clothing.

What makes, or can make, African religious life distinct from religious life anywhere else?

As in their previous responses, Sisters again reported several values as **hallmarks** of African religious life, such as authenticity, Ubuntu, African warmth and “being present to our families, especially in their struggles.”

Some Sisters noted their **concerns** with religious life in Africa, including a lack of balance between prayer and apostolate, firmness characterized by putting on the habit at all times, and a lack of awareness of contemporary issues such as LGBTQI+ matters.

“
As an African woman brought up from a village perspective, we have the experience of religious life grounded in the extended family.”

What are the tenets that can truly be called African wisdom?

Sisters noted that **African wisdom** can be found in the concept of Ubuntu, respect for elders, and resilience and adaptability. The interconnectedness of extended family and community life was emphasized.

Several areas of inquiry were identified for **further discussion**. In particular, one Sister noted, “We inherited this life from Europeans; we don’t know their culture well, so we do not live like them though we try. In the process of trying, we also lose our own culture, so our African religious life doesn’t really make sense, because we are not rooted in any culture.”

Two **barriers** were noted that restrict exploration of these topics: the siloed reality of religious women in Africa, and the fact that some Congregations are not open to allowing their members to participate.

“
Elders guide us; their wisdom is our compass for life.”



Key Insights and Challenges

Core African Values in Religious Life

- Strong family bonds and authentic relationships
- Ubuntu: shared humanity and mutual responsibility
- Respect for elders and dignity of labor
- Oneness with creation and reverence for the sacred
- Hospitality, adaptability, and resilience
- Connection with ancestors as part of the communion of saints
- Cultural expressions through music, dance, storytelling, and proverbs

Strengths

- Warmth and vibrancy in community life and ministry
- Deep integration of culture into worship and service
- Resilience in the face of hardship
- Communal spirit and solidarity

Challenges and Barriers

- Weakening community bonds
- Rising materialism, secularism, and tribalism
- Leadership struggles and unhealthy competition between congregations
- Financial pressures from supporting extended families
- Dependence on European-derived structures, limiting cultural authenticity
- Insularity and lack of cross-congregational collaboration opportunities



Watawa wa Taa Consecrated Women of Light

Watawa wa Taa can be loosely translated as “Consecrated Women of Light” in Kiswahili. The name was chosen as an ode to the remarkable presence and works of women religious in Africa.

Whether as members of international, missionary or local Congregations, holding pontifical or diocesan status, African Catholic Sisters can be found at the forefront of society, working for sustained and systemic change in the areas of health care, education, social work, pastoral care, agriculture, and many more.

Watawa wa Taa acts as an incubator of ideas, thoughts, and inspirations of African Catholic Sisters from around the continent as they reflect on this shared and unique way of life and together seeking the Holy Spirit’s invitation as to how to move forward together.



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