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Losing One's Culture: The Narrative Identity of Nigerian Catholic Religious Sisters

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.72473>

Abstract

This chapter reports on part of the findings of a doctoral research focused on identity construction of Catholic religious sisters in the Church and in the wider Nigerian society. Primarily, the chapter interrogates how Catholic religious sisters negotiate their culture identity within the context of living religious life. Data were collected from 18 sister participants, who were purposefully recruited from two religious congregations across the different states of Nigeria. These included six temporary professed, six final professed and six leaders (including superiors/formators) representing the different categories of sisters that live religious life. The data were thematically analysed using the Dialogical Self Theory I-positions. The second sentence revealed tendencies for the participants to lose their cultural identity in terms of their struggles and sometimes compromises in identifying Western culture as the dominate culture of religious life. In this regard, the participants reported that their Nigerian communitarian culture of love, care and hospitality is regulated to the background. In response, this chapter calls for further research towards exploring the impact of culture on Catholic religious sisters' expression of identity.

Keywords: Catholic religious sisters, socialization, cultural identity, I-positions, struggles, compromises

1. Introduction

This chapter as part of a doctoral thesis, which explores Catholic religious sisters' identity construction within the context of living religious life in the Church and the wider Nigerian society, presents the sisters' cultural identity portraying their struggles not to lose their culture identity. As Africans, these Nigerian religious sisters have a cultural identity, which is what this paper primarily explores in an attempt to understand how they negotiate their culture identity within the context of living religious life in the Church and the wider Nigerian

society. Customarily, the Catholic religious sisters are a cohort of women, who commit their entire lives to the service of humanity under the auspices of the Church and in God's name. Hence, they live communal life through which they are socialized to acquire their religious culture identity. The 18 sisters, whose narratives are presented in this paper, present conflicted cultural I-positions, indicating their struggles and compromises in their bid not to lose their Nigerian cultural I-positions. These I-positions indicated that the sisters' sense of identity is partly intertwined with collective values and norms reflecting their cultural-shared voices and positions [1–5]. These conflicted I-positions that the participants presented reflect the contradiction between Nigerian communal interdependence and Western culture of individualism. On the one hand, the participants maintained that Western culture is the dominant culture of religious life, which compels them to play down their African and Christian (Judeo-Greek) communitarian ideals. Consequently, they reported that they struggle to identify with their cultural identity of love, care and hospitality. Thematic analysis was used alongside Dialogical Self Theory I-positions to portray the participants' cultural struggles and compromises within the context of living religious life. Based on the findings, this paper calls for further research towards interrogating the impact of culture on Catholic religious sisters' identity construction.

2. Literature review: religious life, culture and identity construction

The Catholic Church advocates that religious life socialization process must adapt to the cultural circumstances of the place where it is lived [6].¹ In this way, culture is presented as one of the vital variables that deepens and facilitates the individual's authentic self-expression [6–10]. Accordingly, culture and religion blend providing individuals with a set of belief systems that facilitates understanding of the world they live in [11, 12]. As such, religion is context-bound reflecting a history of human activity. In this regard, Pope Pius XII in his *Summi Pontificatus* stipulates that [13]:

The herald of the Gospel and messenger of Christ is an apostle. His office does not demand that he transplant European civilization and culture, and no other, to foreign soil, there to take root and propagate itself. His task in dealing with these peoples, who sometimes boast of a very old and highly developed culture of their own, is to teach and form them so that they are ready to accept willingly and in a practical manner the principles of Christian life and morality; principles, I might add, that fit into any culture, provided it be good and sound, and which give that culture greater force in safeguarding human dignity and in gaining human happiness.

According to the above quote, adaption of Christian faith to the cultural context is compulsory though caution must be taken to avoid watering down the essentials. Thus, the inculturation of religious life into African context has the sanction of the Church and need to be done diligently.

Conversely, it has been noted that Catholic religious formations within Africa fondly adopt Western values and norms in its socialization processes. Others who share similar views emphasized that one of the debilitating experiences for the African religious has been the

¹In this and subsequent citation, PC refers to *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965). Decree on the up-to-date renewal of religious life [6].

inability to translate the gospel and its charism into his/her cultural ways of life, particularly those African values that are life-giving and compatible to the gospel message [9–11]. They argued that formation programmes in virtually all the institute of consecrated life (religious life) engage cultural paradigms that are foreign to African perspective in orienting its members, such orientations as insisting that visitors are only welcomed if they have given prior notice to their visits. This kind of orientation is in opposition to the fundamental African communitarian concept of hospitality shown to visitors at whatever time they called [9]. She argues that for the Africans, 'a visitor is a blessing' ([9], p. 140), and by implication one does not refuse blessings and blessings do not give notices before coming.

Similarly, Musonda in discussing African relational characteristics in relation to religious life identified that Africans are well disposed to understand community life better than any other aspect of consecrated life because communal living is often prized above individualism in Africa [8]. Thus, he argued that one of the most vital relational characteristics in Africa is communal life where 'mutual help' ([8], p. 165) is offered to anyone in need. This need he identifies includes lack of food, shelter, clothes and sometimes visits to the sick, attending funerals and activities celebrating life. However, he acknowledges that the African religious is often challenged by the blatant lack of this mutual help in the lived experience of religious life.

Furthermore, a study carried out among 278 young Kenyan religious (a mixed group comprising of 134 Africans and 144 participants from international congregations) among other things reported that young African religious do not feel at home in religious communities [15]. In particular, their findings showed that the young religious feel like 'strangers' in their own religious communities because most times nobody seems interested in them, which is contrary to relational situations in their family of origin, where everybody at home gives time and attention to others and their concerns. The researchers interpreted this finding to mean that the young religious are compelled to live religious life in a culturally unfriendly manner, leading them to conclude that in a religious community most people appear to be too busy to spend time with their brothers and sisters. This, they argued, is contrary to the African communitarian worldview, which has been articulated as the existential experience of 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' ([16], p. 106). This definition of the African person goes a long way to portray that there is a collective sense of others that is embedded in an individual's sense of 'who I am' and 'who I am becoming'; hence, the African person is defined by reference to the surrounding community [16, 17]. Consequently, the researchers argued that this lack of care impacts on an African religious person's performance of cultural and religious identity, which by extension prefigures his/her sense of identity.

In addition, they also reported that the young professed maintained that hospitality within religious life is nerve-racking and this is because of the stress impact it has on the community resources in terms of space, time and money. In analysing this finding, the researchers affirmed that visitors are not warmly welcomed in religious community compelling the African religious to underplay his/her cultural values of welcoming visitors any time they call [9]. They concluded that this is a source of tension and conflict for the African religious who have to live religious life in an alien cultural way. The tension experienced by the African religious could be likened to Edward Said's autobiography in which he reflects on cultural restrictions imposed on him and his colleagues whilst they studied in colonial Cairo in a

British school [19]. He describes how their cultural I-positions in terms of Arabic language were relegated to the background at the expense of English language.

Considering the above-reviewed literature, it is important to note that the major cultural challenge for the African religious has been that of conflict arising from living in the interface of religious culture which has been identified as heavily influenced by Western cultures [8–11] and his/her African worldview. In this regard, the African religious encounters the dilemmas of allowing his/her cultural values to be dominated, leading to struggles and compromises as she faces the challenge of losing her cultural identity. This kind of conflict calls for attention of religious leaders towards making inculturation a reality for religious life as lived in Africa.

3. Method: research design

This is a qualitative interpretive research aimed at capturing the participants' in-depth wealth of experience [20, 21]. The choice for interpretive approach is governed by the assumption that the participants' act of meaning making regarding 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming' is a subjective experience [21, 22]. Therefore, the participants are considered to be in the best position to tell their own stories of the meaning they make out of their lived experiences of religious life and its impact on their sense of personhood.

3.1. Research settings and participants

This research drew participants from Nigerian Catholic religious sisters. The participants are women who live the Catholic Church religious life by devoting their entire life totally to God and to the service of others [6]. These religious sisters are 'bonded to God' through the evangelical counsels (vows) of consecrated celibacy (chastity), poverty and obedience, and they live in the community [6]. The 2017 Nigerian Conference of Women Religious (NCWR) National Directory lists a total of 54 religious communities living and working in the country [23]. These religious are estimated to be above 5000 in number including members of the consecrated life, societies of apostolic life as well as monastic communities [24]. Hence, Nigeria is described as having vocation boom in Africa [25] wherein many men and women are identified as embracing religious life as a meaningful way of life [26].

One of the congregations whose sisters participated in the study is the Daughters of Divine Love (DDL), which is a diocesan congregation. Being a diocesan congregation means that its foundation began in Nigeria though membership has spread to include sisters from other nations, and it is recognized by the Vatican, thus having pontifical status. The other congregation is the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), an international congregation whose foundation started in England and has spread to America and Africa. What the two congregations have in common is that they both represent Catholic religious active contemplative life which comes under the supervision of the *Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* situated in the Vatican. Both congregations are classified as living apostolic life in which case their members are engaged in active service to God and humanity under the auspices of the Church. In as much as 18 participants seem small in terms of the large number

of sisters who live religious in Nigeria, the strength of qualitative research focuses on in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation. Hence, single cases can suffice for any qualitative research provided in-depth, and rigor is maintained [20, 21]. For each of the congregation, nine sisters participated, and their aged range was 30–60 as reflected in **Table 1**.

All the participants are Nigerians though drawn from across the country, and participation was voluntary. The selection for participation included the different categories of sisters who live religious life in terms of temporary and finally professed including leaders such as superiors/formators. This kind of selection was to ensure that information-rich cases are included acting as boost for validity and reliability of the narratives [27].

3.2. Procedure

The participants were obtained purposefully using a medley of two strategies, namely, convenient and theoretical samplings. This involves non-probability sampling, which entails that selection of participants is not determined by statistical principle of randomness [27, 28]. The participants were rather invited through letter and personal contact after the official gate-keeper permission had been obtained from their congregational leadership. Some others were invited to participate through snowball sampling wherein participants were invited through other participants. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants between January and July of 2010. The interview sessions were held at the participants' convenient places, sometimes in their offices or community space. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour at most. Therefore, data was collected using face-to-face narrative interview in which each participant was invited to tell her own story of lived experience of religious life and the sense she is making out of it. The open-endedness of the interview questions afforded the participants' opportunity to express views in their own unique ways [20, 21]. The interviews with the participants' permission were tape-recorded in order to capture accurately what was said.

3.3. Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed with the aim of interpreting and deconstructing the meaning that the participants are making out of their lived experiences [28, 20]. This involves verbatim transcription of the tape-recorded interviews, after which the primary researcher engaged in reading and rereading the data in order to familiarize self with the data [30]. The process began during data collection including keeping of research journal, which helped to affirm

Participants	Daughters of Divine Love	Society of the Holy Child Jesus	Participants' age
Temporary professed	3	3	30–35
Finally professed	3	3	30–50
Leaders: superiors/formators	3	3	35–60

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

the emerging themes, as well as was used for reflexivity purposes as the first and third authors are religious sisters. That means they are researchers with an insider's and outsider's voice [20, 29–31]. It involved familiarizing one's self with data by listening to the tape-recorded data and jotting down ideas for analytic purposes. The preliminary coding process involves line-by-line reading, which permitted a closer engagement with the data that lead to eventual assignment of meaning to them [29, 31, 32], followed by establishing relationships between themes and codes. Finally, the themes were reviewed to establish coherence and clear patterns to permit detail explanation of the phenomenon [33, 34]. The established themes were linked to theoretical framework of Dialogical Self Theory as an interpretative lens through which the participants' cultural I-positions were examined [35–37]. Thus, the theory constitutes part of the analytical tool through which the sisters' multiple cultural I-positions are examined and interpreted.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings are discussed under three themes, namely, (a) participants' identification with African communitarian identity, (b) African cultural worldview of hospitality and (c) the call for inculturation of African worldview into religious life.

4.1. The participants' identification with African communitarian identity

The majority of the participants used the cultural I-position of care and support to present Africa's communitarian identity. They claim that African cultural worldview mirrors the ideal culture of religious life based on the gospel values and the spirituality of their congregations. In this regard, they emphasized that as Africans they are oriented towards sharing communal support such as helping each other. For example, one participant indicated:

As Africans we learn to help each other, and that's what religious life also teaches us, particularly considering the 'servant song' which says we are here to bear each other's load...support one another...

This participant introduces the idea that Africans assist one another, which is in line with African communal 'mutual help' offered to one another ([8], p. 165) reflecting the premise of 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' ([16], p. 106). She also emphasized that this culture identity is linked to the ideal culture of religious life based on the so-called servant song. Therefore, she uses the theoretical I-position of 'we-as-helping one another' to represent African communitarian identity, which some other participants' refute is missing in religious life. However, another participant who re-echoes the African cultural values of support and care said:

I believe that, you know, in Africa we live together and we have all these extended family. We care much about our brothers, our sisters ... So, the fact that we live together in families I think it is also helping us to live religious life. It is one of the things that are actually helping us-African sisters to live together...

This participant positions herself and other African religious sisters as living religious life effectively based on Africa's relational identity shared in their families of origin including the

extended family. She argues that Africa's relational characteristics [8–11] have helped them as African sisters to live religious communal life efficiently. In other words, her emphasis is focused on the fact that African communal orientation of care and support is helping them to live religious life appropriately. Thus, her construction of identity reflects 'I-as upholding my African relational identity within the context of living religious life'. Another participant reiterated:

I think the identity of oneness we find in our society (Nigerian society) is supposed to feature effectively in our religious life ... and that is what is helping us live our religious life.

This participant still emphasized that the 'identity of oneness' found in the Nigerian society helps the sisters to live religious life effectively. This 'identity of oneness' reflects the act of communal-shared voices/positions and how these constitute resources for cultural sense of identity [1–5]. In line with this view, some participants report that the services they render to one another in the community have both cultural and religious undertones. For example, this participant said:

It is part of our culture and also religious responsibility to help one another. Take, for example, when somebody washes and hangs her clothes on the line we mustn't wait for the person to be the one to bring them in. In this way, we share the love of Christ with one another.

In this extract, the participant argues that Nigerian culture of love and care mirrors the gospel values, thereby emphasizing that their Nigerian cultural orientation enriches religious life [7]. Consequently, based on the cultural orientation, she is able to construct her sense of identity with the I-position of 'I-as-helping others' [3, 34–36], which is a shared position with other sisters. Likewise, another participant claims that based on their African orientation, they exchange charitable acts with one another:

As Africans we really embark on exchanging acts of charity with one another ... when somebody steps out of her cell (room) you just rush, fetch water for her, iron her clothes and she wouldn't know who did it.

This participant uses the cultural I-position of 'I-as-charitable' based on cultural orientation to construct her sense of identity [3, 34–36]. However, there are some participants who lament that these cultural I-positions of care, support and charity are silent in religious life. They argue that the ideal discourse of religious life as communal life form has been influenced by other cultural characteristics where their foundation of origin was laid. In this regard, some of the participants maintained that the foundation for their congregations were laid in the West, particularly Europe or America. Holding such view, one participant remarked:

...when it comes to religious life the culture is Western base. In Africa's culture somebody's uncle or distance relation who dies is regarded as your father... But in religious life if it is not your biological father or mother and brother/sister you are...on your own. So looking at the two, I would say... there are two different things.

This participant observes that there is a distinction between the African and Western understanding of familial relations. According to her the culture of religious life is Western; therefore, by implication the African religious struggles to incorporate her cultural values into lived expression of religious life [10, 11]. Typically, this participant constructs herself with

the cultural I-position of 'I-as not able to join my family to mourn the death of an uncle because I am a religious'. This kind of cultural I-position reflects culture identity alienation as was expressed in Said's autobiography depicting what happens when one's culture of origin is dominated by foreign culture [19]. Another participant restated that the infiltration of Western individualism culture into religious life is the catalyst that distorts African cultural worldview, and here she said:

Our community life is changing, people have learned to live on their own; no one cares for the other. We have become so much individualized based on the so-called western culture... We could count the number of times we come to eat together; recreation - people don't come again.

This participant claims that religious community life has changed because people 'have become so much individualized based on the so-called western culture', and this could be liken to the Kenyan-based research findings with young religious men and women, which stated that the religious have no time to care for one another [15]. This participant argues that sisters have no time/space to share with each other the communion of doing things together, such as eating together or socializing with one another in the evening after work, thereby inferring an infraction of African cultural orientation [17, 18]. Hence, she uses the emerging cultural I-position of 'I-as-individualistic' to present the sisters. Another participant laments that African cultural value of communion is not reflected in religious life:

We are lamenting that the Africa's spirit of communion is lacking in religious life whilst it is very much alive in our culture...so sad that we just want to be seen as individual cut off from others - aloneness is far becoming part of our life... just me and that's all ... sisters are finding it difficult to even tell others (sisters) what they are doing ... they just want to mind their own business.

This participant argues that the African way of life particularly that of interdependence is often lacking in religious life [15]. She points out that sisters are allowing individual interests to sway them from sharing communion with one another. This participant by using the expression 'we are lamenting' positions herself as speaking with a collective voice on behalf of all religious representing the institute of consecrated life [1]. In this regard, she presents the argument that Africa's cultural worldview of communion is a vital aspect of their life as religious [7–9, 14], but, unfortunately, it is sidelined, leading the religious to experience the conflicted I-positions of identifying with their culture. What this means is that the sisters are compelled to live religious life in a culturally unfriendly ways, thereby subscribing to their cultural subjugation due to pressure coming from the context of living religious life.

4.2. African cultural worldview of hospitality

A good number of the participants used the discourse of hospitality to describe their experience of the warmth shown to visitors within African culture. These participants claim that in Africa's worldview hospitality is a value that is treasured, and they report how important it is that people are welcome warmly and cheerfully when they visit. They argued that visitors are blessings, and whenever one visits, the visitor is cherished [9]. In this perspective, they argued that visitors are always cherished and they share joyfully whatever the host has to offer no matter how small. For instance, one participant verbalized:

In our African culture except now that cell phone is everywhere but in those days you (people) just get up and you are going to see your relation; you just go, and you're welcomed warmly. Whatever the living condition is, you share it with them and you know you're there to share love and joy.

This participant argues that within the African context people visit their relations anytime they feel the need with or without informing the host about the intended visit [10]. She further argues that both the visitor and the host accommodate each other and adjust to whatever living conditions they meet or have to offer. Furthermore, some participants continued to identify that religious life's culture is not very open to receiving visitors. These participants reported that in religious life they are often required to let their visitors notify the community before visiting, which is contrary to what is common within Africa's cultural setting [10]. To this effect, one participant stated:

If a family member is coming to the house (religious community) and the person didn't call to say I am coming. It is going to be a problem. You know, you have to give prior information. So that a room can be made ready and food prepared.

This participant points out that hospitality in religious life requires that visitors notify the community about their intended visit; otherwise, it will be problematic. In other words, this participant constructs her sense of African identity as estranged, and it is not just about her but also others who live religious life within African context. Thus, her dominant self-presentation with regard to culture identity becomes 'I-as-neglecting my culture identity of hospitality'. No doubt, this kind of situation is a source of conflict which according to the participant, the sisters act as 'strangers' within their cultural environment [15]. In similar ways, many participants report that such situations have led their family members to stop visiting, even under emergency situations. In the light of this, one participant suggests a way forward as follows:

I would suggest that we in religious life should always make room for emergency...may be a sister is travelling and...is stranded somewhere and needs hospitality and remembers that we have a community around there... would say let me run there...or a family member remembers that my sister is in this congregation - then can always run there for hospitality. So, let her get the assurance that she... would be welcomed...we are Africans so let us make room for travellers who may stop by...not just the situation, where it is, that you have to or must inform the community. I'm not saying we shouldn't give information, you know, not that we shouldn't say it before hand but in case of emergence, I would suggest we be more welcoming to visitors...

In this extract, the participant suggests that the religious community should be more receptive towards visitors, particularly in emergency situations. It is not clear what these emergency situations are, but the bottom line is that a visitor needs to be warmly welcome at all times. The constant use of the pronoun 'we' appears deliberate, which suggests the act of collective identification and speaking on behalf of other African religious [1]. Although the participants have multiple I-positions through which they express their culture identity, there is a dominant position which seems to show that African's cultural values, especially those of interdependence conveyed through hospitality, are undermined in religious life. In response to this act of neglecting one's cultural values and norms, many participants expressed the need to review such situations in an attempt to balance the difference. This becomes a clarion call that is very obvious in the next section.

4.3. Call for inculturation of African worldview into religious life

A number of the participants in response to their experiences of losing their cultural identity within the space of living religious life advocate for inculturation of African worldview into the lived reality of religious life. This is in line with the Church's proposal of adapting the Christian faith to the cultural circumstance of the people [6, 7, 14]. Accordingly, the participants construct identity as persons advocating for inculturation of Africa's (Nigerian) cultural worldview into religious life, which they argue in silent. In this light, one participant argues that even though the culture of religious life is based on the traditions of the foundation of origin, contextualization approach should be adapted. In this regard, she purported:

Holy Child is an international congregation and what I have realized is that the culture that we maintain upmost tends to be those tradition (culture) which has come down to us...there are couple of things that we are saying it is our tradition...it is our tradition because of our root; ...because of our foundation...but ask me about contextualization - yes I would prefer contextualization...

This participant stressed on the fact that religious life has traditions which are influenced by the culture of its initial beginnings, but she recommends that attempts be made to integrate religious life into the context of its surrounding environment wherever it is lived [6, 7, 14]. In this case, Nigeria's (Africa) cultural worldviews need to be given the space to be transmitted into the lived reality of religious life rather than have it sidelined by other cultures of religious life. Passionately, she presents herself with the position of 'I-as-advocating' for inculturation of African worldviews into religious life. Another participant who shared similar position of calling for inculturation emphasized that African hospitality values should be an inclusive value of religious life. On that point, she affirmed:

In the African way of life, there is hospitality and care for one another, which seemingly is lacking in religious life. Particularly in terms of welcoming visitors: when people come, you give them all the respect, you give them the best things. But in religious life we don't have that. A family member coming to us is not accepted; we have this Western kind of life when it comes to religious life... Even though we are Africans in religious life but I think that the Western way of life we have embraced dominates our African culture...I would suggest that we in religious life should identify with our African culture...

In this extract, this participant constructs herself as advocating for the inculturation of Africa's culture of hospitality into the lived reality of religious life. She contrasts the difference between religious life's lived expression of hospitality and Africa's cultural practice of hospitality and acknowledges that visitors are not warmly welcomed in religious life, which is in opposition to the African way of life. She argues that the cultural value of the West has permeated religious life and as such has influenced the way it is lived. Specifically, she forecasted that Africa's cultural value of welcoming visitors warmly anytime they come has been overshadowed by Western cultural values. Therefore, she argued that they, who are Africans, are living religious life in a cultural way that is at variance with the values and norms of their culture of origin. Consequently, she cautioned that African religious should endeavour to incorporate Africa's way of life into religious life [6, 7, 14]. In a nutshell, her proposal is centred on the need to cooperate African (Nigeria) values, particularly those that are life-giving into religious life. Another participant in the process of calling for inculturation condemns the de facto lack of warmth and hospitality (including warmth) among the sisters in religious community:

I told you before what my experience on my first day of arrival was...it does not make sense to me to be asked to go and cook on my first day of arrival after I have sat outside waiting for you people (the sisters). I didn't think that resemble the Africa's sisterly treatment we give to people when they arrive from a long journey...and to think of it that we are from the same culture that is noted for its hospitality to people...

In this extract, this participant claimed that the kind of welcome she received upon her arrival in her new religious community was unfriendly, reflecting lack of warmth, which is popular among Africans. In this sense, she argued that Africans do not subject travellers to the experience of cooking food for themselves including others after making a long journey. Her argument accentuated that others whom the traveller comes to meet have the obligation to prepare the meal and keep for the traveller, particularly on the day of arrival. Hence, she criticizes African religious sisters for not living out their cultural values of engaging warmth and care in their interpersonal relationship with one another [7]. Her criticism is conveyed in this expression: 'to think of it that we are from the same culture that is noted for its hospitality to people'. In this way, her self-expression is conveyed through the position of 'I-as-criticizing' lack of sisterly care among African religious sisters. Directly or indirectly, she argues that Nigeria's cultural worldview of hospitality should be accommodated in religious life particularly when the sisters in question share common cultural background. Interestingly, one participant argues that what they need in order to live genuine religious life is to embrace Africa's cultural worldview of love and care. To that effect, she said:

As Africans...in religious life we need each other... Like our servant song says we are here to help one another; we are here to walk with one another - we are here to bear one another's load. Because if I come back from work with so many loads...in my head and I don't have anybody to say 'sister let me help you to relieve that load,' you know it will also affect me because it will be like I am bearing it alone - you know nobody is helping me to bear the burdens of the day; yes, God is there but we need one another also. So that is why the individualistic life is not really encouraging in religious community. It doesn't help us to grow...

This participant's position-taking is based on the fact that Africa's relational practice is fixed on interdependence on one another [16], which resonates with the ideal religious culture but contradicts with individualism, where each one strives alone or protects his/her comfort zones. She links this African relational value to a certain Christian spirituality, using the 'servant song' to portray collective collaboration of love and care. In this perspective, the religious need one another, which is part of their identity as people who live a communal life [6, 8, 10]. Vividly, the discussion above indicated that the participants have used multiple cultural I-positions to construct identity. These multiplicity of I-position emerged as a result of their self-positioning and self as positioned by others within the context of living religious life. Generally, these I-positions present contradictory positions representing the participants' affirmation of their culture as well as their experiences of losing their cultural identity. The latter in particular calls for the attention of the leaders and policy-makers of religious life to initiate actions that would lead the religious to appreciate each members' culture.

5. Implication of the study

Predominately the findings of this study as presented in this paper pointed to the fact that there exist some discrepancies between religious life culture and Nigeria culture. This discrepancy

is mainly portrayed in the fact that religious life culture as presented by the sister participants is dominated by Western worldview as against Nigerian culture that is communitarian in nature. As a result, the Nigerian sisters who live religious life experience the dilemma of either regulating their culture of origin to the background in place of the Western culture or continuing to struggle to live religious life in a cultural unfriendly ways, including resistance that some of them adapted. The implication is that African religious sisters, particularly those who participated in this study, ought to source for meaningful ways of integrating African (Nigeria) life-giving culture into religious life. On this note, more research is needed in order to create further knowledge regarding how the interface of religious life and Nigerian culture impact on religious sisters' sense of identity.

6. Study limitations

The major limitation in this study is based on the fact that as a qualitative research design, its sample size is small; therefore, the findings could not be used for generalization. However, transferability is possible, as the research procedure has been well detailed allowing for similar research to be carried out in other African settings.

7. Recommendation and conclusion

Overwhelmingly, the participants' narratives reveal that the Church's discourses of inculturation [6–11, 14] need to be transmitted into action particularly in the face of seemingly culture domination that the participants experienced. To this effect, leaders of religious life and all who live the life within the African context should make conscious effort to recognize and respect Africa's cultural norms. Based on the participants' narratives, some of the African cultural values such as support, charity, care and hospitality are life-giving; therefore, it should be integrated into the lived reality of religious life within Nigeria. Such integration could be achieved through organizing constant conferences, seminars and workshops wherein religious sisters will have the opportunity to make their voice heard, as well as become proactive in decision-making and designing policies that govern the context-bound integration of their culture of origin into religious life. In addition, there is a need to carry out further research towards exploring the impact of loss of culture on religious sisters' identity construction. It is hoped that such further research will yield significant results, which will facilitate the religious sisters' authentic expression of self within the context of living religious life.

To sum up, these multiple cultural I-positions that the participants presented and its associated challenges in which the participants indicated that they are compelled to subjugate their African culture identity call for urgent attention; it demands that religious life as lived in Africa needs to reassess its initial and ongoing formation programmes. These formation programmes should be designed towards incorporating African worldview as Pope Pius XII proposes that the principles of Christian faith fit into every culture [7, 14]. In this way, the African religious, particularly the Nigerian religious and for the two congregations whose sisters participated

in the present study, will appreciate and celebrate their culture as an integral aspect of performing their personal/religious identity. As a way forward, much more research is needed to explore how culture identity impacts on religious sisters' identity construction. Hopefully, such research will throw more insight that will continue to facilitate sisters' identity construction. Such research might as well include the male religious, which no doubt will enrich the findings and, thus, create inclusive literature, promoting a wealthier data for the ongoing understanding regarding how the religious make sense of 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming'.

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