

## **The Calling of the Twelve by Jesus in Matthew 4:18-22: A Reflection of the Concept of OMO AWO in Yoruba Traditional Religion**

By

**Oghenekevwe Kate Jibromah, Ajishola Omojeje, Elijah Rotimi  
Ashafa & Jonah Olusola Adeniran**

### **Abstract**

Continuity is a fundamental essence of every religion. The leadership of every religious group in the world realizes the importance of transmitting the ethics, values and norms of their belief system from one generation to another. Such intergenerational transmissions rest upon the continuous zeal and devotion of the adherents of each religion. One of the important aspects of the Yoruba Traditional Religion is the practice of initiation into the secrets of Ifa divination after a period of apprenticeship during which all apprentices are known as *Omo Awo*. Essentially disciples or followers, the *Omo Awo* constitute a common phenomenon that runs through religious practices of the people. *Omo Awo* are trained under the *Adahunse*, *Babalawo* or the *Onisegun*. They are trained to understand the secret and practice of Ifa divination which would enable them to serve as custodians of Yoruba traditional religious thought and practices after their initiation. They continue as trusted custodians of affairs pertaining to the gods and attend to the people's spiritual needs after the demise of their masters. Against this background, this paper examines the calling of the twelve disciples of Jesus in Matthew 4:18-22 in juxtaposition with the requirements and stipulations entailed in the process of selecting the *Omo Awo* in Traditional Yoruba Religion. The paper employed comparative, historical and contextual methods of investigation. Research materials were drawn from primary and secondary sources, published and unpublished data, as well as from oral interviews conducted with identified resource persons vastly knowledgeable in the art of traditional medicine. In the light of its findings, the paper concluded that there is an urgent need to advocate for more *Omo Awo* in the practice of Yoruba Traditional Religion.

*Keywords:* *Omo Awo*, disciples, religion, tradition, Yoruba

## Introduction

Different religions across the world have sustained their beliefs and practices and ensured continuity by transmitting their ethics, values and norms from one generation to another. Hence, discipleship or apprenticeship, designed to train and install devoted adherents who will carry the religious system into the future, is an integral programme of every religious order as it is the surest way of guaranteeing intergenerational survival. The paper, using historical and analytical methods of investigation, undertakes a study of the apprenticeship practices of Yoruba Traditional Religion's *Omo Awo* in relation to Jesus' call of His first disciples as chronicled in Matthew 4:18-22.

It has been noted that by examining various religious beliefs, customs, rituals, and approaches, we gain a better and deeper understanding of different religious groups and communities, thereby enhancing our appreciation of similarities and differences between diverse religious persuasions and practices. In addition, being acquainted with the ways of different religious traditions grants a useful insight into how each group has been able to create and sustain a unique worldview by which their adherents give their lives meaning and transcendental value.

This is a comparative exposition that examines discipleship recruitment and practices as they relate to two different religious traditions: Yoruba Traditional Religion's concept of *Omo Awo* and the Call of Jesus' disciples as recorded in Matthew 4:18-22. This is not a theological comparison but rather an academic study of the apprenticeship approaches employed by the two belief systems. As emphasized by *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005):

Unlike theology, the academic study of religion seeks to provide accounts of the world's religions from perspectives that have no confessional (religious) ground or agenda. As an empirical pursuit, it is concerned with understanding and explaining what people actually think and do without establishing or enforcing norms for that thought and behavior" (p. 8761)

Lambe (2021), underscoring the importance of such relative investigation, states that "The academic study of religion is an ideal way to explore religious ideas from a variety of perspectives... Researching religion means having the chance to learn how others understand existence and our purpose."

## Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework adopted for this study is the comparative

method, as proposed by Oliver Freiberger (2018). In his “Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion”, Freiberger emphasized the need for a “a methodological frame of comparison that addresses both the general configuration of a comparative study—its goal, mode, scale, and scope—and the comparative process, distinguishing operations of selection, description, juxtaposition, redescription, as well as rectification and theory formation” (Freiberger 2018).

Freiberger identified two broad goals in the study of religion, namely *description* and *classification*. He distinguishes these two goals and their corresponding modes as follows:

A comparative study whose primary goal is description aims at a better understanding of a particular historical-empirical item by means of comparison. Comparing that item with other items can serve a heuristic purpose by identifying aspects and facets that would otherwise be missed or neglected. It can produce insights by de-familiarizing the familiar... This goal corresponds to the illuminative mode of comparison... Second, a study whose primary goal is classification uses comparison to form, apply, critically evaluate, and refine metalinguistic terminology in order to classify religious phenomena. This goal corresponds to the taxonomic mode of comparison. While it seems useful to separate these two general goals analytically, they can certainly complement each other, even within a single study (Freiberger 2018).

In the context of Freiberger’s framework, this paper is essentially descriptive and illuminative, and the main comparative operation adopted for the study is juxtaposition. Because the *Omo Awo* phenomenon, while fairly well-known in traditional Yoruba communities, is not a well-known practice among non-Yoruba speaking audience, this study will allocate greater scope to explaining aspects of the *Omo Awo* custom than to description of Christian discipleship principles and practices.

### **System of Discipleship in Christianity**

A disciple in Christianity is a follower of Christ, that is, someone who believes and practices the tenets taught by Christ in the gospels and carried on, after His earthly life, by His initial disciples. Discipleship in Christianity continued after Christ’s death and resurrection through the activities of those who had interacted with him physically, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (who were chiefly Jesus’ first twelve disciples and the distinguished convert, Paul) and the epistles (collection of letters written to early Christian groups and communities by some Apostles and pioneer Christian leaders).

Training was a key element Jesus used in developing His followers, and the main instrument he deployed in doing so was teaching. He taught them His principles on different occasions; in Matthew 5:1-2, it is on record that Jesus' "disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them". William (1911) enumerated the number of times Jesus was called the Teacher in the Gospels (that is, the record of His ministry as narrated by four of His disciples). According to Williams:

In the Synoptic Gospels the title Teacher is applied to Jesus thirty-nine times, twelve each in Mark and Matthew, fifteen in Luke. In the Fourth Gospel it is used six times to designate Jesus. That is, forty-five times in the four Gospels Jesus is called the Teacher.

In studying the above passages more closely we observe that they can be divided into three classes: First, those in which Jesus is called the Teacher by Himself: Mt. 10:24, 25; Lk. 6:40; Jno. 13:14 – six in all; Secondly, those in which He is called the Teacher by those friendly to him, including the Twelve and His other followers and sympathizers. There are twenty-three instances where those friendly to Him call Him the teacher, ten of which are cases in which the Twelve call Him the teacher. (p. 63)

Teaching the word of God as revealed To Him was a crucial tool Jesus used to train His disciples; His disciples spread and continue to spread His doctrine through teaching the principles and practices of Jesus and those of His earliest disciples as recorded in the Bible. So, teaching and mentorship are crucial tools of discipleship in Christianity.

### **System of Discipleship in Yoruba Traditional Religion**

According to Olupona (2022), "At the core of Yorùbá religious thought and practice is the idea and practice of secrecy called *awo*." The practice being referred to here, as indicated by Olupona, is "Ifa divination practice" whose "custodians...and masters of the sacred exoteric tradition" are the Babalawo. The Babalawo is someone who has been initiated into Ifa after completing a minimum of five years apprenticeship under the tutelage of Olúwo. During these years of training, Ifa apprentices are called *Omọ-Àwo*.

As a matter of fact, there will never be *Omọ-Àwo* without *Awo* and *Babaláwo* and vis-à-vis just like there will never be student without school and the teacher. Therefore to get a clearer picture of who the *Omọ-Àwo* is, it is necessary to understand the term *Awo*.

*Awo* is an institutionalized process that trains its students in the school of life, the philosophy, ethics, morals, science and technology of life, through

the instrumentality of *IFÁ* principles and divination system. The institution requires high moral value, maturity, discipline in words and character. *Babaláwo* is a product of the institution called *Awo*. The word, *Babaláwo*, is etymologically derived from *bàbà* (master) in *Awo* – institution of acquiring Yorùbá body of knowledge, which *Ifá* (the Yoruba deity of wisdom) represent in totality. Hence, *Babaláwo* means master in the working knowledge of Ifa, acquired in the institution called *Awo*. There can never be a *Babaláwo* without the institution called *Awo*. However, it is important to know that the term *Babaláwo* has nothing to do with being a father, but being a master in the act and knowledge that is accessible in the institution of *Awo*. There are many young boys, who are not yet married, but are experts in the art of divination and traditional healing therapy; some have also become pharmacopoeial – highly knowledgeable about therapeutical plants and healing system. This succinctly explains the Yorùbá metaphorical aphorism that, “*Baba ni baba yóò máa jé lójó kójó.*” which means, “A professional will always be professional, come rain or shine.”

*Awo* is the institution which trains and imbues its students, the *Ọmọ Awo*, with the basic and deeper bodies of knowledge in the skills of writing (marking of *Odù* on *Ìyẹ̀re òsùn*) and in reading, reciting, divining, philosophy, ethics, music, herbal medicine, and other Yorùbá-oriented science. After such students are certified as competent in learning and character by their teacher, whom the system gives the appellation of ‘*Oluawo*’, they are certificated with the title of ‘*Babaláwo*’ (an expert in the art of divination and traditional healing system). During the learning process, the institution expects an *Ọmọ awo* to be submissive and accept the knowledge passed to him or her by his master, the *Oluawo*, without arguing. Hence, the saying, “*májiyàn la fi awodá*”, that is, knowledge is better acquired where there is absence of rancour. In the same vein, a trained and competent *Babaláwo* is also expected to know when to talk and when not to talk. He or she must learn not to divulge the secret of his or her client, and possibly his colleagues. That is the basis of the statement, “*Wíwonienuawo n wo*”, which means that a *Babaláwo* should be able to keep a sealed lip on issues which concern his clients and colleagues.

In addition, a trained *Babaláwo* should not be self-centered but should help his colleagues when the need arises. Refusing to act at such times, to protect the glory of the institution, will not only bring ridicule to his colleagues but will also bring the institution to disrepute in the public domain. Hence, our ancestors said, “*awoní n gbé awoní igbòwò, bí awokò bá gbé awoní igbòwò, awo até, awo a sì fàya.*” That is, united we stand but in division we fall.

In summary, *Awo* is about an institution through which diverse fields of Yoruba body of knowledge are learnt by the *Omọ awo*; the product of such an institution is referred to as *Baba Aláwo* which, in Western parlance, could be interpreted as the father of the initiates. A *babaláwo* is also another name for a person who is an *Ifá* priest. He is the one who has the knowledge of divination and can identify the 16 sets of *Ifa* which is known as *Odù* as well as the signatures of their sub sets which is always arranged in chapters and verses.

### **Stages and Processes of Ifá Learning**

The stages of the *Ifá* Learning system could be divided into three, with each stage having a number of processes. The three stages are:

- The Early Stage
- The Middle Stage
- The Final Stage

### **The Early Stage of Ifá Learning**

The early stage of *Ifa* learning is sub-divided into six processes to reflect the level or degree of knowledge acquired by the *Omọ awo* in the course of his or her training. Below are the six processes of this stage.

1. ***Babaláwówíwá*** (Finding the Priest): This is the first process during which the would-be *omọ awo* would need to find a priest suitable enough to take him through the rigorous exercise of learning the *Ifá* and its literary corpus. It usually takes a person about ten years to know and master the art of divination and be well versed in the traditional method of therapeutic healing, so it requires a lot of prayers and searching for a *babalawo* who is that serious as to take a man who himself must be ready to be tolerant and to persevere through the entire process of learning the traditional method of healing.

2. ***Baba Ìkófú Yíyàn*** (Choosing a mentor among the priests): There are usually many priests that have graduated from a particular *babaláwo* (chief priest); therefore, an *Omọ Awo* will have to choose one of them who will be guiding and mentoring him/her.

3. ***Iná Ìdáwótẹpón*** (First Induction Ceremony): After the *Omọ Awo* has found a priest who will serve as his/her mentor, the parents of the *Omọ Awo* will come around to do the induction ceremony for him/her. Here, they will undergo some sacrifice that has to do with placing the hand of the new *Omọ Awo* on *Ifá* divination tray. This is called *dídá ọwọ tẹpón*.

4. **Àkóṣe Èránfá** (Spiritual aids for Ifá memorization): This is somehow spiritual in the sense that the *awo* will inscribe the sixteen Ifá corpus, *ojú odù méréndínlógún* in the *opon* (Ifá divination tray) and spread *atare* (alligator pepper) with *èṣébi* (pieces of kolanut) across the corpus. Then the *Omọ Awo* will have to prostrate and eat the alligator pepper and pieces of kolanut with his/her mouth after which he will gulp it down his throat with a specific local dry gin prepared for such purpose.

5. **Opón Títè** (Inscribing *odù-Ifá* on Ifá divination tray): Here, the *Omọ Awo* will start learning the sign and names of the *ojú odù méréndínlógún*, the sixteen Ifá literary corpus. This usually starts from *Èjì Ogbè* till *OfunMeji*.

6. **Sísí Òpèlè** (Divine chain practice): The *Omọ Awo* also will have to be very familiar with how to interpret the *òpèlè* (divine chain) because the *Opele* communicates with the initiates through signs and symbols. Though the divine chain could be made of *òpèlè* seed or brass, the system is the same for those who are well versed in its interpretation.

### **Middle Stage of Ifá Learning**

The following processes make up the middle stage of Ifá learning:

1. **Òpèlè Sísán & Ìgbowó** (Divine chain and interpretation of *Odù*): During this stage, the *Omo Awo* is expected to know the logic in divine chain process and proper interpretation of the kind of corpus or *odù* that appears during the divination system.

2. **Dídá owó àtiètítè alè** (How to use divine palm kernel fruit and its interpretation of signs inscribed on the ground): Through deeper learning and rigorous practice, the *Omo Awo* must pay more attention to make adequate and correct interpretation of the signs and symbols which are the usual ways through which the *Opele* communes with the initiates.

3. **Ifá RíránàtiIfá Kíkì** (Memorization of Ifá literary corpus): The *Omo Awo* is expected to memorize and recite all the sixteen corpus of Ifá off hand. Such an *Omo Awo* must also be able to link the corpus to its sub sets which have unending verses. A typical example is the difference between *Oyeku* and *Oyekulogbe*.

4. **Òkararaẹbọ** (Prescription of sacrifice for atonement): Every *odù* has its prescribed sacrifice or *ẹbọ*. Thus, an *Omọ Awo* is expected to know the appropriate sacrifice for the appropriate *odù* that appears.

5. **Àkóṣe-Ifá** (Spiritual aids prescribed to any problem).

6. *Ojùgbònà Imọlẹ̀* (How to prepare *Ifá* sacrifice such as how to kill *Ifá* goat).
7. *Ifá Sísẹ̀* (How to find divine palm kernel fruit and transform it to use for divination process).
8. *Ifá Bíbọ* (How to make sacrifice for *Ifá*): This implies making *Ifá* sacrifice during the annual *Ifá* festival.

### **Final Stage of Ifá Learning**

The final stage involves the following ten processes:

1. *Ìwẹ̀ Èrìgì àlọ̀ àtìIfá Fífọ̀* (How to wash *Ifá* divination palm kernel fruit).
2. *Ìkápónjá àtìlípónpo* (That is, the *Omọ Awo* should be able to memorize and recite at least two verses in each of the 256 corpus of *Ifá*).
3. *Orin Ifá Kíkọ* (*Ifá* songs): Every *Ifá* corpus has its song. An *Omọ Awo* is expected to know at least two songs in each of 256 corpus of *Ifá* and he should be able to create his own.
4. *Ìyèrẹ̀ Ifá Sísun* (Every *Ìyèrẹ̀-Ifá* has song but not all *Ifá* songs have the *Ìyèrẹ̀*).
5. *Ìlù àtiagogo Ifá* (The drums and gongs of *Ifa*).
6. *Ìwẹ̀ Látọpaàti Èsù Gígún* (Establishment of the *Esu* shrine).
7. *KóókoIfá tabiẹbu Ifá* (This refers to *Ifa* Powder).
8. *Ìtefá tàbí Igbódù Wíwọ̀* (The *Ifa* Initiation proper).
9. *Àkọşẹ̀jayé tabiẹşẹ̀ntáyé* (Divination or probing into the future of the *Omo Awo*).
10. *Lékú awotabi Ìsosúnawo* (Preparation of the *Osun* powder for the *Omo Awo*).

### **Juxtaposing the Concept of *Omo Awo* with the Call of the First Four of the Twelve Disciples by Jesus Christ**

Jesus' call of the first four of His twelve disciples is recorded as follows in Matthew 4:18-22 (RSV):

**Matt 4:18** As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.

**Matt 4:19** And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you



fishers of men.’

**Matt 4:20** Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

**Matt 4:21** As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

**Matt 4:22** Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

In Jesus’ calling of the first four disciples, there is a process of discernment. He most likely saw other people but chose to call Peter and Andrew, James and John, all of whom ended up playing great roles in His ministry. Jesus discerned and called those who were worthy of being a part of the new consciousness – that is, “the kingdom of heaven”. Those were retained and given spiritual sustenance (Rev. Ed, 2010). This also is reflected in *Ifa* corpus. *Ifa* decides who trains as an *Omo Awo*, for it is not just anybody that is destined to be an *Omo Awo*; there are those who are called for such purpose.

The call of the disciples is rooted in the call of Jesus, and this call is to change their lives forever and redirect them to a higher cause of serving others (Heusel, 2017). Jesus called them to follow him; he invited them to leave their ordinary life of catching fish and follow him to experience a new life of faith and a life of godly mission (Triton World Center). The aim or purpose of Jesus’ call is to teach the disciples to be like him. The same model is reflected in the call of the *Omo Awo* – he or she is called and trained by the *Oluawo* who teaches the *Omo Awo* to understand and practise divination like him.

In the context of the book of Matthew, a disciple is one who has an experience of Jesus through a continuous encounter with him and who is in a position to convincingly tell others about Jesus. The Matthew account, therefore, attributes to the disciples a function that prefigures and alters their responsibility as co-workers in Jesus’ mission of preaching and asserting the kingdom of God which He represents.

*Awo* and *Babalawo*, which signify the institution and the product of its learning process rooted in *Isese* Yoruba dynamics of wisdom, can be said to be equivalent to the pattern of Jesus’ call of His twelve disciples. Just as Jesus’ disciple must devote his entire life to follow the Lord whom he accepts as his master, train as His student, and study His word, so the *Omo Awo*, who is apprenticed to the *Oluawo*, must follow the precepts and examples of the *Oluawo* during the period of apprenticeship or mentorship. Eventually, the *Omo Awo* will be able to do everything the

master does and at the end becomes the master of the custom and tradition of the people.

The traditional priest is an important social figure. As a result of his training, the priest becomes the repository of the customs, knowledge, taboos, theology and even history of the society. This extensive knowledge qualifies him to act as political head, judge and ritual expert. He is very prominent at the installation of kings and chiefs. Traditional priests are men and women of integrity and of respectable disposition. As Mbiti puts it, "They are trustworthy, devout, and obedient to the traditions of their office and to God or the divinities that they serve: friendly, kind, 'educated' in matters of their profession and religions".

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that in spite of differences between different religious persuasions and practices, they share certain conceptual and operational similarities. This study, to a significant extent, has shown that there is a reflection of the concept of OMO AWO in Yoruba Traditional Religion in the calling of the first four of the twelve disciples by Jesus, as narrated in Matthew 4:18-22. In both cases, mentorship and tutorial processes are involved, as the disciple or spiritual apprentice is called to be and do like his master, and to continue his work even after he has passed on.

### **Recommendation**

To prolong the practice of Ifa divination system, which is a cultural, spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Yoruba as well as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity, more youthful apprentices should be trained to carry on the work of the mostly aged persons currently sustaining the tradition by serving as *Babalawo*.

### **References**

- Abimbola, W. 1968. *Ijinle Ohun EnuIfa Apa Kiini*. Glasgow: Wim Collins and Co. Ltd.
- Abimbola, W. 1977. *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun*. London: Oxford.
- Abimbola, W. 1973. The Literature of Ifa Cults. In Biobaku, S. O. ed. 1973, *Sources of Yoruba History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Adeoye, C.L. 1979. *Asaati Ise Yoruba*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Awolalu, O. 1979. *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. U.K: Longman Groups Ltd.
- Freiberger, O. (2018). Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion. *Religions* 2018, 9(2), 38; <https://doi.org/10.3390/re19020038>
- Heusel, P. (2017). *Sacred Space (1999-2021)*.
- Jones, L., Eliade, M., & Charles, J. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Macmillan Reference USA, Detroit, 2005.
- Lambe, E. (2021). Cited in <https://www.rhodes.edu/academics/majors-minors/religious-studies/why-study-religion#:~:text=The%20academic%20study%20of%20religion,understand%20existence%20and%20our%20purpose.>
- Lucas, O.1948. *The Religion of the Yoruba*. Lagos.
- Naseri, C.N. (2010) Discipleship in Luke 19:28-40. A Challenge to Contemporary Christians. *KOINONIA*, Vol. 4 (2) 1-20.
- Ogunranti, J. I. 2012. *Itanati Asa Yoruba*. Ibadan: Alafas Nigeria Company.
- Ogunremi, D. and Adediran, B. (Eds.). 1998. *Culture and Society in Yorubaland*, Ibadan: Rex Charles Publication.
- Ogunsakin, P. 1979. *Ondo: The People, Their Custom and Traditions* Lagos: Inway Publishers.
- Olupona, J.K. 1992. *Kingship and Religion in A Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yoruba Festivals*, Ibadan: Layday.
- Olupona, J. K. (2022). AWO –The Nature and Essence of Secrecy in Yorùbá Religious Traditions: Conversations with IFÁ Diviners 1. In H. B. Urban & P. C. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Secrecy*. Routledge.
- Williams, C. B. (1911). Jesus as a Teacher. *Review & Expositor*, 8(1), 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463731100800105>.
- Yusuf, A. K. (2019). m.facebook.m Accessed 11 February, 2020.



**Author Information:** Dr Oghenekevwe Kate Jibromah is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. *Email:* jibromahok@aceondo.edu.ng.



Dr Ajishola Omojeje is a lecturer in the Department of History, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. *Email:* omojejeav@aceondo.edu.ng.



Dr Elijah Rotimi Ashafa is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. *Email:* ashafrotimi@gmail.com.



Dr Jonah Olusola Adeniran is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. *Email:* soladeniran21@gmail.com.



#### APA

Jibromah, O. K., Omojeje, A., Ashafa, E. R., & Adeniran, J. O. (2024). The Calling of the Twelve by Jesus in Matthew 4:18-22: A Reflection of the Concept of OMO AWO in Yoruba Traditional Religion. *Global Online Journal of Academic Research (GOJAR)*, 3(3), 26-37. <https://klamidas.com/gojar-v3n3-2024-02/>.

#### MLA

Jibromah, Oghenekevwe Kate, Omojeje, Ajishola, Ashafa, Elijah Rotimi and Adeniran, Jonah Olusola. "The Calling of the Twelve by Jesus in Matthew 4:18-22: A Reflection of the Concept of OMO AWO in Yoruba Traditional Religion". *Global Online Journal of Academic Research (GOJAR)*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2024, pp. 26-37. <https://klamidas.com/gojar-v3n3-2024-02/>.