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• CONSECRATION IN IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION : A DEFINITION

The Problem of Culture Contacts

The art of reading and writing was an innovation in Igboland. This we owe to the effects of both the christian missionaries and the colonial government. However prior to this literary innovation, the traditional Igbo society had an unwritten flourishing way of communication. They also had systematized forms of cosmology, philosophies of life that were often enshrined in myths, pithy sayings, proverbs, folk-lore and even in artistic works. But with the advent of culture contacts came the problem of thought patterns—should the traditional world view be thrown overboard in favour of a wholesale assimilation of imported world view that came with literacy? If yes, then one would be faced with the problem of endurance of traditional values and beliefs even after so many years of culture contacts.¹

Furthermore, one has to reckon with ecological problems and other environmental factors which influence every world-view. For instance, is it possible to create an identical European ecological surroundings in Igboland? Or, can we uphold the traditional thought patterns without serious cognizance of western philosophical outlook which has inevitably invaded the Igbo? If a solution is sought along the lines of continuities and change of the two world views, there may be need to search for the process of dual domestication of both thought patterns.

While scholars like Levy-Brühl may opt for a total abolition of Igbo traditional thought because it is unscientific, prelogical and mystical, others like J.D.Y .Peel would call for a sympathetic under-

1. Ezeanya, S.N., "Endurance of Conviction in the Converts: The Force of the Traditional Religion of Africa" *West African Religion (WAR)* 8, (1970), pp. 20-24.

standing of alien belief systems.² And Horton's³ systematic analysis of the two thought systems may provide a blue-print for systematic comparative analysis.

The focus of this paper is on the definition of consecration in Igbo traditional religion. But this definition will be given against a critical examination of the same concept in western category. The analytical method to be adopted will be purely phenomenological. This will include not only its notional, semantic meanings but also its existential meanings. And following the ideas of Ninian Smart,⁴ we would aim at not only giving insight and understanding of the substance of consecration in Igbo traditional religion, but also the way it actually exists, impinges on institutions and exists in human consciousness. Then we would attempt at a workable descriptive definition instead of strict essentialist understanding of the term.

The Western Understanding of Consecration

The modern classical definition of Consecration in western conceptual scheme places it in the sphere of the sacred as opposed to the profane. And so consecration becomes an act by which things are withdrawn from their profane use and completely dedicated to the sacred. For instance: *The Oxford English Dictionary*⁵ defines consecration as "the action of setting apart as dedicated to a Deity, dedication with religious rites to a sacred purpose." And *The Webster Universal Dictionary*⁶ defines it as the process of making sacred or venerable. This can be used figuratively. *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*,⁷ concentrates on the liturgical act and defines it as "the solemn setting apart of persons or things for some particular religious work or use" – this involves both symbolic gestures and prayers of dedication. While *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia* examines consecration

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2. Peel, J.D.Y., "Understanding Allien Belief-Systems" *British Journal of Sociology* 20, 1 (1969) 69-84.
 3. Horton, R. "African Traditional Thought and Western Science" *Africa* 37 Nos 1 & 2 (1967).
 4. Smart, N., *The Phenomena of Religion* London, O.U.P. 1973, p. 69.
 5. *The Oxford English Dictionary Vol. II* Oxford at the Clarendon Press, pp. 848-849.
 6. Cecil Wyld et al (eds) *Webster Universal Dictionary*, p. 294.
 7. Feltoe, C.L., "Consecration" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. 4 edited by James Hastings. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911, p. 587.

in the light of Christian commitment – the author, however, distinguished between the consecration of all christians by baptism and the dedication of persons and things for divine services.

From the above definitions, we may conclude that

- (i) Consecration is radically different from the profane. It places persons and things on a higher plane than the profane.
- (ii) It involves complete withdrawal from the profane use.
- (iii) It is necessarily a human action and not necessarily a divine action for it is man who deliberately withdraws things or persons from their profane status and through liturgical rites places them in the divine sphere.
- (iv) It is viewed as something static, creating in the mind two incompatibly opposed realities – the profane and the sacred, and
- (v) It seems to create a monolithic relationship with the divine sphere.

It is important to note, however, that those definitions seem to be limited in scope. They do not cover a whole range of existential situations but are confined to the essence of consecration as abstracted from all concrete realities. Yet the question remains: Was this basic dichotomy between the sacred and the profane in existence from the dawn of history or, has it a historical development? This paper boldly claims that the dichotomy seems to be an offshoot of the growth and development of secularism in Europe.

B. Groethuysen defined secularism as "the attempt to establish an autonomous sphere of knowledge purged of supernatural fideistic presuppositions . . ."⁸ He further traced its historical growth in Europe highlighting the factors which led to its growth and the total desecularization of European world-view. A summary of his views runs thus:

8. Groethuysen B. "Secularism" in Salignam E.R.A. et al (eds) *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* Vol. 13. (Macmillan, 1934) pp. 631-634.

Secularism was a spill over of the Middle Ages' scholastic controversy. Several factors contributed to its growth. The most important ones are: the radical distinction between Faith and Human Reason. Dun Scotus and Oakham's quest for clarity of concepts as opposed to the contradictions of the supernatural faith; Luther's radical rejection of all metaphysical rational knowledge of God and the supernatural. The 17th century witnessed the systematic metaphysics of Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz who constructed their world-views on a strict scientifically established knowledge. And in the 18th Century, the emphasis shifted from metaphysical explanation of universal ultimates to empirical knowledge of tangible phenomena.⁹

The effect of these controversies was felt in the political life of Europe. At least, it generated the incessant struggle between church and state – between the temporal and eternal powers. While the church and her leaders claimed a complete subordination of the temporal under the Eternal power, the secular powers opted for a complete autonomy of human sciences especially politics. Thus the stage was set for various political ideologies – Marxism, socialism, and nationalism which led to the French revolution. For this reason, I strongly submit that the essentialist idea of consecration was not known at the dawn of European history but was associated with a historical innovation in European thought.

Therefore if today Eliade¹⁰ makes a strict distinction between the sacred and the profane and Otto¹¹ dwells on the analysis of religious experience of the "Wholly Other" we must bear in mind that they are addressing the 20th century Europeans who are no longer acquainted with a world-view in which the spiritual is inseparably bound with the material, the sacred with the profane.

Now we need to examine the concept of consecration in Igbo traditional Religion in order to determine whether it is synonymous with the western category.

9. For details see the above article.

10. Eliade, M. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 1 London and Sydney: Sheed & Ward 1958 (reprint 1971).

11. Otto, R. *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1925, 1970, p. 5.

Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion

1. The Problem of Approaches

Most studies in Igbo traditional religion seem to have tilted towards considerations of purely theological ideas consisting of a systematic discussion of such concepts like God, Spirits and/or divinities, and ancestors. Even church historians and missiologists are not free from this theological pre-occupation. The few anthropologists like Meek, Green, and Basden, who studied Igbo cultural institutions and values often peppered their narratives with theological ideas. Unfortunately, not much interest was shown in Liturgy. So there is a dearth of studies on liturgical rituals. Consequently before we can even attempt the actual definition of consecration we must grapple with the problem of approach. This will help off set any misunderstanding lurking in the mind.

The problem is should we adhere strictly to the essentialist definition of the western category which confines itself to the barest minimum definition leaving the seeker to reflect more on the meaning of that definition? Or, if found inadequate, could we attempt a definition by phenomenology, an approach which investigates all possible meanings attached to a definition? For instance, the essentialist approach would define man as a rational being while the phenomenological approach would not only view him as a rational being but would also consider him as an economic being, a social being, a religious being etc.

The Essentialist Approach

Assuming the essentialist position, we would probably define consecration in Igbo traditional religion as the process by which realities are withdrawn from their profane use in order to dedicate them exclusively to sacred services. But this approach has some innate problems. First, is the problem of squaring it with the Igbo world-view in which the material interact mutually with the spiritual – a world where spiritual realities are a paradigm for worldly activities. In such a situation where every earthly reality seems to be sacralized, is it proper to even think of a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane or should we not look for an alternative approach?

The second problem emanating from that same approach concerns the ambivalent nature of consecrated things in Igbo conceptual scheme.

For example, the land by its nature is sacred yet a part of it could be reconsecrated for special use. Similarly, man from the moment of conception is sacred probably because he bears in his body a human blood which is of its nature consecrated. Consequently, abortion is regarded as an abomination in Igbo traditional society. Yet the same man after birth undergoes series of reconsecrations with different rites of passage. Again, certain trees like Iroko, Ofo tree, Udara tree, fig tree, Nkwu Ojukwu, Ogilisi, Akpu tree, and Echichii etc are by their nature sacred but they would undergo some ritual reconsecration for particular human needs. It is thus clear that the essentialist definition does not take cognizance of this paradoxical nature of consecration in Igbo religion.

However, some scholars of Igbo religion recognize this paradox but failed to resolve the issue because they have adopted the definitions provided by the western category. For instance, Ezeanya having admitted that the Igbo treat the land, *A/a* and a host of other things as sacred went on to assert that—

This abundance of the sacred should not however suggest a confusion either in theory or in practice between the sacred and the profane among the pagans ... ¹²

He further explains that "the thing assumes a new ontological value on becoming sacred" but he failed to say what value such a thing had before its reconsecration as it was already sacred.

Similarly, Uzoho in his own contribution,¹³ leaves no one in doubt as to the incompatibility between the sacred and the profane, as well as the superiority of the sacred over the profane. Unfortunately he omitted completely the paradox of the sacred in Igbo religion let alone discussing it.

So it is now clear that the essentialist approach has failed to interpret the Igbo idea because of the paradox on which lies the solution to the problem of definition of consecration in Igbo traditional religion. So a new approach may yield better results.

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12. Ezeanya, S.N. "The 'Sacred Place' in the Traditional Religion of the Igbo people of the Eastern Group of provinces of Nigeria." *WAR* No. 6, August, 1966 pp. 1-9.
 13. Uzoho, V.N., "The Sacred and the profane in the Traditional Religion of Africa" *WAR* 15 (1974), 36-43.

The Phenomenological Approach

We are going to concentrate on the multiple realities of consecration in Igbo traditional religion. There is no doubt that once a thing is consecrated it acquires a new being since a thing cannot be both sacred and profane at the same time. Yet in Igbo religion a thing could be an embodiment of sacrality and secularity at the same time. This needs some explanations.

The land, *A/a*, for example, which in Igbo view is by its nature sacred, remains in another sense a secular thing. As a sacral reality, it remains ontologically oriented to the spiritual world. But as a secular reality it shares in temporal activities of the Igbo – they cultivate on it, it yields food for the temporal existence of the people, at the same time it is the guardian of morality in the temporal existence of man.

As a sacral reality it shares in the creative activity of the supreme being, possessing in itself immense power of productivity. But this creative activity, this power of productivity is realized in the temporal activities of man. Thus what the Igbo call 'consecration of the land' seems, therefore, to be a ritual association with a sacred reality, a public recognition of the sacredness of the land and the need for man to respect that sacredness through observance of ethical norms and *Omenala*, customs of the land. It is a ritual recognition of the role of the land in the cosmological perspective of the Igbo.

So we can see that consecration as mirrored in the sacredness of *A/a* has dual dimensions – transcendental and horizontal. On the transcendental level, it is the process of associating realities with spiritual powers, equipping them with powers which have to be realized in time. On the horizontal level, it is a ritual recognition of the sacred power which each being possesses and man's association with these powers for his well-being. In doing this, man ultimately associates himself with the spiritual world.

This idea of relation is vital for a deeper understanding of consecration in Igbo religion because consecration establishes a vital relationship with spiritual entities from the moment of creation and in time stabilizes this relationship with temporal realities and with the spiritual world. How do I explain this? Take, for instance, the

case of a woman, in the Igbo world-view she is by nature consecrated to bear children and is fully equipped to fulfil this role in time. Ontologically, she is blessed because she is associated with the spiritual powers and marked out for a temporal role for the welfare of the society. But this eternal role assigned to her by God is realized in time through a ritual process which not only stabilizes her relationship with the gods but also with the society and especially with her husband. Thus she realizes her role only with the co-operation of the gods and human society. Even though she may play other roles like trading and farming, her sacred duty remains "giving the world children". In her barrenness, she sighs and says *Uwa m enweghi isi*, the world or life has no meaning for me.

In the light of these analysis, we can now attempt at a definition of consecration in Igbo traditional religion. *A DEFINITION:* This definition will take the form of description of the reality of consecration as the Igbo see it. Namely:

the ontological process by which a being is marked out, from the moment of its inception to perform a specific vital role for the perfection of the whole group. On the horizontal level, it is a public ritual recognition and promulgation of the roles which each person has to play for the betterment of the society. But on the individual level, it takes the form of an awareness that the perfection of that individual essentially consists in playing a specific role for the good of the society, as well as maintaining a stabilized relationship with all beings of Igbo cosmology.

Problems Inherent in the Phenomenological Approach

Even this new approach is not without its flaws. The first question is whether it tends to negate the distinction between the sacred and the profane in Igbo religion?

The answer to this question is both yes and no. It is *Yes*, if the sacred is conceived as the very opposite of the profane in Eliade's sense,¹⁴ while the profane is viewed as a sphere completely devoid of the sacred. On the other hand, the answer is *No* if by the sacred

14. Eliade, M. Op.cit, p. 1.

we mean a situation that is charged with the activities of the Supreme Being, gods, spirits and divinities interplaying equally with temporal activities. In which case, the profane becomes the plane for the execution of human activities and for man to realize his *akala aka*, destiny – not in isolation from, but in continuous relationship with all the forces around him. Namely: God, the gods and spirits and ancestors above him, and the other forces like *amusu*, witchcraft, and *ogwu*, medicine below him. Thus Metu's idea is upheld that in Igbo cosmology, man is at the centre playing a unique role in complete union with other related spiritual and temporal beings.¹⁵

In the light of this problem, it is difficult to determine the exact semantic Igbo words for consecration, sacred and profane. However, some suggestions have been made:

- (i) For consecration, some suggested *odido nso*, the act of making holy. But if this is accepted, we would miss the paradoxical nature of consecration in Igbo views. While others suggested *akala aka* destiny. This is not appropriate because destiny *akala aka* is peculiar to man and does not affect other beings.
- (ii) For sacred, someone suggested the word *Nso* or *Aso*. But this word *Nso*, holy connotes something that is static while consecration in Igbo view is conceived more in terms of activities.
- (iii) For profane some one suggested *ihe uwa*, worldly thing. But this idea is not adequate because to the Igbo, the world is a sphere of interaction between material and spiritual beings. Therefore it is not proper in the Igbo world-view, to speak of anything in the world as being completely devoid of the spiritual – hence *ihe-uwa* cannot interpret profane if the latter means the opposite of sacredness.

So far, it is not easy to find an appropriate Igbo word for consecration which shows that it is not easy to transplant foreign words wholesale into an alien culture. A lot of pruning and adaptation is needed to make it fit into the new culture's world-view. So the quest continues.

15. Metuh, E. *God and Man in African Religion* London: Geoffrey Chapman 1981, p. 103.

Secondly, another possible reaction against the new approach is the idea that it probably devalues the richness of western scholarship. To this the response is *No*. Rather than that, the new approach is an attempt to show that foreign words could be domesticated to fit into alien perspectives. Consecration in western category not only gives the impetus for research into the same phenomenon in Igbo religion but it provides the basis for a comparative analysis of this idea as experienced in the two worlds.

Conclusion:

Having examined the *pros* and *cons* of the issue at stake from all angles, we seem to return to where we started apparently without a solution. This confirms the warning of the writer of Ecclesiastes that "writing books involves endless hard work and that much study wears the body"¹⁶ an idea that applies to every research especially one like this. This paper is merely a search for an interpretative meaning of consecration in the perspective of two world-views. In it, issues of methodology are raised. Having cast some reasonable doubts on what is described as essentialist approach, the dice is cast on the phenomenological approach which is considered suitable because it is situationally oriented and possibly fits into a tripartite description of consecration in Igbo religion-transcendental, horizontal and psychological.

Nevertheless, the issues raised may lead to further discussions and probings; therefore, the paper does not claim to be the last word on this topic of definition. The set goal here is to sensitize the mind as to how demestication of words in foreign category can be of immense help to research on some aspects of the traditional religion of Africa. If this awareness is provoked the writer will perhaps consider his job done.

16. *The Book of Ecclesiastes* 12:12.