

The Relational Nature of Good and Evil in Africa: Focus on *Imbalu*, Masaba Cultural Initiation Ritual

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Abstract

In Africa, religion, culture and life are inseparable. To be alive means to live according to the prescriptions and proscriptions of culture. Religion is at the heart of culture; it is what gives culture its worldview and meaning. In traditional African culture, life is about community, for this is where individuals derive their relevance and meaning. It is the community that makes individuals what they are, nurtures and promotes them from one social level to another. Therefore, relationships and relatedness describe who and what individuals are. Similarly, the concept of good and evil also take on a relational meaning. Good and evil describe a state of affairs where individuals and communities are affected. Initiation rituals are among the best settings where individuals, community, religion and culture interface. It has unique mobilization power, acts as a medium of cohesion and training of successive generations. Initiation ritual, therefore, presents a perfect focus to examine the interplay between the concept of good and evil. The cultural ritual of *imbalu* exhibits how good and evil are expressed through relatedness, vertically with the ancestors and divinities, and horizontally with other humans and with the created world.

Key words: *Imbalu*, initiation, relatedness, ritual, culture, religion
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Introduction

While discussing how black African culture has mutated, Lado and Adanhounme (Lado and Adanhounme 1999: 64). assert that for many African scholars, there are four values, which are authentically black and constitute the pillars of the '*Neger Sein*' (black being): the joy of living, hospitality and solidarity, dialogue and religious sense. Taken together, these values are the symbols, which make up the collective conscience of the black race; for Senghor they are '*ce que l'homme noir*

apporte' (what blacks bring) as a contribution to the collective edification of a universal civilization.

African traditional religion in general, has no written scriptures, but is found in the beliefs, values, morals, religious objects and personages, wise sayings and other religious practices of the people. It is found in their songs, myths, proverbs, invocations and prayers. Mbiti (1982: 1) has described Africans as being notoriously religious, while Pobee (1979: 26) accuses them of being intensely and pervasively religious as their life is permeated by their religious beliefs and values. Perhaps the most notable forum where their worldview, beliefs and values of African traditional religion come to the fore and find expression is during the rites of passage. These include birth

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and naming ceremonies, puberty or initiation rites, marriage and funeral rites.

Initiation is perhaps the most important of the rites of passage in the life of an African. It is during this crucial time in the life of an individual that society hands to the initiate cultural grammar for interpreting reality. Since all life is pervaded by the sacred, it is at this time that the person acquires a worldview and a set of beliefs and values, the legacy of the community.

One important reason behind the power of ritual is its rich symbolism. Symbols are rich in expression as they are flexible, having power to push the frontiers of knowledge beyond the empirical in their pursuit of ultimate reality. The essence of religion is its ability to bridge the here and the hereafter, the physical and the spiritual or metaphysical. Its potency consists in its promise of a hereafter where rewards and punishments will be meted out for actions committed or omitted during the here-now. Since we cannot verify these promises while we are in the here-now as a rehearsal, we cannot likewise disprove them. The central interest of religion appears to concern something, which is comparatively vague and intangible, something whose empirical reality is not at all clear. It is concerned with a beyond, with man's relation towards that beyond, and with what these particular people consider to be the practical implications of that beyond for their life (O'Dea and O'Dea 1983: 1-2). I situate this discussion among the Bamasaba of Mt. Elgon.

The Bamasaba are a Bantu speaking community who live on the fertile slopes of Mount Elgon (Mount Masaba) in Eastern Uganda. They practise male circumcision, known as *imbalu* as a form of cultural initiation for their young males between the ages of 14 and 20. This is an elaborate biennial ritual in seven phases, lasting a whole year. It marks the stage where the community brings the initiates before itself, puts them through initiatory instructions and ordeals, to test their maturity with the purpose of conferring upon them a

new status as adults. Society hands to these initiates its worldview, collective wisdom, religious beliefs and practices, as well as its moral norms and values.

The Religious Nature of Initiation Ritual

Initiation is not simply a social activity but above all a religious ritual, interlaid with invocation, myths, didactic songs, dances, libation, sacrifice, blessings, smearing, symbolism, shaving of hair, and many other religious elements. In discussing African religion, Parrinder (1954: 26) notes that there is no sharp dividing line between sacred and secular such as is usually assumed in Europe. Material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the latter. In the same vein, albeit on a different tangent, Bujo (1992: 51) thinks that Africans do not formulate juridical definitions but instead prefer to live the reality itself.

For Africans in general, life is relational, vertically with the ancestors, spirits, divinities and God; and horizontally with others and with the created environment. In my view, the African concept of good and evil is best approached from a relational point of view. John Taylor (Taylor 1963: 85) notes that the foreground in which African primal sense of solidarity becomes sharply defined and directly experienced is the life of the extended family, the clan and the tribe. This is the context in which an African learns to say, I am because I participate. In a nutshell, the individual is always an abstraction; an integral part of the family.

Prescriptions and Proscriptions: Interface Between Physical and Spiritual

Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1958: viii) explains initiation ritual in terms of death and rebirth. Society has prescribed procedure and behaviour while proscribing others. Interestingly, what is "normally" regarded as obscene and therefore proscribed may be allowed or condoned during certain occasions, particularly during initiation rituals. Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 95) has documented

expressions of obscenity in several communities and observes that "these prescribed acts and songs of obscenity are made to emphasise the suspension of the ordinary laws in the 'marginal periods' in passage rites". He posits an interesting explanation for this state of affairs, when he says that large ceremonial undertakings, such as those associated with death, the birth of twins, drought and initiation into manhood are all occasions of emotional stress fraught with grave danger both to the individual who experiences them and to the society. The pent-up emotion of anger, fear, sorrow, grief reaches a point where some activity is essential; yet, unless this activity is guided into harmless channels, it may prove to be fatal to the individual and disruptive to society. On such occasions, society condones or even prescribes, actions, which it ordinarily prohibits and penalises.

Initiation is a crisis because the initiate is at the crossroads, on the verge of transition and transformation: from childhood to adulthood, from individuality to community, from single life to married life, from childlessness to fecundity. It is believed that while festivity and goodwill abound, so do malice, hatred, envy, witchcraft and magic. Among the large corpus of paternal and maternal relatives, there are elements that harbour ill-will towards the initiate or his parents. These may be grudges the initiate knows nothing about. They may resort to curses, sorcery and witchcraft to obtain their objective. This may be in terms of causing the initiate to cry out during circumcision, causing the "knife to be blunt" or the skin to harden thereby prolonging the ordeal, causing him to over bleed, or the wound to fester; rendering him impotent or sterile; causing his wives to have miscarriages, or children to die young.

Belief in witchcraft is as real as belief in spirits, and like all other aspects of religion, it is a communal belief. One believes because the community believes, regardless of personal experience or lack of it. What matters is not the objectivity or otherwise of such beliefs. It is

enough that people believe witchcraft exists for it to influence their actions. Witchcraft is the most common expression of evil in Africa, and witches are believed to be in league with evil spirits and animals or birds which are associated with evil.

Africans believe that there are powers in the universe, both benevolent and malevolent. Wisdom in the African understanding, therefore, has to do with the ability to balance these counteracting powers. Ogbu Kalu (1986: 3) captures this point well when he observes that emphasis is placed upon the recognition of an alive-universe in which spiritual reality is crucial and deliverance from hostile/demonic forces becomes the object of religious rituals. Salvation has two dimensions: salvation from evil forces, and salvation into the realm of achieving success and obtaining the good things of life till a reverent old age. Causality for failure or success is explained by appeal to the hidden spiritual warfare in the universe. It is admitted that since spiritual forces utilise human agency, evil-minded persons can utilise witchcraft, sorcery and magic to cause disaster for others. Salvation does not simply consist in running away from inimical forces to safe havens, but in consolidating and abiding in and with these same spirits through a covenant which is periodically reinforced. This is the role of *inter alia* festivals, ritual dances, masquerades, pilgrimages, processions and initiations.

Evil lurks in the heart and is expressed through evil acts like senseless destruction of people's property and destroying common property like wells and rivers. Selfishness is seen as an expression of evil, albeit at a lesser stage. Selfish people are believed to be antisocial by thinking only of themselves. Malice is a strong instance of evil and so is vandalism.

Vision of African Morality

The concepts of good and evil tend to be concrete rather than abstract. The word evil as is

understood in the western sense does not have an exact equivalent in African religion. It does not exist independently of a person, spiritual being or thing. Benezet Bujo (1992: 49) stresses that African ethics are fundamentally anthropocentric. To him, black Africans generally see evil as coming from humans and not from God, which causes morality to be seen horizontally, i.e. in a relationship between humans. Their worldview is often relational, and everything is done to preserve these relationships, both vertical and horizontal. Precisely because the African cosmology is anthropocentric, creation only has meaning by reference to man. The most important item is life, life in its abundance, while the worst is not having life, or having it in a diminished form. Laurenti Magesa (1997: 64) echoes this sentiment when he writes that, "the realisation of sociability or relationship in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African religion"

Ritual as Reciprocity Between Humans and Supernatural

Religious behaviour has to do with reciprocity between the human and that which he considers to be the recipient of his prayers and worship. This interaction takes the form of prayer, invocation, sacrifice, praise and so on. Rituals are normally associated with so-called preliterate societies to transmit cultural and social values to the younger generations.

Rituals are, therefore, used to communicate something of a religious value to other members of the community through word, symbol or action. The people involved in ritual are saying something and doing something they value and believe in, something they desire and hope to achieve.

Societies attach a lot of significance to ritual because of its expressive value. In ritual, something is being said and done, something of importance is being symbolically asserted. It has been described as religious aspiration

which has been given the form of corporate art, a special language for speaking about God and men. It is, from that standpoint, able to be explicit about religion, about the difference between men and the gods they worship. The same honesty that marks the ritual approach allows people to be themselves in the presence of one another, acting out with their bodies what they think with their brains.

Liminality [the indeterminate phase when the boy has been circumcised but has not yet been reincorporated into the community, therefore, he is neither the boy he was, nor the man he desires to become] also leads to deep communality because finding themselves in this unenviable indeterminate uniform state, the initiates develop a strong sense of identity with one another. These bonds will be maintained throughout their lives, creating social cohesion. That is why Jean La Fontaine (La Fontaine 1986: 11), says that ritual is concerned with social action, and its performance requires the organised co-operation of individuals, directed by a leader or leaders. There are rules indicating what persons should participate and on what occasions; often the rules excluding certain categories of people are of as much significance as those which permit or require others to take part.

La Fontaine (1986: 181) sees oaths as an important element in initiation rituals where some sort of secret information has to be protected, for fear that it might be revealed. Where oaths may be absent in initiation, other mechanisms compel the initiate to recognise his or her changed state and new obligations, which is essentially what an oath does. She has no doubt that in all initiation rituals there are highly dramatic moments, of excitement and tension, of solemnity and grandeur, and also of comedy.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, arguably African's morality is evidently relational, vertically to the supernatural, and horizontally to others and the

created environment. African morality has to do with life and how to fulfil it. It is claimed that an African prays for three things: a long and healthy life, wealth and finally immortality. Health is infinitely more than merely being healthy in body, for it entails a healthy mind and environment, including the health of his wives, children, animals and gardens, indeed healthy relationships with the superhuman and with the humans. Immortality is not a question of life after death, or life after life, but a hereafter with one's ancestors, one's kin and kith. Within this background, life is only full and meaningful if it is within the context of community. These sentiments come to the fore especially through initiation ritual in particular. In the midst of globalisation with its attendant individuality, solitude and alienation, there is need to protect and promote this concept of community as a central building block of African life.

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