

A Critique of Smart's Ritual Dimensional Theory in the Phenomenological Study of Igbo Priesthood of African Tradition

by

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Abstract

The phenomenological method employed for scientific study of religion in relation to Priesthood and priestly practices in African tradition has been misunderstood by scholars in religious studies as a result of problems of specificity, anti-reductionism, and bracketing its diverse activities within a religious context. Ninian Smart's dimensional theory is one of the phenomenological approaches employed for scientific study of religion through doctrinal, Mythological, Ethical, Ritual, Experiential, Institutional, and Material Dimension, and focused on the area of methodology which should not be "rated above conceptual insight" (Smart 2000). His phenomenological approach remains vague due to paradigm in bracketing diverse functions of the priest in African tradition within a cultural context and the problem of specificity. In contrast to Smart's dimensional theory, this article reveals the diverse roles of traditional priests as delimit by his "ritual" dimension theory. In support of Smart's Dimensional Approach, the article also suggests another Dimension of studying Priesthood in relation to African tradition using Critical Review Analysis.

Key words: Priest, African Priest, Traditional Priesthood, African Religion, Indigenous Priest

INTRODUCTION

The challenge involved in employing Smart's ritual Dimensional approach for scientific study of priesthood and priestly services in African tradition entails finding the accuracy of phenomenological methods for a clear description with characteristics of specificity and objectivity. The ritual dimensional approach of Smart serves as the paradigm for a descriptive analysis but remains vague when applied for a specific conceptual framework for the scientific study of a particular tradition. It also lacks concept of "specificity" when applied for study of traditional priests and its multi-functional services in indigenous practices of Africa and Asia respectively. Geraldus Van deer Luew (1933) suggested a proper understanding or empathy of religion to prevent a reduction of religion to another plane of explanation through a phenomenological approach. Smith Cantwell explained that anyone who wrote about a religion other than his own today does so, in effect, in the

presence of those about whom he is speaking. One cannot study religion from above, only from alongside or within (Booth ,Jr, 1977). There will be production of distortion if African religion is studied from an assumed position of superior revelation or superior rationality. To accept smart's scientific approach, it must be made form a standpoint within African rather than from an outsider's perspective (Booth jr) or require adjustment to enhance the specificity of the context for its description as part of its paradigm approach.

In contrast to Smart's dimensional theory, Nowell Booth (1977), suggested another phenomenological approach to avoid the tendency to obscure the pervasive quality of African religion since the western traditional religion have frequently been made in terms of belief and practices only. Booth's phenomenological approach underlies specificity of belief, symbols, ritual, and myths which encompasses both real and superstitious activities of priests. For instance, in Luba traditional religion of the KasongoNiembo Kingdom of Republic of Zaire (Congo), the priest serves both as a King and Chief and as a mediators between the Living member of the community and their ancestors for the communal welfare and spearhead the agricultural development of the communities, burial arrangement and presents to the ancestors the needs and petition of the living through prayers in times of communal crisis (Burton 1961) While in Swaziland, a complex phenomenon involved the differentiation of Kingship from Priesthood. Here, the King plays both political and ritual roles. The ritual renewal of the office is performed in conjunction with the summer solstice, when the celestial bodies are at their most powerful. The King, as priest, is purified and washed, and the water running off his body is thought to bring the first rains of the New season which he will spearhead (as priest) in the festival of agricultural produces. With the look of things in African tradition, priestly roles are significant with Kingship or there is a political function attached to its services. (Grillo, 1999). In line with the traditional functions of priesthood in African traditional religions, Booth suggested Life- approach, Wholeness, continuity approach, health approach which details herbalist roles of the priest as a "medicine man" in Igbo terminology. Also listed in Booth's approach is Celebration approach which encompasses festival, feast, dances, artistic expression, and the recitation of myth celebrate the communal existence and at the same time strengthen the community against evil influences. However, Booth's approach attempt to avoid vagueness to delimit the application of social scientific theories of the western perspective in the scientific study of religion. A study of African religion may contribute not only to an understanding of African traditions but also to the understanding of religious phenomenon as such. This research work create disparity between the non-ritual diverse roles of a priest in African tradition and the limitation of ritual dimensional approach of Ninian Smart in studying Priesthood in African Traditional religion to suggest an accepted Dimensional Approach for scientific study of priesthood in indigenous religion.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several scholarly works in religious studies have been conducted for an acceptable approach for a phenomenological study of African religious practices but results showed

background works social scientific research. The influence of foreign religion, culture, political and social system, local beliefs have almost certainly changed because of the culture synthesis and cultural diffusion of global forces in African societies (Gerald Benedict 2008). As a result these cultural transformations at the traditional setting have readily affected the “academic tradition” and themes in the study of religion from a phenomenological approach and subjective perspectives of social scientist, let alone the “outsider” or epoch study of priesthood and its roles in African tradition and the mechanism involved in most supernatural occurrence in the indigenous tradition. A Critical answer is required for determining the exact etymology for defining the nature of African traditional religious practices and if determined what type of theory and hypothesis are used for the scientific study of priesthood in traditional religion because several etymologies have been developed by social scientists and Religious phenomenologists but convey different meanings while studying the culture. For instance, the words “ancestors worship”, “Shamanism”, “indigenous”, and “Pagan”, or more pejoratively “fetishes”, “Satanic”, “devilish” etc have commonly been misapplied and if used properly in some times interval it irritate African scholars. These confusion were caused by several of the below biased factors;

- Caused by conflicting forces against the traditional practices. In the first place, some researchers placed the cause of these problems as the effect of slave trade on African religion together with the influence of feedback from the new religious forms developed by the slaves. Other believed the origin of the problem to be Lack of literature and language. Again interruption of the priestly services in the shrines for the spiritual development of the indigenous practices and their roles by the Christian missionaries from Europe along with the British colonial forces and with the invention of science and Technology as part of the integrated western knowledge can be another factors. Another factor is the loss of the originality of the priestly practices because most shrines, when destroyed, were rebuilt but with the loss of writing sources and archives (if any) the historical archives of written accounts in the original contexts were lost through incineration of the bamboo or wood made shrines. Furthermore field anthropologists and other social scientist have not always been able to step aside their own culturally conditioned perceptions and provide an objectives interpretation of the indigenous concepts. Finally, when the tradition is subject to analysis from “insider” perspectives of whatever faith, possibly there is a serious tendency that result must be influenced by the imposed religion
- The second biased factor entails the “approach” and “theoretical methods” employed. Ninian Smart’s ritual dimension focuses on the tradition of some practices that might well be more formal or informal than the word “ritual” implies. And included as part of ritual are patterns of behavior which, while they may not strictly count as ritual, fulfill a function in developing spiritual awareness or ethical insight like Yoga and Meditation (Smart 1998). As a western concept, this dimension does not expressively and specifically define what priesthood is within the African traditional context. In categorizing features that are significant with primitive culture, John Noss (1974) listed characteristically seventeen features which have been identified with African traditional

religion, but the problem of categorizing modern African traditional religion as “primitives” might not easily be accepted by mainstream African scholars of religion. Among the features purification rite, sacrifices, divination, ritual and expectancy are specific roles (not all) performed by priest of shrines in African traditional religion but from the anthological studies of “insiders” perspective more functions that has political, legal, and social roles are often involved.

- Thirdly is the misconception of system of worship. Scholars of religion have confusedly remarked that African traditional religions lack building or temples where worshippers can congregate and render worship as a system of Christian religion, but was misunderstood by the early Portuguese who visited Africa with a view of seen church buildings (Booth, 1974) to identify Africans as religious. Organization of religious activities is paramount and it is unique in every religion but what differs is the system of organization employed (UdoEtuk, 2002). With this concept of absence of place of gathering for worship, membership statistics of different traditional religious groups is never kept, and the hierarchy needs not fear loss of members or encroachment on its territory by rival religions. In the true sense, worship are also conducted in shrines (which is common to African culture, not temple) on specific occasion as its systems of worship, and by being the culture of the people, African traditional religion draws its adherent from all works of life, all confessions and profession within the society.

- Fourthly is the problem of the scientific approach employed for the description of the “mysterious”, “spiritual” and “supernatural” i.e. the Mechanism of defining unseen forces believed to exist. These are events which usually occur during the activities of the priestly services like swearing, taking an oath, suspicious supernatural events believed to be “divine call” for the priestly services and perhaps the phenomenon behind the interaction with the “spirits”. These transcendental experiences are also encountered in Christian religion, Judaism, and Islam but exist through mystical practices and as such question if the study of African traditional religious practices can be research through mystical studies or experiential dimension or through traditional African approach that is free from western concept.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research questions of the work are;

1. Can Smart’s ritual dimensional theory be applied for scientific study of priesthood in African traditional religion?
2. If no, what delimit the application of Smart’s Dimensional theory in the study of priesthood in African tradition?
3. What alternative approach can be employed for acceptable scientific study of priesthood in African traditional religion?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this research work is to critically examine the roles of priest in African traditional religion to ascertain the possibility of applying Smart’s ritual

dimensional theory in the scientific study of priesthood in African tradition. Other specific objectives entail:

1. To show the absence of “Specificity” in the paradigm of Smart’s ritual dimensional approach
2. With the case study of the roles of Priest of Araba shrine in Igbo land, and that of KasongoNiembo Kingdom and in the traditions of Swaziland, this research shows the non-ritual diverse roles of priests in African tradition which delimit the application of Smart’s ritual dimension in the study of African religion .
3. To suggest a scientific approach in support of Smart’s dimensional theory specifically made for studies of priesthood in African tradition.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Studies have revealed different forms of ritual practices in African tradition which different scholars have concluded as “fetish” or “pagan” from western religious and theological concept. Some of these scholarly etymologies may originally have had valid non-judgmental meanings, but today from the scientific studies of religion they have little clear content but strong suggestions of inferiority and resent Africans. In fact, there are no anthropological terminological words like “animism” which is a product of the western mind (P’Bitek 1971).This work is significant on the development of a new approach for the phenomenological studies of priestly services in Igbo Traditional religion, and as a scholarly work it questioned if the “ritual” dimensional theory of studying religion (Ninian Smart 1998) can be employed for phenomenological study of Priesthood alone in African religious practices. Its significance also centers on developing more dimensional theory for the Study of Igbo Priesthood because of the multiple roles of the African traditional priest in the legal system, political structure and other socio-cultural and economic importance .So the development of native tradition which the “ritual” dimensions of Ninian Smart’s approach cannot curtail. For a proper phenomenological study of religion, it is important to note that any generalizations about African religion should be made from a neutral standpoint rather than from a blending of “insider’s perspectives (Chris Partridge 2000). No statement about a religion and its practices is valid but for academic studies, it requires a systematic approach with the use of theories and hypothesis. The ritual dimension of studying religion entails the study and analysis of ritual practices that are found in religious tradition and other patterns of behaviors that may in one way or the other fulfills a function in developing spiritual awareness alone. In Africa, the most potent ritual in her indigenous tradition is sacrifice which involved the offering of plant or animal life with its blood, a representation of its life force for provision of power mostly to ward off evil forces and change calamities believed to befall on the land. Although several reasons are vital for the offering of the sacrifice based on the culture of each ethnic group and the type of deity worshipped, but such spiritual activities cannot be carried out without the priest.

CRITICAL REVIEW ANALYSIS

In relation to African religious practices, the modern philosophy of Phenomenology entails descriptive analysis, anti-reductionism, intentionality, bracketing, andeidetic

vision. As Smart's dimensional theory centers on a phenomenological approach for a pure scientific definition of religious practices, his theory focused in developing a vague definition of religion; rather he wants to study religion by looking at actual individual religions and cataloging the things that they contain. For instance, if an alien asked a question of what human beings are, the answer to this question should first try to devise a definition of a human, but an alternative approach is to take the alien to meet as many individual as possible. That way the alien can gain an insight into the range and variety that exists within the human race. This is analogous to Smart's approach to religion. To Smart, Religion cannot be understood through definitions, but by looking at specific examples. The Dimensions are intended to present an approach of gathering and classifying information about religious practices. He described this as *ascientific undertaking* which aims to deal objectively with facts. He clearly explained that it was not his intention to investigate the truth claims made by religious believers. This approach is sometimes termed *methodological agnosticism*. In contrast to theological and mediaeval concept of describing religion, his approach is developed to respond to the challenge of modernity head on by applying the scientific method to the study of religion, which he describes as a 'scientific undertaking' and there is evidence of parallels between his methods and the collection of scientific data. His dimensional theory served as foundation for drifting away from traditional theology which had its origins in the faith based assumptions of the medieval world towards a more objective study of the phenomena of religion. The phenomenological approach to religion has been described as a method by which 'the bewilderingly diverse data of religion can be philosophically linked together without doing damage to the several strands' (Charles Courtney, 1997). Using Phenomenological approach, Smart said that the question of truth is a question not asked, not a question left unanswered. As a Phenomenologist, his theory is *primarily suggestive, and specifically descriptive* in nature as it seeks to avoid allowing preconceptions or theories that can color the description of the phenomena. Thus the phenomenologist aims to describe things as they appear within its context. His dimensional Theory was developed with European lens as its "ritual" Dimension centers on the ritual context of European tradition and delimit itself to the ritual performances of major religion that operate within the European contemporary society without the contents of Anti-reductionism because of the diversity of priestly roles in relation to ritual acts. For instance, as an English Scholar he may have been acquainted with an organized Religion like Anglican in England or with Methodism since his parents is Scottish. As an organized religion with orthodox system, the rituals performed by priests as part of its liturgical services in Anglicanism is limited to ordination of priest and Holy Communion done, but God parenting and Cathedral worship with use of book of common prayers can be performed by adherents. Furthermore, ritual performed by priests is often used in context with worship performed in a religion, the actual relationship between any religion's doctrine and its ritual(s) can vary considerably from organized religion, indigenous culture, to non-institutionalized spirituality, such as ayahuasca shamanism as practiced by the Urarina of the upper Amazon (Bartholomew 2009). Rituals often have a close connection with reverence, thus a ritual in many cases expresses reverence for a

deity or idealized state of humanity. As regard to priesthood in African tradition, Nworie stressed that priesthood in Igbo Traditional Religion is part of African Traditional Religion that is not dispensable, whether in form of a ritually consecrated priest (as the only defined profession of priest) with full insignia of office or a paterfamilias playing priestly roles. Hence a genuine appreciation of the concept and function of the priest with regard to sacrifice in Igbo religion is quite imperative (2011:59). He further defined priesthood in Igbo Traditional religion as “that sacred institution in the traditional religious set-up, whose sacred officiates are ordained and dedicated for the service of a particular cult, especially in “Sacrificial” and *other allied matters*” (1990:2). In Igbo traditional religion, priest of various shrines occupy different positions with different roles not limited to ritual act alone. They can serve as diviners, political transformer, socialist and herbalists yet converse does not necessarily hold (Parrinder, 2004), but with different names in Igbo culture with men playing the dominant roles. As a priest, he could be called “*isi-Muo*” (head of the spirit cult); as a diviner he will be “*onye n’ agbaafa*” (person who casts afa-divination), but with the role of healing using herbal remedies as the traditional profession, “*dibia*” (Austine, 1942), Judicial roles, political roles, and social roles as they (priests) play important part of most civic and seasonal cultural festival.

For instance, the *priest of spirit* cult known as *Isi mmuo* plays integral roles in spirit cult practices set up by the ancestor and men at different times (onwuejeogwu). The Priest goes by different names (Arinze 1970) because of the nature of roles assigned to him. As attached with deities his name will also be identified with the deity worshiped or whose shrine he is in charge of for various practices in Igbo communities. For instance, there are *isi Edo* (priest of Edo), priest of *Amadioha* for Judicial role and above all the *Isi mmuo* who take charge of the village spirit shrines for propitiation, and the priest of earth-Mother known as “*Eze-ala*” I.e. the priest of *Ala* who enjoys status higher than that of priest of other cult because the *ala* is the custodian of tradition and custom to regulate the cult of the other deities and spirit. So his priest exercises the role with the regard to their cult. In the whole of Igbo land the *EzeNri* was the foremost priest of the all cults and possibly exercises the priestly role for a large section of Igbo communities and preside the New Yam festival. The *isimmuo* was regarded as the heads of spirit-cult who take charge of the village spirit shrines.

However, from anthropological and Christian perspectives, priestly roles in African tradition have been pejoratively defined as fetish priest, juju priest, witch doctor, but in the phenomenological study of their roles in the African context, their status and functions showed a clear evidence of ritual practices and involvement in other allied matters which the ritual dimensional theory could not contain, as its role encompasses much more task like social, political, judicial functions. The functions of priest in African tradition are diverse and a little multi-tasking, though dominated by men who have their deity as *Ikenga* - a personal spirit of many achievements, sometimes women unlike the priestesses of *Bori* cult tradition in Hausa, have their “*Chi*” which they kept in their own shrine as their personal spirit. With *Ikenga* as his spirit of achievement, an Igbo man offers sacrifices to it to drive away evil spirits “*ichuaja*” and by so doing priestly roles begin

but by recognition it is a culturally recognized status and role in the Igbo society as the official minister of a particular spirit(s) which has a shrine and an organized cult (Basden, 1938). However, it is not so clear that practices from different religions placed in each category would be sufficiently similar for such a comparison to be useful like that that ritual performance of priest in Anglicanism and most organized religion that operate in Europe with that of African religions that are fully syncretic, and operate without ecclesiastical system. Consequently, the categories might be technically accurate but not specific. In contrast to Smart's Dimensional theory, Douglas Allen explained that the theory is superficial, though he demanded an empirical data, but furthered it as arbitrary and extremely subjective (Allen 1997)

DISCUSSION

Sequel to smart's suggestion for an accepted theory for phenomenological study of Religion; the ritual dimension of religion refers to the ceremonies and outward behaviors which are attached to a specific intention relating to the spiritual realm. All rituals have an 'inner' and an 'outer' element to them, like the ritual practice of Chief priest of Araba Shrine (Isichei 1977). Generally, the ritual elements of religion may be simple or complex like baptism ceremony, closing eyes to pray etc. There are other physical aspects to religious belief and practice which can be described but to understand these fully one needs to understand their symbolism and their relationship between other aspects of the faith like mystical experiences. Smart believed that his Dimensional approach had to also be studied historically, anthropologically and sociologically, philosophically and psychologically thus encompasses ways for a suggesting an accepted approach that can be "specific". However, he believed that a phenomenological approach to religions could provide a very useful starting point in that it could be used to create an objective overview of the facts. By this, a scholar in religious studies can categorize the vast array of religious traditions in a systematic and comprehensible way. Smart makes it clear that the dimensions link together and that a person must understand the relationship between the ritual and the narrative (for example) to understand the religion. Due to the problem of anti-reductionism, Smart's dimensions question if categorizing different elements of religion actually makes it harder to understand the religion as a whole. With the difficulty of specificity, the way that the phenomenological approach to religion is used by Scholars in Religion often results in scraps and fragments of different religious traditions to which young people are exposed to ... [are] at best meaningless and at worst actually distortive of any real understanding of this or that religion or mode of spirituality (David Carr 1996). Another problem with Smart's approach is the concept of *methodological agnosticism*. Here Michael Bourdillon () argued that we should not pretend that we can be objective. If we honestly admit our own judgment then we are more likely to actually learn from others and make explicit the value judgments behind our academic work. Timothy Fitzgerald (University of Stirling) from argued in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* that Smart's methodology is incoherent as he believed that Smart contradicts himself. Fitzgerald says that Smart wanted to maintain two conflicting things, namely the study of religion is something distinctive and not just another word for

anthropology and religion is not to be studied from a faith-based perspective. According to Fitzgerald, the scientific study of religion entails abandoning all reference to things which we cannot observe, and if religious studies take account of the sacred then it becomes theology. But if it ignores the sacred it becomes sociology and anthropology.

In other words, there is no such thing as methodologically agnostic religious studies.

Ninian Smart presents the dimensions a *modernity and postmodernism* scientific tool to begin religious study which can provide a way of comparing the religions without misrepresenting them by interpreting them through the lens of another religion. His refusal to deal with questions of truth and his interest in the plurality of religious experience seem to have more in common with postmodernism than with modernity.

Smart was concerned with describing rather than explaining the diversity of religious experience and although he suggests that the reader use this information to make their own judgments he provides no criteria upon which these judgments can be made.

Furthermore, his separation of religion into dimensions to better understand them could be interpreted as a form of deconstruction which works best with organized religion but lacks specificity in African Traditional religion that has diverse practices with priestly multi-functional roles. Drawing from the conclusion of and research of Turner (1968), Graham Harvey (2002) stressed that religions are the complexes of action in which people engaged as was research currently as a recent trend in the study of ritual, and by this concept Smart's dimensional approach should be extended to "*priestly dimension*" because of the complexity of African religion with its the non-ritual multitasking activities involved in priesthood services in that cut across other dimension like political, legal, social and spiritual activities .

CONCLUSION

To correct these misconceptions, Dopamu (1978) in his presentation on Religious understanding and co-operation in Nigeria highlighted three points for a better understanding of African tradition while studying its priesthood services in relation to the ritual Dimension of Smart. The first point is that African religion has no historical founder. It is a revealed religion whose teachings and practices are theological revelation from sacred tradition. Secondly, it is rational i.e. it is a religion that originated from the people's environment and on third soil thus becoming an established culture (way of life) of the indigenes. Finally, the traditional religion of the Africans has no written literature or sacred scripture or creedal forms and exists with many traditional practices. Religion is thus conveyed through oral traditions, myths and legends, stories and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies and rituals, proverbs and pithy sayings, adages and riddles. With this in mind the study of African religion should include research in African priestly service and its traditional practices from a "*priestly dimensional approach*". As a new phenomenological approach for priestly study this dimensional approach has no limit in the ritual activities but possibly encompasses both the spiritual performance of divination but covers the phenomenological study of priesthood that encompasses political, social, legal roles and beyond.

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