THE CONCEPT OF 'FAMILY' AS THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICA TO THE CONSECRATED LIFE

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., Ph.D

Augustinian Institute, Makurdi

Abstract

The Year of Consecrated Life which was inaugurated last year 2014 by his Holiness Pope Francis, and which will end in February 2016 has provided diverse opportunities for consecrated persons to reflect on the different dimensions of the consecrated life. This year being the year of the extraordinary synod on the family, a new aperture has opened as a locus for reflection on the consecrated life. In attentiveness to the various discourses on the family and the consecrated life, this piece focused on the concept of family as the contribution of Africa to the consecrated life. It questions the contribution of African ontology to the historical evolution of the consecrated life. It adopted the historical and phenomenological methods of inquiry in its investigation. The research discovered that the spirit of community in the consecrated life was borne from the African spirit of the family.

Keywords: African, family, consecrated life, ontology, community, theology.

Introduction

At the heart of the evolution of the 17th century, emerged a popular perspective among scholars: philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, among others that Africa contributed nothing to world civilization. Since it was costly assumed that the presence of the human prerogative of reasoning was absent in the African, it was not surprising that they were relegated to the background of obscurantism and impotency. Among this college of thinkers was Hegel (1956) who posits that the Negro is yet to go beyond his instinctual behaviour to identify a being outside of himself:

> In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness had not yet attained to the realization of any substantial existence.... Thus distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained. (p. 93).

In the same vein, Levy-Bruhl (cited by Njoku 2002), questioned the veracity of an untutored African knowing about God. In his perspective, the African way of thinking is non-logical and full of inner self-contradictions and, therefore, unworthy of the consideration of the civilized mind. Sharing in the contention of Levy-Bruhl, Baker (cited in Kanu 2005a) writes:

> The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry.... he has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life,

a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress. (p. 199).

In the opinion of Masolo (1994), at the heart of this debate on the identity of the African is the concept of reason, a value which is believed to stand as the great divide between the civilized and the uncivilized, the logical and the mystical. Kanu (2015b) explains that this perception of the Negro by Western scholars have made Negro-hood a burden for the Negro- with an attendant crisis of identity and authenticity. In our own time of African cultural renaissance, an attempt to identify and appreciate the African cultural heritage, circumstances have arisen to question the contribution of 'African civilization' to world civilization. This year, being the year of consecrated life, it would be interesting to question the contribution of African ontology to the historical evolution of the consecrated life. This piece, therefore, has the burden of unveiling the contribution of the African cultural heritage to the rich religious heritage of the consecrated life.

The Family in African Ontology

According to Alyward, (1975), the African traditional life is centered around the family. The family is where life is generated, a basic unit of life which represents in miniature the life of the entire people. Kanu (2015a&b) avers that, it is in the family that the values of the clan, the tribe and of Africa are transmitted. It is, therefore, not surprising that the family, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in African life. This is evident in Uchendu's words in *Things Fall Apart*:

> We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him. (Achebe 1958, p. 132).

The African concept of family is different from the Western understanding. In Igbo-African ontology, the family is referred to as the *ezi na ulo,* that is, literally, *the outside relations and those in the house*. Unlike the Western concept, the idea of family does not only apply to husband, wife and children, but also includes, somewhat vaguely, the in-laws, uncles, cousins, nephews distant and near, and even maids and servants. Thus, according to Ogbalu (2006), when the Igbo-African person talks about his family, he refers to his wife or wives, that is, if he has more than one, his children and everyone that is dependent on him. He might also include his children's children and wives. However, when a young man refers to his family, he means his father, mother and a number of other relatives. It is because of this extension capacity of the African family, that the concept 'extended family' was coined to convey the profound meaning it embodies. The African concept of the family does not exclude the ancestors and the unborn members who are still in the loins of the living. They are, for the African, the buds of hope and expectation.

Characteristically, the African family is an institution in which "everybody is somebody". Westerman (1949) puts this succinctly: "The whole of existence for the African is organically embodied in a series of associations and life appears to have full value only in those close ties" (p. 65). Achebe (1958) writes:

> A man who calls his kinsman to feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. When we gather together in the moonlight village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (p. 155).

The African family, according to Iroegbu (1995) is bound together to the extent that individuals find meaning and fulfillment in it; the individual is not defined without reference to the family: he/she is either the son or daughter of someone, or the father or mother of someone. The indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family to which the individual belongs is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). Mbiti (1969) sums up the bond between the individual and the African family thus: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am" (p.108).

In every African family relationship, there is hierarchy based on age and degree of kinship. In this relationship, Mbiti (1969) avers that the oldest members have a higher status than the youngest. Within this hierarchy, there are duties, obligations, rights and privileges dictated by the moral sense of the society. Failure in performing ones duty either as parents and children or otherwise has consequences attached. In the family, it is the duty of family members to be hospitable to one another, relatives, friends and even strangers.

The Theology of the Consecrated Life

Consecrated persons according to Kanu (2015) are the members of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life. The Code of Canon Law (1983) teaches that they are lay persons or clerics who assume the evangelical counsels by means of a sacred bond, and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the church. They totally dedicate themselves to God with the goal of pursuing perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In this sense, consecrated persons respond freely to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ the poor, the celibate, the obedient son, more closely, thus becoming in this life a sign of the life to come. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) maintains that:

> The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls (No. 43).

These counsels in the contention of Fleming (1990), are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life of Jesus and message and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration. The consecrated life is also traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented life-style, to a radical following of Jesus Christ. The first person in this line according to Nwachukwu (2010) was Anthony of Egypt. He was followed by a line of disciples, until it became an institution in the Church.

Very significant is the idea of consecration. It is derived from the word 'holy' or 'holiness'. In Hebrew it is *qadash* and in Greek *Hagios*; these are translated to mean 'to consecrate' (Leviticus 15:31; Ezekiel 14:7). In Numbers 6:5-7, 12, the Nazirites were referred to as consecrated because of their vows to God. This makes the person holy, a consecration that separates the person from others. Thus the word consecration implies a setting apart or a separation. This separation for Mayers (1987) does not in any way imply superiority, or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) says, "The state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the church" (No. 44). The document continues:

> The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state. (No. 42).

Thus, *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) exhorts consecrated person thus:

> Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully. (No. 5).

The Consecrated Life before Encounter with Africa

An examination of the historical development of the consecrated life reveals that for more than two centuries, Christians were persecuted in the Roman empire until the 4th century, when Constantine legalized Christianity in the Empire of Rome. With this legalization, Christianity became the popular religion in Rome, however, it lost the self-sacrificing spirit which it possessed during the era of Roman persecution. In reaction, many holy men and women went into the desert, propagating a new kind of martyrdom for the kingdom of God. The Greek word for desert, *eremos,* is the root word for the eremitic life. Those who lived this kind of life were referred to as hermits (200Ad-350AD). Because of the role which the desert played as the *locus* for the expression of this kind of life, this period is also referred to as the age of the

desert. The pioneer of this kind of life who symbolized this new ideal in a way no one else had done was Saint Anthony of the Desert. He provided guidance to many other hermits who were scattered in the deserts of Egypt and Syria in search of the way of perfection. The image of the religious life at the time was that of a holy ascetic. In the desert they prayed and fasted, doing battle with the devil in the wilderness as Christ had done long ago. However, they did all these as individual hermits. The idea of community was absent.

The Consecrated Life after Encounter with Africa

With the passage of time, the eremitic life gave birth to the cenobitic style of life (350-1200), that is, a communal asceticism. The word cenobitic is from the word *cenobium* which means community. As saint Anthony was the pioneer figure of the eremitic life, St Pachomius was the father of the cenobitic life. He was born to pagan parents in 292 in Thebes, Luxor, in Egypt. He adopted the idea of communal patterns and established a monastery where monks lived in common between 318 and 323. He, with the help of his sister Mary, founded a network of about ten thousand monastic communities for men and women. After Saint Basil visited the monks of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, he founded a monastic community in Asia Minor, with the addition of apostolic service as his innovation. In Palestine, Melania the Elder, a friend of Saint Jerome, promoted communal asceticism. With her experience of famous hermits in Scetis and Nitria, she founded a monastery for women in Jerusalem and another for men, which she left in the care of her disciple Rufinus. Gradually, from the Eastern half of the Roman empire, Cada et al (1979) aver that this way of religious life spread to the Western half of the Roman empire, especially in Spain and Gaul. As these different persons moved beyond the shores of Africa, Egypt, they took with them the value of community which was at the heart of monasteries of the time.

In Algeria, Africa, an African, Saint Augustine began a community of monks also referred to as Canon Regulars in 397. They lived according to the rule of Saint Augustine in monasteries, sharing their goods in common. Augustine wrote down a rule that is called The Rule of Saint Augustine; it was followed by every Augustinian and some religious Orders and Congregations that are based on the Augustinian principle. Their main purpose of coming together, according to the Rule and Constitution of the Order of Saint Augustine (2010), is to live harmoniously in one house intent upon God and in oneness of heart and mind. They called nothing their own but possessed everything in common. With Pachomius and Saint Augustine, however, the frame for the consecrated life was already made, with the idea of community life at its centre. Thus, in 529 Saint Benedict founded a monastic community in Monte Cassino in 529 along the same spirit of community living. Gradually, the importance of the presence of community spirit spread across Europe. This spirit of community in the consecrated life that began in Africa and by Africans and then spread to other parts of the world is considered the African touch of the consecrated life.

Conclusion

This piece has studied the contribution of the African cultural heritage to the consecrated life, with particular reference to the concept of family in the African cultural heritage. It further studied the concept of family in Africa and the theology of the consecrated life as a background to the study of this contribution. The eremitic era in the history of the consecrated life was explored, and it revealed an epoch distant from an encounter with the fundamental principles of Africaness; at this time, consecrated persons dwelt as individual hermits in their various hermitages. With the emergence of consecrated persons like Pachomius and Saint Augustine, who had a community of consecrated persons in Africa, the idea of a coenobium began. This is believed to be borne from the rich African cultural heritage of the family. This is, therefore, understood as the contribution of Africa to the consecrated life. This further helps the African consecrated person to understand that the religious life is not just a Western religious culture that was transported from Europe to Africa, but that it is a religious system to which he made fundamental contributions and, therefore, has a stake in, and thus, should protect.

References

Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*, Britain: Heinemann.

Alyward, S. (1975). *African Christian theology.* London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Augustine, Saint, (2010). *The rule and constitution of the Order of Saint Augustine.* Augustinian Curia: Rome.

Cada, L. et al (1979). *The shaping of the coming age of the religious life.* New York: Cross Road Book.

Fleming, D. L. (1990). Understanding a theology of Religious Life. In G. A. Arburckle and D. L. Fleming (Eds.). *Religious Life: Rebirth through Conversion.* New York: Alba House.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1956). The philosophy of history. New York: Dover.
Iroegbu, I. (1995). *Metaphysics: The* kpim of philosophy. Owerri: IUP.

Kanu, A. I. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African Traditional Religion, theology and philosophy.* Nigeria: Augustinian.

Kanu, A. I. (2015). *African philosophy: An ontologico-Existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues.* Nigeria: Augustinian.

Kanu, I. A. (2015a). *The 17th Century Ethiopian Rationalists: Rethinking the Ideological Race Classification of Africa.* A paper presented at the Academic Conference of the Society for Research and Academic Excellence, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. On 16th – 19th February.

Kanu, I. A. (2015b). The Philosophy of Anton Wilhelm Amo as a Case against the 17th Century Ideological Race Classification of Africa. *African Journal of Humanities. 2. 1.* 189-195.

Kanu, I. A. (2015c). *Africae Munus and Consecrated Persons,* In The Catholic Voyage: A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria. 11. 4.

Lumen Gentium (1964). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (pp. 350-428). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

Masolo, D. A. (1994). *African philosophy in Search of Identity.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mayers, A. C. *Sanctify, Consecrate.* The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 493.

Mbiti, J. (1969). *African religions and philosophy.* London: Heinemann.

Njoku, F. O. C. (2002). *Essays in African philosophy, thought, theology.* Enugu: SNAAP.

Nwachukwu, M. (2010). *Consecrated: A Vision of Religious Life from the Point of View of the Sacred.* Lagos: Change Publications.

Nwachukwu, M. (2010). *Consecrated: A Vision of Religious Life from the Point of View of the Sacred.* Lagos: Change Publications, 2010, p. 84

Ogbalu, F. G. (2006). Igbo institutions and customs. Onitsha: Varsity.

Perfectae Caritatis (1965). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (pp. 611-623). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

The Code of canon Law (1983). Canon 573. 2. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India.

Westerman (1949), *The African today and tomorrow.* Ibadan: International African Institute.