

**FROM THE SACRED TO THE PROFANE: COMMODITIZATION AND THE
CHANGING STATUS OF MMONWU IN IGBOLAND THROUGH THE
PERSPECTIVES OF KOPYTOFF AND ELIADE**

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Abstract

The Mmonwu Sacred institution in Igboland is fastly undergoing some changes that would completely render it unrecognizable. Its acceptance of the market forces of commoditization are gradually weakening its traditional symbolic boundaries making it vulnerable to desacralization. With the religious mode of experiencing and interpreting reality gone, the empirical and secular perspectives take control. Mmonwu loses its ritual significance as the hierophany of ancestral spirits, and acquires the new identity of a cultural artifact circulating as goods in exchange for financial power. Participation in political campaigns, appearances in social events like wedding anniversaries, birthday parties, traffic generating appearances on social media handles in the form of content creation, are some of the evidence of the changing status of Mmonwu under the control of economic forces. Though these give Mmonwu a form of visibility, its ritual significance is greatly diminished. Rather than relying on ethnographic fieldwork, the article employs the complimentary theoretical perspectives of Igor Kopytoff's theory of commoditization and Mircea Eliade's phenomenology of the sacred. These two enable us to introduce a theoretical process model of commoditization - weakening of boundary - desacralization, which will be made manifest in the course of the article.

Key Words: Mmonwu, sacred, commoditization, desacralization, ritual , religious

Introduction

The Mmonwu institution in Igboland is highly respected for its status as representation of the benign spirits of our ancestors. In the days of our fathers, the Mmonwu was respected for what it represented and was never seen crossing the boundaries of what was permitted. Its outing was strictly reserved for the occasions where it's naturally meant to appear as determined by ritual calendars, ancestral authority, and communal obligations. With the influence of modernization and globalization, the Mmonwu sacred institution seems to be losing some of its sanctity and shield. Its special aura as something reserved for special occasions has worn thin as a result of the commercial instrumentalization that has been allowed to permeate and to dilute the very

essence of Mmonwu. It is no longer reserved for the sacred and the cultural; it has now made itself available in the social sphere with its attendant consequences. From the cultural to the social, it has become a commodity that can be bought over in exchange for other values.

Our goal is to expose how the commoditization of the sacred institution of Mmonwu, is derobing the institution of what Kopytoff (1986) describes as its “special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common” (p.69). As a result, it is becoming an ordinary plaything even for women, children and the uninitiates. Our study adopts a qualitative hermeneutical and philosophical approach to examine the changing status of Mmonwu in contemporary Igboland. We shall employ the theory of commoditization by Igor Kopytoff in our bid to understand how Mmonwu has become an exchangeable value for money. It argues that commoditization does not itself constitute desacralization but facilitates the process of de-singularization - whereby an object loses its status as unique, reserved, sacred, and protected to the economic forces of exchange as a commodity; reclassification - whereby an object’s cultural status is redefined to determine its value and treatment; and exchangeability - whereby the sacred object is degraded to the status of a commodity under the control of market forces. These contribute to the gradual weakening of the symbolic boundaries protecting the sacred. As these boundaries erode, the conditions for desacralization emerge.

For a proper understanding of how the weakening of the boundaries by commoditization gradually leads to the desacralization of sacred institutions and objects, we shall employ three analytic elements by Eliade: the long process of rationalization, the loss of the sense of religiousness of the cosmos and the birth of nonreligious consciousness. These elements weaken humanity’s capacity to appreciate *hierophanies* - self-revelations of the sacred. With the religious mode of experiencing and interpreting reality gone, the empirical and secular perspectives take control. Mmonuw in itself gets appreciated no longer as the manifestation of the ancestral spirits, but as a mere cultural artifact worthy of continued circulation as goods or services in exchange for financial power. By integrating Kopytoff’s theory of commoditization with Eliade’s phenomenology of the sacred, the article offers a conceptual framework for explaining the transition of Mmonwu from sacred institution to commercial cultural performance. The analysis relies on existing scholarly literature on Igbo religion, masquerade traditions, and the philosophy of religion, while drawing examples for illustration from contemporary social practices in Igboland. Our aim is not to establish statistical generalizations but to provide a conceptual explanation of the transformation of Mmonwu from a singular institution to an increasingly commodified cultural performance.

Brief Literature Review:

A lot of literary work has already been done on the phenomenon of masquerade in Igboland. Looking through heaps of articles in this area within the last couple of years, it becomes evident that the central areas of concentration have been on the religious significance, the cultural roles, the aesthetics, performance, traditional control and roles in Igbo society. Only recently, there has been a growing interest in the importance of masquerade in boosting tourism in the Igbo states of Nigeria. Few of the writers like Esther & Oriema (2022), Ejikeme, Mmadu, & Joseph (2026), developed arguments on how masquerades can become sources of income through cultural tourism. Others like Odoala (2026), Isidienu & Onyekelu (2022), Dimonye & Asiegbu (2023), paid attention to the socio-political importance of masquerades in maintaining order, stability, peace and harmony in Igbo traditional society. Others paid attention to the ritual aspect of masquerades as messengers from the dead. There was only a passing interest in the commercialization of masquerade as one of the challenges facing the institution in Igbo society. (Odoala, 2026, p. 132). Though it is very close to something different, it has not addressed the changing status of the masquerade institution in Igboland. If we are trying to promote tourism through the masquerade institution, have we thought about the effect on the sacred status of masquerade in Igboland? Tourism that is cultural would involve the commercialization of sacred objects, places, rites that have been protected in Igbo tradition. Can the sacred institution, objects and rites survive commoditization without suffering the potential danger of desacralization? What would be the resultant effect on sacred symbols when they are subjected to intrusive market forces? This is a real scholarly gap that our article intends to fill. The transformation of the sacred institution of Mmonwu and others, under the pressures of commoditization and modernity, is real and ongoing. Though commoditization may not inevitably lead to desacralization, it significantly facilitates the enabling conditions under which desacralization becomes likely. Our theoretical framework will be to employ Kopytoff's theory of commoditization with Eliade's phenomenology of the sacred to create a philosophico-analytical process model: commoditization - weakening of boundaries - desacralization. It is a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in philosophical and hermeneutical analysis.

Igor Kopytoff and the Commoditization Theory:

According to Kopytoff (1986), "a commodity is a thing that has value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value" (p. 68). The quality that ascribes the value of commodity to a thing is its saleability, that is, its readiness to be given away in exchange for money or its equivalent. Anything that is saleable is common because it has the same status as millions of other things of comparable value. If an object or a thing indicates this presence of the spirit, it immediately acquires a "commodity status." (69).

Culture is one thing that assigns the value of “sacred” to objects or spaces, in the sense that it singularizes them, makes them unique, protects them and sets them apart. In that vein, culture can be said to be anti-commoditization because it hinders its objects or spaces from being exchanged for anything. Kopytoff (1986) avers that “culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others; and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized” (p.73). As such in every society, there are things that are publicly excluded from being commoditized. In Precolonial Igbo society, such singular things and spaces among others include ajo ohia,(evil forests), okwu alusi (shrines), mmonwu, ofo, Osisi Orji, some totemic animals or reptiles like snakes (eke) or animal parts like skin of a tiger, teeth of a cat, and some other ritual objects. (Orjikwe, 2016, p. 156f). These objects become sacralized by the culture. The prohibitions placed upon them are cultural and collectively protected by the will of the people. In modern societies, there are items described as the “symbolic inventory of a society,” like public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects, and so on.” (Kopytoff, 1986, p.73) These are considered untouchable by the state.

In contemporary society, however, distinctions have been introduced between forms of Mmonwu. There are types of Mmonwu that have become available for exchange, in the sense that they can be commoditized. Other types of Mmonwu are non exchangeable for anything at all. That is why Kopytoff describes commoditization as “a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-nothing state.” (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 73). The necessary steps now would be to examine the processes by which sacred things can become exchangeable and how sacred things can lose their sacred status. The implication of this is that exchangeability does not derobe a sacred object of its sacredness and “singularity does not guarantee sacralization.” (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 74).

The Process of Commoditization by Igor Kopytoff and its Application to Mmonwu

Our examination of Kopytoff reveals that he does not propose a rigid, step-by-step plan of commoditization, but rather, a gradual process in which the status of an object can be negotiated given the cultural circumstances that affect the object’s exchangeability or not. Kopytoff (1986) uses “a processual perspective” to refer to “a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status...” (p. 65). Going through the same “processual perspective,” let us examine the steps through which a Sacred thing can thus become a commodity, that is, it acquires the character of exchangeability.

I. De-Singularization:

The most important idea in the thoughts of Kopytoff is arguably singularization by which he means the process of pulling an object away from the homogenizing market square where it acquires the value of exchangeability into a new state where it becomes ‘unique,’ ‘singular,’ ‘protected,’ and ‘reserved.’ However, where it is the question of making an object a commodity, scholars think that the “procedural perspective” would be that of de-singularization. This would mean a reverse process, where an object loses its status as reserved, protected, and unique to the market and economic forces of exchange as a commodity. Culture details certain objects as singularized because they possess unique religious, historical, moral and social symbols that define the identity of the objects in question and the people who own them. The Mmonwu institution is an example of what culture has designated as singularized. Traditionally, it represents the ancestral spirits who assist and communicate with the living. Though they also entertain the people in addition to their other multiple duties, the Mmonwu has never been reduced to the status of commodity. Today, however, the Mmonwu institution seems to have been de-singularized, and mostly reduced to a commodity in exchange for money. Instances include the modern habit of politicians hiring masquerades to accompany them on campaign trails, perhaps as guards or as objects attracting followership of the masses; the social media handles like TikTok, You Tube, Whatsapp all displaying performances by Masquerades for the purpose of creating traffic, gathering “like and repost” comments, and potentially receiving monetary reward, etc.

II. Reclassification:

This is about changing the social identity of an object to determine how it should be valued and treated. Commoditization can involve persons and things. The group of persons involved with commoditization is termed slaves. Slavery has been seen as the condition which treats the human person as a property or an object. Recently however, using the ‘procedural perspective,’ Kopytoff (1986) defines slavery as “a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status, some of which merge with other statuses...” (p.65). In the example of a slave who initially was withdrawn from the original social setting of a freeborn, and thrown, by captivity into the condition of a commodity; later bought by another master who decommunitizes him, rehumanizes him and gets him reincorporated into the human society, we see various phases or processes of social transformation.

In brief, the process has moved the slave away from the simple status of exchangeable commodity and toward that of a singular individual occupying a particular social and personal niche (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 65).

Kopytoff wants us to see the process of classification and the eventual reclassification of the 'slave' as 'human' in possession of a new identity. At each stage, the social meaning of the slave changes thus determining the treatment he should be given. In the category of objects, sacred objects, heirlooms, or ritual artifacts are often classified as singularized objects because of their exceptional cultural or religious value. When those classifications are altered, the objects may become reclassified into commoditifiable objects. For instance sacred object reclassified as cultural artifact renders the object into a commodity with an exchange value. The social biography of the sacred object that has been reclassified is affected as well as rules determining its circulation. When Mmonwu is reclassified, it loses its sacredness and acquires a cultural and social status reserved for entertainment. It is this reclassification that reduces Mmonwu to the status of commodity. This is why in ordinary daily social events like birthdays, anniversaries, house warmings, churching, etc, something as grand as Mmonwu would be seen dancing around for the pleasure of the onlookers because some money had been paid in exchange for its presence. This progressively weakens the boundaries exposing the Mmonwu institution to gradual desacralization and hastens its changing status in Igboland.

III. Exchangeability:

Exchangeability is the consequence of the reclassification of an object. Exchangeability is the practical realization of commoditization. This is what happens when Mmonwu has become an object for hire in the event of birthdays, weddings, and social gatherings. From its sacred status, it has been degraded to the status of a commodity making it exchangeable for financial gains. It is this shift in the value of Mmonwu that has placed it under the control of market principles. Today, Mmonwu can be hired and rented; individuals have built booming businesses on Mmonwu industry. As such what used to be the reserve of the initiated members and elders of the secret and sacred institution, has become the reserve of whoever controls the market economy. This has contributed to the changing status of Mmonwu as a ritual reactualization of the ancestors, to an ordinary cultural and social amusement. The appearance of Mmonwu on the social media dancing choreographed steps with their troupe, for the services of content creation, find its explanation here.

We eventually come to appreciate the two ways in which, according to Kopytoff (1986), the expansion of commoditization takes place: "(a) with respect to each thing, by making it exchangeable for more and more other things, and (b) with respect to the system as a whole, by making more and more different things more widely exchangeable" (p. 73). What we have here are the two dimensions of commoditization: the internal dimension of commoditization which he calls expansion with respect to each thing and the systemic dimension of commoditization expressed as expansion with respect to the system as a whole. The internal dimension deals with

an object with only limited exchangeability. This object suffers expansion as a result of the increasing market forces. For example, a ritual mask may have been exchangeably limited to ritual contexts. Over time, it becomes rentable for festivals, exhibited in museums, displayed as art work and so on. Its sphere of exchange continues to undergo expansion. The same thing is applicable to the Mmonwu sacred institution.

The systemic dimension of commoditization affects the entire institution. The things that were collectively protected as singularized and sacred objects in traditional societies like deities (alusi), sacred spaces like shrines, sacred objects like Ofo, (Orjikwe, 2016, p.156f) etc may eventually lose their unique status and become commercially exchangeable. The more commoditization expands, the less the boundaries between the sacred and the profane become. Here, the concern is alarming as it involves not just individual types of Mmonwu but the sacred institution of Mmonwu as a whole which is subjecting to the wider economic system. The modern markets are awash with the material aspect of Mmonwu or masquerades. What used to be seen reservedly only on official days of festivities have become publicly displayed to women and uninitiates. They have the liberty to touch and examine it as ordinary piece of cloth, thus losing the awe and respect that Mmonwu on itself engendered. Festivals intended to draw crowds get arbitrarily fixed by state tourist agents for the purposes of publicizing their visibility; masquerade performances are monetized online etc. The possibilities are limitless and the sacred institutions have become official market resources.

Commoditization may not be responsible for desacralization, but it creates the enabling atmosphere that facilitates desacralization. If the exchangeability of Mmonwu is restricted only to a few alternatives, its glide into desacralization can be controlled and even, prevented. But where the options are infinite, it becomes almost impossible to hinder the procession towards desacralization. The logical conclusion is that commoditization thus enhances the vulnerability of sacred institutions to the forces that render them profane. We shall later examine how this is made possible by the theories of Mircea Eliade.

Brief Description of Mmonwu and Its Types

Mmonwu is a secret society 'of restricted membership and mysterious activity.' (Parrinder, 1961, p. 128) Mmonwu or 'mmanwu' is normally translated as 'Masquerade' because of the habit of wearing 'masks' associated with the members of this religiously inspired society. Arinze (1970) describes it thus:

“The ‘Mmanwu’ are men robed in unusual clothing from head to foot, with raffia strappings and sometimes artistically carved heads. The person speaks in a weird guttural voice through a small pipe with the capsules of a spider’s web at one end. The idea is to have a spiritual appearance. The ‘mmuo’ or ‘mmanwu’ are believed to be the dead come to life for special celebrations.” (p.18).

As a society, it is exclusively reserved for male adolescents and men. Part of the mysterious activity in it is the personation of the dead members of the society, those described as the ancestors. The ritual initiation, the personation of our hallowed ancestors, and the specific multidimensional duties-religious, social, legal, moral, cultural-it performs, attributes to it a sacred status in Igbo society. The masquerade plays an adjudicative role in the community especially as it intervenes in inter and intra village conflicts. The institution takes part in social control of crime and execution of punishment on meriting offenders. (Onebunne, 2019, p. 29). Members of the community who refuse to contribute common levies or pay dues are usually visited by the masquerade for compliance. They thus act as agents of taxation and control for the development of the community. (Odoala, 2026, p.129).

Members of the institution are taken to be custodians of the sacred rites, secrets and customs of the land. As observed by Parrinder (1961):

Initiation into the society is begun when boys are about ten years old. They undergo an ordeal of beating by a masker and then parade round the village...The full initiation follows several years later and is a ritual of death and rebirth. The dead are called up from the underworld, in the form of a masker, and the naked novice is made to undergo ordeals symbolizing a visit to the spirit world and proving his power of endurance...in the morning the novice emerges exhausted and dirty from his adventures as if he had come from the underworld, and is then told the secret of the masks and their occupants and sworn to secrecy (p. 133f).

Initiation rites are not just ordinary, they have rich connotations that totally and completely raise the initiate into a different level of existence with a different form of understanding not accorded to the uninitiate. Eliade (1959) captures the real significance and the ontological transformation that takes place in the initiate. It is this initiation that makes an ordinary man die to the profane condition of his living and resurrect to the sacred world, the world of the gods. (p.197) The initiate becomes a religious man who understands the inter-connectedness between the world, its

creator and all that happens in it. He understands that the existence of the world itself “means” some thing, “wants to say” something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance.” (Eliade, 1959, p.165). The religious man sees the transcendent aspect of life and living in the cosmos.

The initiation into the Mmonwu society is a religious rite that introduces the novices into the mysterious and metaphysical dimensions of the Mmonwu institution. Wherever and whenever Mmonwu appear, “they appeared not in human shape and attitude but rather exhibited a supernatural and divine power empowered either by the gods, ancestors or spirits. The masquerades in this regard are regarded as spokesmen of the gods and as such, cannot be seen by mere mortals.” (Onebunne, 2019, p. 21) That is why, all those associated with it, bear an enormous responsibility to maintain the sacredness of the Mmonwu. How could that not be when the initiation makes the initiates possessors of three levels of revelation: revelation of the sacred, of death and of sexuality. (Eliade, 1959, p. 187) The initiate is as it were born again to a new form of sanctified existence, having buried his profane, infantile life. He lives a new life in possession of the secrets of the sacred, knowledge of the myths of creation, of the gods, secrets of the initiation and their meanings, secrets of existence and custodian of the ancestral traditions. He has experienced the mysteries and is he who knows. (Eliade, 1959, p. 188).

There are two categories of Mmonwu: the visible and the invisible masquerades. There are other divisions of Mmonwu according to various communities, though we have chosen to go with the general group of two. These both provide entertainment in addition to their other duties. However, the entertainment function of the Mmonwu is seen mainly with the visible masquerades. The visible masquerades are normally meant for public entertainment. Their masks are usually designed to offer some visual appeal for their shapes and forms from the deity. (Ikeokwu, 2016, p.13). The Mmonwu through their performances capture the theatrical and dramatic parts of the cultural life of the Igbo people. Anuka (2019) notes that:

The Mmanwu perform different theatrical characters and roles like dancers, comedians, annotators, poets, praise singers and historical narrators. Be that as it may that some Mmanwu are awfully clothed to evoke fear and dread, they still provide some sorts of entertainment, just like the horror films of today. The music and songs that usually accompany Mmanwu performances are complete traditional entertainment. (p. 134).

The invisible category of Mmonwu perform mainly at nights and are for special purposes. Unlike the visible types who perform to entertain through the use of their material figure and constituent, the invisible types of Mmonwu make use mostly of their voices and sounds. Though different communities may have different names for their Mmonwu, Onebunne (2019) categorizes the invisible types of Mmonwu into three: Agummuo, Achikwu Oji na Ocha, and Ogbagu. Other groups and types of Mmonwu do exist. (Dimonye and Asiegbu, 2023). They traverse the village at night producing horrible screaming sounds that create fear in the uninitiates. Some of them act as village surveillance agents while some others execute severe punishment on meriting offenders. (p.27f). The group that is mostly affected by the progressive changes in the society is the visible category of Mmonwu. They are the ones that are mostly affected by the phenomenon of commoditification. The invisible group are rarely called upon today because there are more efficient social institutions that take complete care of their former roles in the communities.

It is worth noting that Mmonwu had designated times and periods for their appearance. Historically, masquerades were connected to agricultural cycles; they appeared usually during designated festivals and occasions like funerals, New Yam celebrations, title-taking ceremonies, etc.(Ikeokwu, 2016, p.12). These were sacred events that took place in a mythical time, and sanctified by the gods. When these events are celebrated today, they become recreations of the sacred events that took place in the beginning. Eliade (1959) observes that :

Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, “in the beginning.” Religious participation in a festival implies emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time reactualized by the festival itself. Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable (p.69).

These events are ritually celebrated because they were given by the gods in the beginning. New Yam festival among the Igbo is of particular importance because it is one of the best gifts given by God to the Igbo. Not to celebrate it is to forget the benevolence of the gods. This is why it can be “cultivated and eaten in the ordinary way because it is periodically cultivated and eaten ritually.” (Eliade, 1959, p. 89). The same applies to agriculture whose cycle is celebrated ritually and periodically. These events are accompanied by the appearance of the Mmonwu to celebrate and to recreate the sacred activities of the gods in the beginning. The entertainment that comes with the Mmonwu is not geared towards economic value exchanged with money. In those days,

there would not be a multiplication of the appearances of the Mmonwu without any justifiable cause.

In the contemporary times however, there seems to be the loss of sacredness that was part of the essence of Mmonwu. The celebration of events established by the gods or mythical heroes in a mythical time, seem to have given way to all sorts of profanities. Non religious men, uninitiates tend to have taken possession of the Mmonwu and turned it into a commodity for money yielding venture. The ritual aspect has been sacrificed at the altar of entertainment. Weddings, political campaigns, birthday parties, corporate events, house warming, anniversaries etc., have become occasions for the appearance of Mmonwu. Organizers of these profane events negotiate performance fees and schedules and make Mmonwu the commodity of exchange. Boundaries are no longer respected such that women and uninitiates dance in close proximity with masquerades who willingly welcome the spread of naira notes on it.

Most recently, a group of syndicates have evolved what has become known as “Mmonwu Uka Eke” for, among other things, the purpose of making financial gains in the villages and communities of the old Aguata area of Anambra State. It is a practice of organizing Mmonwu on every Sunday that falls on the market days-which could be Eke, Oye, Afo or Nkwo-of individual communities. There is no historical antecedent to this phenomenon, no sacred event that it commemorates; there is no sacred time for it and it has no relation to any god unless the one invented by the organizers. The “Mmonwu Uka Eke” phenomenon is totally profane and mundane and thus amenable to commoditization. The most attractive thing about it is the carnival-style of atmosphere it creates and the booming business of beer parlours and restaurants that operate on such Sundays. There is strong indications that masquerades are hired from particular ‘lenders’ with the aim of making money and paying back to the lenders. There is nothing sacred nor mythic about this practice; Eliade (1959) describes the condition thus:

In contrast, what men do on their own initiative, what they do without a mythical model, belongs to the sphere of the profane; hence, it is a vain and illusory activity, and, in the last analysis, unreal (p.96).

It would perhaps, not be out of place to think that those behind this phenomenon which tends to derobe the Mmonwu institution of its sacred character, are mostly non religious men. They employ the masquerade as a means of amusement; those of them who are uninitiates, see the masquerade as piece of art work that can be employed for various purposes. This group become content creators of the social media, using the masquerade to attract traffic with the ultimate goal of making money. Thus for them, the Mmonwu has become “a profane act justified by the

economic profit that it brings. (Eliade, 1959, p. 96). The probable effect of reducing the Mmonwu to a commodity is desacralization.

Mircea Eliade and the Movement toward Desacralization

The whole analysis of Eliade (1959) in his ‘the Sacred and the Profane,’ is worth examining. The Sacred according to him, “always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from “natural realities.” (p.10) The manifestation of the sacred is called *hierophany*, I.e, self-revelation of something different from the ordinary. Eliade notes that:

from the most elementary hierophany - e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree -- to the supreme hierophany (which for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act - the manifestation of some thing of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world (p.11).

In Africa and some other parts of the world, the sacred or the divine can reveal itself in some ordinary object, a stone, a tree, a forest etc. A western mind may look at these objects in a caricatural way to signal that they can not be objects of divine manifestation. The Jewish mind may understand this better because such manifestations of the transcendent to Abraham and Moses, and the prophets, happened through mundane objects. In Exodus 3, Moses encountered the ‘Sacred’ in a burning bush. The sight alone attracted Moses only for him to realize the hierophany, a revelation of the divine presence through the beautiful sight. On innumerable occasions, God manifested Himself to Moses and the people of Israel through ‘Thunder and Lightening,’ through the Clouds, through ‘Fire, through the Wind and the gentle breeze, through the Rocks etc. These were all various degrees of hierophany, the self-manifestation of what is sacred and transcendent through the natural, mundane objects. This is the understanding that we should take into the Igbo Traditional Religion. Trees, forests, stones, shrines and other objects, before which our ancestors venerated and worshipped the sacred that manifested itself through those means, deserve our awe and respect.

Mmonwu is seen as sacred in Igbo societies. The sacredness does not rest on the material essence which ordinarily is collectively described as ‘mask’ and those who wear them as ‘maskers,’ but on the collective meaning that it signifies. Eliade (1959) observes that “it is the sacrality manifested through the mode of being...that reveals its true essence” (p.118). It is believed that

Mmonwu is the physical representation of what is totally beyond the ordinary, the spirits of our ancestors long gone beyond the physical realm of the world to the spiritual, invisible realm. These ancestors are sacred and that is why they enjoy some form of veneration and worship. The Mmonwu manifests the sacred, and is thus considered sacred because it has gone beyond the ordinary physical, human-like appearance to embody something beyond the ordinary.

It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu (p.12).

In Eliade, there are no clear-cut step-by-step processes that lead to the systematic loss of the sacred, though he acknowledges that modern societies undergo a progressive loss in the sense of the sacred. One of the major contributing factors is when the sense of “the religiousness of the cosmos becomes lost.” (p. 107). The archaic societies interpreted the cosmos as hierophanies of the sacred. Though natural objects like the bodies of water, forests, trees, rivers, celestial bodies, stones etc were understood as parts of the cosmos, they nevertheless transmitted something beyond their ordinary powers; they revealed or manifested a transcendent reality. When the cosmos is no longer appreciated as inhabiting and manifesting the transcendent, then desacralization occurs, the religiousness of the cosmos becomes lost. Sacred objects, sacred spaces, and sacred time are no longer seen as means of perceiving the totally other, but as ordinary objects within a chronological time frame. Activities no longer acquire religious essence, they become mere social customs or cultural events. In this perspective, Mmonwu is no longer understood as the presence of the ancestral spirits, but as mere instruments of entertainment and cultural heritage. It becomes a mere profane activity that can be employed for whatever purpose, as it is no longer seen as “recovering the mysterious presence of the gods.” (p. 107)

Another contributory factor to the desacralization of the cosmos is what Eliade calls “the long process of rationalization” (p.158) when the religious feeling almost completely disappears. This is to acknowledge the effect of the progressive triumph of rational thought that led to what became known as the ‘Enlightenment’ in the modern period of philosophical development, which freed man from the clutches of religion and endowed him with the freedom of reason. (Lawhead, 2015, p. 293f). Rationalization diminishes man’s religious view of the world and weakens his capacity for accepting hierophanies--”manifestations of the sacred.” The cosmos is no longer accepted as sacred but rather as profane. Scientific approach to things override

symbolic interpretations. This leads to the secularization of nature where Mmonwu becomes understood as a mere work of art and the maskers as mere artists working for their daily bread. It is this rationalization that paved the way for the commoditization of the Mmonwu institution in its various manifestations today.

The final contributory factor to the desacralization of the cosmos, and *ipso facto* the Mmonwu institution in Igboland we shall consider, is what Eliade describes as the emergence of “nonreligious man” who understands reality without reference to the transcendent. The religious man-*homo religiosus*-is central to the ideas of Eliade (1959) in his *Sacred and the Profane*. The religious man accepts the cosmos as the work of God and his presence in the cosmos as a given. He has a reference to the transcendent and shares in the sanctity of the world. (p.172). He holds that by reactualizing sacred history and by imitating divine behavior that he keeps himself close to god in the real and the significant. (p.172). The nonreligious man is the opposite of the *homo religiosus*. He is the modern individual of the contemporary society who has no reference to the transcendent, doubts the meaning of existence and interprets reality in a relative way. (p. 202). His loss of sacred perception means that objects, spaces and realities are divested of their spiritual significance and reference, and rather acquire ordinary, empirical and mundane meaning. The Mmonwu becomes for him, a mere cultural performance of a gifted artist. As such, it can be paid for as a commodity in exchange for the entertainment that it gives. Festivals mean nothing but annual celebrations.

In a summary formula we might say that for the nonreligious men of the modern age, all the cosmos has become opaque, inert, mute; it transmits no message, it holds no cipher. (Eliade, 1959, p. 178).

The modern nonreligious man regards himself as both the subject and agent of history; he considers the sacred as an obstacle to his freedom which he will acquire only when he has killed the last god. (Eliade, 1959, p.203). For the Igbo society, lack of initiation or non participation in the customary rites of passage may have contributed to the status of the nonreligious man.

Conclusion:

This article has called attention to the progressively changing status of Mmonwu in contemporary Igboland. It has consistently argued that this condition can best be understood as the intersection of commoditization and desacralization. With the analytic elements of Igor Kopytoff, the article has demonstrated how Mmonwu institution increasingly undergoes desingularization, reclassification, and exchangeability by entering the sphere of market

relations. Through the perspective of Eliade's phenomenology of the sacred, the article has demonstrated how expanding commoditization continuously weakens the boundaries holding up Mmonwu as a hierophany and encourages the nonreligious view of Mmonwu as a profane cultural performance.

Though it may still be argued that commercialization does not necessarily lead to the loss of sacredness, given that many religious traditions who engage in profit making ventures retain their religiousness. Our argument, rather, is that the expansion of market forces, facilitate the gradual destruction of the boundaries that historically protected the singularity of the Mmonwu institution. With the protection weakened, Mmonwu increasingly becomes accessible to the nonreligious humanity of the contemporary Igbo society who, without any reference to the transcendent, contemptuously disregards the ritual significance of Mmonwu, leading to its accelerated desacralization.

Beyond calling attention to the changing status of Mmonwu in Igboland, our article raises important questions concerning the survival of sacred institutions under the attack of secularist mind views within the contemporary capitalist societies. The challenge today is to find how to preserve the symbolic structures that assist communities to experience the sacred as real and significant. Finding a way to negotiate between cultural preservation, market economic forces and religious continuity is a possible research for the future.

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