RITUAL DIRT AND PURIFICATION RITES AMONG THE IGBO

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If one were to tell the Igbo that a certain writer says that alu (pollution) is "Dirt", and that "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being and non-being, form to formlessness, life to death", they would probably say that she must be speaking metaphorically. An Igbo may ignore some dirt (inyi) but close his ears and run at the mere mention of alu. In this essay, I want to argue in support of Kristensen's assertion that: "Purification as well as pollution is of both spiritual and material nature." They have a sacramental nature. Thus "Dirt" is both 'like and unlike' ordinary dirt. It were better described as "Ritual dirt", or "Religious dirt", which means far more than mere filth. I will show that Igbo ideas about "Ritual dirt" and purification see them as essentially religious phenomena. Their ideas about pollution and prohibition have wide ranging psychological and socio-structural functions, but they are not to be reduced to mere psychological or cultural phenomena.

THE CONCEPT OF NSO (SACRED PROHIBITIONS)

My first acquaintance with Igbo notions of nsọ was about thirty years ago as a child, when my parents took me to my home town Nnewi, in the north-central part of Igboland in southeastern Nigeria. On one occasion, I walked across the outstretched legs of one of my playmates. Some of my close relatives who noticed this drew me aside and told me that my action was nsọ (sacred prohibition) because the boy was an osu (ritual slave). They told me to go back and reverse my action by walking across his legs again, but from the opposite direction, otherwise I as well as any member of my family who crossed my own legs would become an osu. Later, I learnt many other activities of daily life which are nsọ.
The word *nsọ* in Igbo may mean two different but related things—one negative, and one positive. *Nsọ* means literally, 'avoidance' or 'prohibition', i.e. what one must avoid, or what one is prohibited from doing. This is the negative sense. In some other contexts however, the same word *nsọ*, means 'holy'. The two senses of the word appear to be related because every holy thing—spirits, priests, shrines and so on—is surrounded by a set of prohibitions. Ordinary people may on the advice of a priest or diviner adopt and practise certain prohibitions and thus achieve a limited level of holiness. It would appear therefore, that prohibitions create or preserve the status of holiness (*nsọ*), while the breach of prohibitions (*nsọ*) result in pollution or unholliness. *Nsọ* are therefore 'sacred prohibitions.'

There are different kinds of *nsọ*: personal *nsọ*, *nsọ* of the different deities, and of spirits (*aluṣi*). Material objects as such do not have *nsọ*. Personal prohibitions are those observed by an ordinary individual. Some of these may be natural, others are acquired. Certain foods or activities persistently avoided by a person since birth are his natural *nsọ*. Explanations for this phenomenon are spiritual, not biological—either that the ancestor who reincarnated in him had observed these prohibitions, or simply that his personal *chi* (destiny spirit) had included these in his destiny package. Other prohibitions may be acquired on the advice of a priest or diviner. People who hold sacred offices have more prohibitions than ordinary people, e.g. priests, diviners, kings. These are usually believed to be established by the deity or spirit associated with the office. Besides, every deity or spirit has a list of prohibitions associated with its cult. So in Igbo belief, *nsọ* are essentially religious rules associated with spiritual beings. Hence, writes Talbot,

Among Ibo generally ... every man has to keep the Nsaw (*nsọ*) which were observed by his 'Chi'—i.e. his twin-soul, Oversoul, or himself in his last incarnation, and sometimes new personal ones of his own are ordered by the ju-jus through the mouth of a diviner.⁶

**Notions of NSỌ Ala (Earth-Mother) and Pollutions**

By far the most important and the most serious group of prohibitions are the *nsọ ala* (prohibitions of the Earth-Mother). Thomas comments as follows on the *nsọ ala*: