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CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

COMMENSALITY: AN ASPECT OF SOCIAL PRINCIPLE

by O.A.C Anigbo

It has been observed that people of worth do not eat or drink any how in public. If they have to do so, they must know where they eat and with whom they eat. They get really angry and upset if the rules are not kept for them. In the end, they may abandon the food or drink altogether. Behaviour patterns surrounding the sharing of food or eating it is known in anthropological literature as commensality. — the implication of having to share or not sharing food. The rules vary according to cultures.

With the Lugbara of Uganda, commensality at the internal shrine of the minimal inner lineage demonstrates the social dimension of kinship. It is a kind of drama where the individual becomes aware of who is his next of kin and the people on whom he would count for help in various contexts. Here commensality symbolizes unity and solidarity and clearly marks off one group from similar groups in the wider community. For the Nuer of the Sudan, eating together means peaceful co-existence and where people avoid eating together shows that there is tension or state of war.

What is said of the commensal relationship among the Lugbara could equally be said for the Azande of Central Africa. But there, the blood pact creates commensal groups for specific social roles. The pact accounts in part for the stability of Azande society where class and tribes are differentiated by language and historical origin. With its emphasis on equality, the blood pact becomes a mechanism by which the feeling of inferiority due to status differentials inherent in Azande social structure is overcome.

But with the Igbo of Nigeria, a formal exclusion from the sharing of the kola-nut marks off "Osu" as a distinct category of people and emphasizes that all those sharing the nut are "freeborn". It is an important aspect of the Igbo culture that anyone eating should invite those present to share the food with him. In this context the kola nut becomes significant as the one item of food, the sharing of which reveals status differentiation and forms an important means of differentiation among the Igbo.

With the Hindi of India, the sharing of food is a crucial symbol by which commensal groups can identify themselves and be identified by others within an all Indian pattern or within an interacting group, while the non-sharing of food is made the means by which the hierarchical structure of India is made

real in everyday life. There in India, commensality plays a double role — sharing of food marks social equality and, non-sharing of food is a demonstration of social distance or social status.

In the 15th century Bohemia, there was a big political struggle over the issue of who receives the Body and blood of the Lord in Holy Communion. The normal practice has been that the celebrant or the priest would receive the Body and Blood while the faithful who are worthy are expected to receive the Body only. Some priests aided by lay people felt strongly that this practice was an abuse and contrary to the spirit of Christ. For he said "unless you eat my Body and drink my Blood, you will not have life in you." The protesters saw the practice in terms of class distinction. The generality of the priests were wealthy and therefore needed time to enjoy it. The giving of Holy Communion under the species of Bread and Wine to the faithful would take time and therefore militate against the interest of the priests.

The Church in Bohemia was split along the line of those who kept to the old practice and those who supported the new. The leader of the new group was John Hus and his followers known as Hussites while the movement was called Hussitism.

The Hussite demand for the giving of the Chalice to the laity may seem a purely liturgical detail, yet it became the rallying point of the Bohemian protest. The revolution thus launched, mobilized sufficient power to force the Roman Catholic Church as represented by the Council of Basel to make major concessions in 1454. The issue of the Chalice reduced the boundary between priests and people. In the course of the struggle, the traditional Catholic distinction between certain groups of givers and receivers of the Chalice was abolished. The large scale commensality which ensued marked the emergence of a new social group.

Clubs, such as the Rotary International or others similar to it fraternize by sharing meals together. Such occasions provide opportunity for meeting between peoples who in normal circumstance would never have met let alone sharing food. The sharing of food therefore emphasizes equality and refusing to a person is a clear demonstration that he is either inferior or an enemy. This leads to a consideration of ostracism or excommunication as weapons available to a group to ensure that its value systems are kept. Those who do not live up to the standard of conduct approved by the group are forced out and certain sanctions are imposed on them the fulfilment of which wins them back to lost membership. There is no group who does not utilize that kind of weapon.

The Roman Catholic Church utilizes excommunication to preserve its doctrine and traditional practices. There it is defined as a censure by which one is excluded from the communion of the faithful with certain canonical effects (Bouscareu, 1963:897). The intensity of the excommunication is measured according to the gravity of the deviation from the values of the Church. The excommunicate is specifically asked not to share in the communion of the Church. At times, the excommunicate is forbidden even to have physical contacts with members of the faithful (Bouscareu, 1963:897).

A similar pattern of disciplinary measures is noticeable among the Lugbara of Uganda. There, such censorship could include physical mutilation (Middleton, 1965:46). The same features exist in the caste system. Among the Igbo any breach in the sharing of the kola nut between the freeborn and the **Osu** imposes on the freeborn a serious sanction which sticks not only on him but on his descendants (Achebe, 1963:53).

For the Igbo generally, commensality is a serious business language which everyone must learn to keep in line. It is the one area in social life where the individual must tread with caution for to break the rules even without knowing it earns for the offender every amount of ridicule and low esteem in the community. Commensality touches all areas of social life: behaviour patterns at meal times, affinal ties; incidents of death, funerals and festivals. It has packages for all kinds of attitudes towards strangers and guests of all descriptions. Commensality sets limits to all kinds of groups and units and defines the extent of their boundaries. The family, the descent group and even the village community can be defined more effectively than any other social inventions.

Commensality has all kinds of gadget for measuring equality, inequality, inferiority or superiority and even distance. It is a symbolic language available in every culture. For the Igbo it is a social principle in their social organization.

***Note** - For more detailed information on Commensality and Social Organization, read Amgbho, O. A. C. **Commensality and Human Relationship Among the Igbo.** (University of Nigeria Press) 1987, 223 pages. The book discusses various issues on commensality.