

DUALISTIC CONCEPTION OF REALITY IN IGBO COSMOLOGIC-ONTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

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Article History

Received: 28/07/2022

Accepted: 03/08/2022

Published: 05/08/2022

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Abstract

Due to the limitation in written literatures which investigates the Igbo world, there has come to be variations in the Igbo conception of reality. Thus this research work aims at solving this problem through investigating into the authentic Igbo notion of the whole of reality in Igbo-African Cosmologic-Ontological structure. This work advances the thesis that the conception of reality in Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological structure is popularly dual in nature. In this sense, everything existing in the world is categorized under the physical and metaphysical; visible and invisible worlds. However, notwithstanding this popular view, there is a form of interaction or unity between these two categories/worlds in such a way that none is considered in isolation of the other. A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. We made use of data gotten from available literatures, unpublished essays, doctoral theses, journal articles and magazines. This thesis adopted the evaluative, analytic, historical and critical research approaches.

Keywords: Reality, Duality, Igbo-African cosmology, Visible world, Invisible world.

1. General Introduction

As a result of the limitation in written literatures which investigates the Igbo world, there has arisen varying and divergent conceptions of reality from contemporary writers on the Igbo worldview. Thus, some agree that reality in Igbo worldview is unitary and holistic; arguing that the conception of reality in the Igbo world is considered as the totality of all that exists with their ultimate origin and support. For them, even though there exists contraries in the world, reality is but one. On the other hand, some others have contended to argue that reality is seen from a dualistic point of view. For these set of writers, everything in the Igbo world whether realistic or idealistic can be categorized either under the physical realm (EluUwa) or the metaphysical realm (AlaMmuo). Lastly, there are others who argue that in Igbo ontological sense, reality is classified thus—Mmadu (Humans), Ihe (Things), and Mmuo (Spirit).

In the light of these, the main objective of this research work is that of undertaking an investigation, examination, and evaluation of the whole of reality in Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological structure with the intent of achieving a reconstruction and interpretation that will not

only correct false notions but also present a really critical and philosophical Igbo concept of reality. It is, therefore, the intention of this research work to investigate into the authentic notion of the Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological structure of reality in the Igbo-African worldview.

2. Some Contemporary Igbo Thinkers and the Concept of Reality in Igbo cosmology

In the past, one of the problems that militated against the articulation of African philosophy in general and Igbo philosophy in particular,¹ was the lack of typical traditional African philosophical texts. This problem of text within the context of African and Igbo philosophies respectively rose to a certain stage that Africans were labeled people without philosophy.

However, in this modern period, especially the past few decades, a number of authors have taken real research into African and Igbo philosophy. Consequently, there are now a number of literature materials on both African and Igbo philosophy/metaphysics. These philosophical materials will form the basis of our research on the concept of reality in Igbo-African cosmology.

2.1. Donatus Ibe Nwoga (1933-1991)

Writing on Igbo Worldview in the 1984 edition of the AHIAJIOKU LECTURES,² Nwoga affirms that the Igbo acknowledges three levels of reality, which includes: the physical, the spiritual, and the abstract. The physical is that which can be touched, weighed, or experienced through the senses. The spiritual is the invisible realm and cannot be seen or touched except by especially 'washed' eyes, but which notwithstanding can still exert influence on the physical realm. The abstract exists and can influence reality by being perceived or grasped in either of the other forms: the physical or the spiritual.³

Nwoga argues that each of these forms of being, which in themselves have reality, is capable of being transformed into the other. Differences exist only in the manner in which they are experienced and the kind of impaction they have. In his words, "different permutations of these forms of being take place also at different times depending on circumstances."⁴ It follows then that, each of the three categories of reality are transformable; one to the other. He rightly pointed out that an 'Ikenga' carving, bought in the market, is just a piece of carved wood; but which takes on the reality of the owner's trust force when the right people say the right form of words over the carving.⁵ Here is a clear case of the physical taking on the reality of the spiritual.

Be that as it may, by classifying Igbo ontology into three forms of reality: spiritual, physical, and abstract, Nwoga argues to have made a major contribution to the understanding of Igbo cosmological view by his addition of the category of the abstract concept of reality. For him, the physical agent does not require any explanation. The spiritual agent is also very much in contemporary metaphysical debate, but he must now struggle to articulate and explain the abstract agent. To this end, he posited that 'Umune, Okpevu, Mbataku, Ikenga, Ogu, and Ofo' are abstract beings.⁶ For instance, when somebody is innocent of the matter of a conflict; he says that he has 'ogu'.

However, in refuting Nwoga's claim that he personally discovered and incorporated into the Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological structure, the abstract category of reality, it is pertinent to state that the Igbo do possess to a great extent, abstract concepts of reality although they do not think mainly in abstract terms, be they spiritual or physical. For example, God for the Igbo exists as a spiritual being; but he also exists as an abstract being that has an ontological existence.⁷ Ancestors exist in the spirit world and the people apprehend them in personal terms as abstract beings that have real existence. 'Ala', in as much as she is seen as a goddess, is conceived as an abstract being symbolized by the visible earth. Other examples abound. Thus, it can be argued that the Igbo have always had the idea of abstract concepts. To this end, this notion is not a recent invention or creation by one man.

2.2. Uzodinma T. Nwala (1942-)

In his book, *Igbo Philosophy*, Nwala divided Igbo traditional cosmologic-ontology into three broad categories with their corresponding sub-categories. These are the spirits/forces, human beings, and things (consisting of plants and animals). According to him, the supreme deity (Ezechitoke) occupies the highest position

in the cosmologic-ontological order. He is the creator (God) who possesses spirit in its absolute form and has absolute control over all things. Although he alone enjoys such absolute existence, he is not closely involved in human affairs and natural phenomena as deities⁸ and ancestors are. He remains "a superintendent of power to whom the final appeal is made in the event of any injustice."⁹

'Chukwu' (God) is followed by 'Agbara', the numerous local deities such as 'Ala'(Earth deity), 'Imo' and 'Idemili'(River deities), 'Amadioha' or 'Kamanu' (Thunder deities), 'Anyanwu' (Sun deity), 'Diewu', 'Nshi', 'Ojukwu' and others.¹⁰ They are ministerial deities in charge of several departments of human affairs that include fertility, protection, control of certain phenomena, and what have you. Spirits inhabit natural objects like rivers and hills. Next is 'Ndiichie' who are spirits of revered ancestors. The spirit of an ancestor may reincarnate in several people at the same time while maintaining a spiritual existence in the spirit world.

Nwala included in the category of human being (Mmadu) those living and those about to be born.¹¹ 'Mmadu' is the centre of creation and the main actor in the drama of existence and life. Their actions evoke reactions from the gods and have deep implication for the lower beings and forces. He further articulated that man possesses two parts- 'Mmuo' (spirit) and 'Ahu' (body). 'Mmuo' incorporates the elements of spirit: intelligence, feelings, emotion, and conscience. It has no particular shape or form and is associated with 'Mkpuruobi' (the soul) which is located in the heart. 'Mkpuruobi' is essentially materialistic and should be differentiated from 'Mmuo' which is spiritual. The soul is the residence of the spirit and ceases to exist when death occurs. The spirit, however, departs into the spirit world and may reincarnate. 'Ahu' (body) is the visible part of man, which perishes and becomes dust at death. Medicine men and magicians are capable of transforming themselves into spirits in order to visit the spirit world for specific purposes or into animals like "Tiger, Lion, Crocodile, Mermaid, Fish, Cat, and so on; and later change again to normal human form."¹²

In his third cosmologic-ontological category, Nwala talks of 'Ihe' (things) which consists of the sub-categories of animals, plants, and inanimate objects and elements. They inhabit the physical and visible order and yet exist in the spirit world as well. Animals are believed to not only have souls and spirits, but are thought to have access to things an ordinary human person can not know, and possibly see things that are beyond what ordinary human eyes can perceive. Plants, on the other hand, serve as food for man and animals. They are considered sacred when they serve as an abode of spirits and deities. Trees like 'Ububa', 'Abosi', 'Otusi', and 'Uha' are seen as religious symbols and are generally found in shrines and temples. Certain herbs, roots, and leaves form essential ingredients in the preparation of medicinal concoctions. Similarly, inanimate objects and elements like mountains, hills, valleys, caves, rivers, and streams, serve as the "abode of spirits and deities, and as scenes for sacrifices, locations of shrines, and spiritual events."¹³ Sand, water, oil, salt, and chalk are essential ingredients for sacrifice, magic, and medicine.

1.1. Emmanuel Mathew Paul Edeh (1947-)

Edeh considered two hypotheses: 'Onye' (Person) and 'Ife' (Thing), with regards to what term approximates the Igbo concept of being. In his pioneering work, *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, 'Onye' hypothesis was abandoned; for whereas it embraces the human and supra-human levels of being, it excludes "inanimate, vegetative and non-human animate entities."¹⁴ 'Ife' hypothesis was adopted with minor modifications, as being the most appropriate word employed by the Igbo people to express Igbo concept of being. 'Ife' can be affixed to the Igbo verb 'idi' (to be) to imply the notion of existence; for instance, 'Chukwu-di' (God exists). A combination of 'ife' and 'idi' in the modern Igbo orthography should render 'ife-di' (that which is/exists) as the most approximate translation of the English concept of being that associates being with existence and embraces visible and invisible beings as well.

Edeh further classified 'ife-di' into: the 'Supra sensory', 'Human', and 'Thing' categories.¹⁵ At the top of the supra sensory category is 'Chineke'. "He is the unseen who possesses all beings, the creator who creates being."¹⁶ In addition, Edeh listed 'Ndi-Muo' (the unseen) as the second level in the supra sensory category. They are the inhabitants of 'Ani-Muo' (land of the spirits). Constant communication goes on between the occupants of the two worlds.

On the 'Human category', Edeh subdivided it into: 'ndi-di-ndu' (the living) and 'ndi-nwuru-anwu' (the dead).¹⁷ According to him, every living human being is believed to belong to the culture with its unified form of human behavior such as thought, speech, action, and artifacts that are passed down to succeeding generations. The Igbo live in a life community that is characterized by an infinite active and alive culture of interaction. Relationship is on a personal human basis as distinguished from the predominantly impersonal relationship existing in today's urban cities. This follows that, for Edeh, the Igbo see death not as an end, but as a transition from the visible to the invisible world. In his words, "when a person dies, he lives the material world and enters the immaterial world which is imperceptible to the senses."¹⁸ He starts to live a new life in 'Ani-Muo', the world of the ancestors. From the invisible world, the ancestors are able to exercise some influence on the activities of the living. From here also, they come back to the physical world and are born again that is reincarnation.

Having dealt with the human category in different parts of his publication *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, Edeh continued with 'Thing' category which he divided into two major groupings:

* 'Anu'- These are animals different from human beings and inanimate beings.

* 'Ife-nkiti'- They include all inanimate entities subdivided into: 'Ife-nkiti-nwelu-ndu' (ordinary things that have life) i.e. vegetative beings, and 'Ife-nkiti-enwero-ndu' (ordinary things that have no life) i.e. minerals.

2.4. Pantaleon Osondu Iroegbu (1951-2006)

In his publication, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, Iroegbu dedicated the 24th chapter to the development of his 'Uwa' ontology, which is a synthesis of his perception of reality. For him, "Uwa defines being. It summarizes being and beings for me...it

en-globes all beings in the bosom of Uwa...whatever is, insofar as it is, is Uwa. Uwa is reality and reality is Uwa."¹⁹

To deepen his search, he studied the meaning of 'Uwa'. Translated from the Igbo language to the English language, it simply means World.

More so, he developed fifteen connotations of 'Uwa'. First as life; as in when the Igbo says 'uwa m' (my world) or 'uwa m aburo uwa gi' (my world is not your world); in all these, it means life. As cosmos; as in when the Igbo says 'elu uwa' (surface of the earth). As field of action, as when the Igbo says 'uwa ndi nta.' (the world of hunters). As space and time, as in 'uwa mbu ka mma' (the old and ancient world is better than ours). As destiny, as in the Igbo word, 'uwa oma' (good destiny). As condition, as in 'uwa afufu' (world of difficulties). As tragedy, as in 'uwa ike' (tragic life). As fate, as in 'uwaojoo' (bad world). As age limit, as in 'uwa umuaka' (children's world). As nature, as in 'uwa osisi' (the world of trees and rivers). As nation, as in 'uwa anyi na ha mekoro ihe' (the world [people] we had dealings with).²⁰ As person, as in 'uwa Igbo' (people of Igbo). As earth, the globe, as in 'uwa nile' (the whole world). And finally as totality; in this case, whatever is, insofar as it exists, is 'Uwa'.

What is more, Iroegbu further divides the world into six zones: the cosmos, where "we human beings live and die."²¹ The divine world, the world of 'Chukwu', the Supreme Being. Godian-world of powerful spirits - 'Ala', 'Amadioha'²² etc. The Good-spirit world, the world of "ancestors who have graduated into spirits because of the loss of living memories and concrete kith and kin relationships with families."²³ Bad spirit world, where people who were evil in the world live; those who cannot reincarnate. Ancestral world, that is, where the ancestors live. However, he argued that these six zones of the world are highly inter-related with the cosmos, the world of the human beings as the centre. Furthermore, "the meta-empirical geography of the zonal existence of the worlds has no fixed boundaries. They co-penetrate each other's world zones."²⁴

2.5 Bartholomew Abanuka (1947-)

In his publication, *A New Essay in African Philosophy*, Abanuka posited that, in accounting for what reality is, "all that is perceptible or conceivable on the basis of human experience of the universe is put into consideration."²⁵ In this connection, the least statement one can make about that which is said to be real is that it is. In other words, in talking about the real, one is saying that there is at least one thing which is.

To this end, he considered reality as a whole. "When we talk about the whole of reality or reality as a whole, we do not mean an addition or sum total of all the individual or concrete things that are. The whole of reality includes all the particular things that are said to be and the origin or source of these particular things."²⁶ This implies that Abanuka sees reality as one (whole), who's only opposition is nothing or nothingness. For him, this wholeness does not imply the calculative summary of all the individual things that are or exist; rather, it includes all the particular things which the human mind and senses understand as being in existence, including their source or origin. In other words, for Abanuka, reality as a

whole is the totality of particular things which are or exist and their ultimate support or origin.

Moreover, Abanuka posited a word in Igbo, in juxtaposition to the conception for the English word 'real'. This he referred to as 'Chi'. He thus averred that:

If Metaphysics is the basic philosophical discipline, insofar as it describes the general characteristics of reality as a whole, then the fundamental philosophical idea we have attained, must be the idea of the subject matter of Metaphysics. In Igbo Metaphysics, the idea of 'Chi' corresponds to the idea of 'being or real'.²⁷

Thus, for Abanuka, although 'Chi' could be an enigmatic word in Igbo land, it corresponds to real or being; it is what is common to everything that is or that can be conceived, without exception.²⁸

2.6. Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuwegwu (1965-)

Onwuatuwegwu, articulated his idea on the understanding of Igbo ontology in his publication, *The Concept of Reincarnation in Igbo Ontology*. He agrees with Abanuka on the conception of reality as holistic. Thus, he posited that, "ndi Igbo ontologically have a unitary concept of reality. Hence, existence is conceived as a unified whole."²⁹ Hence, this conception of reality finds inspiration in the Igbo expression 'Uwa di ogbu' (Reality is holistic).³⁰ However, departing from the thoughts of Abanuka, he considered the whole of reality as consisting of three levels of existence. This he enumerated thus: the Spiritual or Ontological level, the Ancestral level, and the Human level. The ontological level as he postulated consists of transcendent beings (God- 'Chukwu' the Supreme Being, the deities, the 'alusi' and other spirits including the human spirits- 'ndi mmuo'). To this end, quoting Asouzu, he opined that: "the Supreme Being, 'Chukwu' is undoubtedly the ultimate in the hierarchy of supernatural forces and spirits...various other lower spirits and forces are at the service of this supreme spiritual entity."³¹

Furthermore, he considered the Human level as "the level of human beings which must be understood from the viewpoint of families and communities; including animals, trees and minerals."³² While on the Ancestral level, he posited that it is the level of the living dead, the heroes of the human societies- 'ndiichie' (the saints). Therefore, this classification in the levels of existence according to him is reserved for all those who through their deeds and actions, lead a worthy life while alive, and transcended the Human level of existence at the point of death; and are now being venerated by the people they left behind.

Going further, Onwuatuwegwu argued that Igbo notion of the universe is anthropocentric in nature. In other words, everything revolves around man, even the divine.³³ However, despite this anthropocentric view of the universe, the Igbo still hold tenaciously to the supremacy of the Supreme Being who makes him that which he is. This position finds inspiration in the Igbo expression about God as 'Onye nwe ndu' or 'Onwe ndu' (the source and the summit of life).³⁴ Thus, this is where he converges with Abanuka in his postulation that the conception of reality is understood as the totality of all that exists or can be conceived including their ultimate support or origin (which he refers to as God- 'Chukwu').

In sum, the views of some contemporary thinkers, presented in this paper, revolves around the idea that Africa as well as Igbo cosmologic-ontological structure, consists of different levels of reality. These categories of reality according to them includes the Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, man, animals, plants, and non-living objects. The Supreme Being is the creator of all that is, and man is the crown of creation.

3. The Scope of Reality in Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological notion

Reality is 'that which is.' The Igbo call it 'ife-dinu.' It is known as the 'real,' insofar as it presents itself as an existing thing. But experience is variable and changing, and therefore temporal. Thus, the Igbo admit the past and present alongside the future. The modes of being proper to the past and the future are connected with the present; for the past was once the present and the future will certainly become the present. Thus, 'Being' in the sense of the real, therefore, extends not only to what is at the moment of actual experience but also to what 'really has been' or what 'really will be.'

4. The Igbo Cosmological notion

The Igbo believes in the existence of two worlds—physical and metaphysical, or sensible and supra-sensible,³⁵ or visible and invisible worlds. Among the Igbo "there is no sharp dividing line between the sacred and the secular...material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the later."³⁶ In the Igbo conceptual structure of the world, therefore, the universe is bifurcated into two and regarded as—the spiritual and the physical worlds. In addition, these two worlds interpenetrate intermingle and intertwine with each other and, therefore, are considered as one unbreakable interacting life.

Analytically, the Igbo cosmos is based on the theory of cosmic balance.³⁷ The theory emphasizes that every single existent being in the world has a double. The Igbo world, therefore, is the world of the opposites. V.C. Uchendu alluded to these two worlds thus:

...the Igbo world is a world peopled by the visible and invisible forces, by the living, the dead, and those unborn. It is a world in which all these interact, affecting and modifying behavior, a world that is delicately balanced between opposing forces, each motivated by its self-interest; a world whose survival demands a form of co-operation among its members, although that co-operation may be minimal and even hostile in character. It is a world in which others can be manipulated for the sake of individual status advancement, the goal of Igbo life.³⁸

On the other hand, T.U. Nwala advances the dual nature of the Igbo universe. He writes: "the universe is basically structured into two main inter-related parts according to Igbo traditional ideas: (a) Elu-igwe- Sky, (b) Elu-uwa- the Earth (also called Ala). These two are believed to be equal in extension. Apart from this, there are two realms or borders (or spheres) of existence: (a) Ala-Mmuo- the

spirit world or supernatural order, (b) Ala-Mmadu- the human world or visible order.”³⁹ Thus, in the Igbo world, every particular event plays out either in the physical realm (the visible human world) or the supernatural/metaphysical realm (the invisible world of the spirits).

4.1. The Invisible World (Ala-Mmuo)

This world is not perceptible to the senses. It is a spiritual world. The inhabitants of the invisible world include: ‘Chukwu/Chi-Ukwu’ (The great Chi) who is also the creator of both worlds; the deities, spirits, and ancestors. It is believed that the spiritual part of material things exist in this world.

Diviners (DibiaAfa), priests (ndi Ezemmuo), and elders (ndi Okenye) claim to make frequent visits to ‘Ala-Mmuo’ and that they maintain constant communication with the inhabitants of the spirit world. Some spirits are symbolized in masquerades. When there is a difficult problem or the people want a special favor from the deities, messages of appeal are sent to the inhabitants of the spirit world through native doctors (ndi dibia). The intentions or instructions of the deities are also communicated to the people through the ‘Dibia.’

According to an orally conducted interview on this subject matter, the respondent Agadimma Ugwu from Orba (a suburb of Nsukka) in Enugu State avers that the existence of ‘AlaMmuo’ is beyond doubt. He felt that skeptics may claim that ‘AlaMmuo’ exists only in the imagination of those who conceive it and not really in reality. To buttress his argument, therefore, he told a story of a now aging woman who had a withered left hand in her previous life and who had died and after some time, reincarnated into the physical world with the same physical characteristics as she had them before her death. She must have stayed somewhere before returning to the physical world; thus, that place is no other than the spiritual world.

Emeka Obuna, another respondent from Eha-Alumona also in the Nsukka area of Enugu State, believes that the spirit world exists but that it is beyond the uninitiated. He affirmed that through initiation, one acquires the special faculties which enable ‘ndi Dibia’ to comprehend the spirit world. The knowledge of ‘AlaMmuo’ is achieved through mystical intuition he concluded.

In the light of the above submissions, the Igbo knowledge about the existence of the spirit world derives from their religious belief that the soul continues to exist after physical death. Death is not the end of life,⁴⁰ but a logical process in the transition from the physical to the spiritual mode of existence.

4.2. The Visible World (Elu-Uwa)

‘Uwa’ or ‘Elu-Uwa’ is the physical world perceptible to the human senses of touch, sight, feeling, smell, taste, and hearing. In it are found human beings, animals, plants, and natural objects. Some writers like Nwala claim that spirits exist in shadowy bodily form in the physical world and that they can “assume different shapes like man, animal, plant or inanimate objects.”⁴¹ Mbiti also assert that people report having seen spirits in ponds, caves, groves, mountains or outside their villages³⁴ “dancing, singing, herding cattle, working in the fields or nursing their children.”⁴²

Based on this notion, the physical world consists of ‘Elu-igwe’ (sky) and ‘Elu-Uwa’ (Earth). ‘Elu-igwe’ contains the Sun (Anyanwu), the Moon (Onwa), and the Stars (Kpakpando); and a huge container from which we receive occasional supply of rain fall. The deities ‘Kamanu’ or ‘Amadioha’ (Thunder deity) and ‘Anyanwu’ (Sun deity), make their presence felt in ‘Elu-igwe’ from where they perform their ministerial functions in ‘Elu-Uwa’, either to punish or reward men according to their deeds.⁴³

‘Elu-Uwa’ embraces the earth (Ala), seas and rivers (Osimiri), mountains and hills (Ugwu), valleys (Ndagwurugwu), and caves. Man, animals, plants, and inanimate objects are the principle occupants of ‘Elu-Uwa.’ There are as well deities responsible to God for the activities that go on in ‘Elu-Uwa.’ These deities are— ‘Ala’ (The Earth goddess) who acts as custodian and guardian of morality, productivity, and fertility. Others are ‘Njoku’, ‘Ahiajoku’, ‘Imo’, and ‘Idemili.’⁴⁴

5. Evaluation and Conclusion

5.1. Evaluation

Arguably, in contradistinction to the duality of reality in Igbo cosmologic-ontological theory of is the contrary Marxists proposal of one world-view. Around the 19th century, a man named Karl Marx emerged on the scene of Philosophical inquiry and began to teach the existence of only one world. Consequently, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels with their dialectical materialistic theory birthed a form of belief known as theoretical atheism, whose proponents do not stopped at their assertion that God is nonexistent through their declaration that the only really real is the material, but went further explicates in their argumentation, schemes, and systems to adamantly oppose any theistic assumption.

Nevertheless, there are Igbo fundamental assumptions regarding the physical and spiritual realms, their positions, and the functions they play in them. These assumptions have contributed in informing the way Igbo should live their lives having in mind that the physical world as it appears to them is not the ultimate end of man’s existence.

5.2. Conclusion

Using the evaluative, analytic, historical, and critical research methods, this research work impliedly has to some extent succeeded in advancing the thesis that the conception of reality in Igbo cosmologic-ontological structure is popularly dual in nature; however, notwithstanding this popular view, there is a form of interaction or unity between these two categories in such a way that none is considered in isolation of the other. This work, therefore, has accomplished its aim of contributing to knowledge and scholarship by provoking more serious thought on this subject and serving as a meaningful point of reference for anyone who wishes to carry out further researches on the subject.

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