

IGBO RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: AN APPRASAL

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Abstract

Environmental conservation has been an everyday discussion in the present day scholarship. This is because urbanization, modernization, globalization and development have affected the environment, so much so that little or no regard is presently given to it. This neglect so witnessed has also affected human beings that are occupant of the environment. Using secondary source of data collection, this research sheds light on how The Igbo belief system, practice and worldview contribute in preserving the environment, especially in the south eastern part of Nigeria, comprising Enugu state, Imo state, Anambra state, and Abia state. Through a qualitative analysis and case study, the research explores the ethical principles in The Igbo religious culture that foster a holistic understanding of nature and promote sustainable resource management. This research uses ethnographic approach and employs the theories of environmental ethics and cultural ecology. It concludes that has some elements that contribute in conserving the environment and the modern environmental approach should access these elements in ensuring their application in order to achieve eco-friendly environment. The research therefore recommends that caution should be taken in the use of the environment in order to help in its preservation.

Keywords: Exploring, Role, African Traditional Religion, Promoting, Environmental Conservation, South East Nigeria

Introduction

Environmental degradation coupled with daily human activities, are part of the causes of many disasters like landslide, flooding, fire, desertification and other forms of accident have been on the front burner globally. Srinivas (2015) opines that some environmental conditions like deforestation have worsened the situation thereby leading to flooding and water contamination. However, long before the advent of western education and introduction of modern forms of natural resource conservation and management across South-East was well developed mechanism for resource management and environmental sustainability. The Igbo consider themselves connected with their biophysical environment in a web of spiritual relationship. According to Igbokwe and Omeire (2020), they venerate specific plants, animals, or even consider some as their ancestors. Their deep understanding and strong affinity to nature has helped them develop a repertoire of knowledge on biodiversity, conservation systems and the diverse ways in which resources can be managed to bring about sustainability.

In The Igbo traditional worldview, the environment is made up of two complementary worlds, namely the visible and the invisible world. Hannah (2001) confirms that these worlds of reality inhabited by beings that have the powers of affecting one another. The heaven and the underworld make up the invisible world or environment while the earth makes up the visible environment. The invisible world is the abode of the deities, spirits, ancestors and God. Ugwu (2004) affirms that, the Supreme Being lives in the sky and has full control over what happens in the whole universe. The invisible powers co-habit the earth with men. Thus man is at the center of the spheres of reality. The visible world depends much on the invisible world and the powers there in for sustainability. The invisible world also depends on the visible world for their recognition and manifestation. There is a symbolic relationship between the two worlds. Man is to obey all the rules that enhance and foster symbolic relationship between him and other creatures which though, lower but have powers capable of injuring him. Igbo religious culture and its approach to the environment reveal the existence of creation, myth, totems and taboos. Ituma (2013) presented that, these are principles through which the African concept of an approach to the environment would better be understood. The whole earth and its inhabitants were created by the Supreme Being. Muhammad (2002) explains further that, the mass bodies of water-sea, rivers, streams, springs and all living things in them were created by God. The mountains, valleys and plants are all creatures of God. They also possess souls which give

them their powers. Thus, they are not ordinary creation but veritable abode and source of power. Man is the prime of all creation since he is the only culture-bearing animal.

Despite the numerous international treaties and conventions, policies, laws and Acts enacted by countries across the world aimed at promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability however, the fact remains that much have to be done in order to save our planet from the imminent catastrophe. It is, therefore, from this background that this work discusses the place of African traditional religion in the preserving the environment. However, exploring the role of Igbo religious culture in promoting environmental conservation in south east Nigeria, is necessary. For the purpose of this research, the Igboland in Eastern Nigeria is the study area for this research, given that the entirety of the African will be an area too wide to be captured in this research. However, because of the ideological relationships in Africa, an understanding of the Igbo would advance a better understanding of the African perspective.

Igbo religious culture at a Glance

Religion is natural in man and this account for the numerous religions invented by different people across the globe over time out of man's natural quest to discover the supernatural ruling power with a view to establishing a relationship with him. In this regard, we talk of Buddhism as a religion that started with Buddha, Taoism as a Chinese religion, Islam as an Arabic religion, Christianity as a religion that started in the Roman world and so on a list of such religions is interminable. Africans also have their own religion and this is called African traditional religion. Awolalu (1976) defines African traditional religion as:

It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet, it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive; yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old. (p. 275).

This religion had been in existence from time immemorial and is still being adhered to today by many Africans. Ekwunife (1990) in a similar way defines African Traditional Religion as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities. (p. 1).

From the above concept, Igbo religion means those beliefs, customs or ways of doing things that have existed for a long time amongst the Igbo people. The traditional religion in this sense is that, it is an aboriginal and fundamental thing which is handed down from one generation to another generation and is still practiced by the Igbo people today. It is the thing that connects the people more than anything else with their past including their fears and hopes. It is a religion that originated from the peoples' environment and their soil. It was neither preached to them nor import from outside to them. It evolved from their ecosystem, that is to say that Africans were not converted into it rather they were born into it. Thus the word traditional serves the purpose distinguishing African religion from any other religion that has been brought to Africa through the missionaries Christian religion or Islamic propagation.

Decline of Igbo Traditional Religious Practice in Igbo Society

The decline of traditional religious practice in Igbo society is as a result of decline in eco spirituality in the area. One of the reasons for this decline is the effect of land degradation on the ecology. According to Udaya (2019), land degradation leads to soil erosion and food shortages, desertification, atmospheric contamination and loss of biodiversity. Biodiversity is the variety of life and its processes which involves all life forms like fungi, protozoa, bacteria and mammals. The loss of biodiversity results mainly from the destruction of habitats by felling down trees, clearing the grounds and the pollution of water bodies. Deforestation leads to the shortage of arable plants and extinction of medicinal herbs and animals. It causes greenhouse gas emission by causing the release of carbon store held in the soil. Apart from that it reduces the level of oxygen that is released during photosynthesis. Insufficient oxygen in the atmosphere leads to health hazards for living organism because it causes difficulty in respiration (Nwosu, 2013).

These ecological problems indicated above affect religious practice in Igbo land. This occurs because when the ecological features are distorted, they affect the practice of religion among the people. Sharing this opinion, Gbenda (2010) opined that religion connects all human beings a divine or numinous presence as well as all other biotic and abiotic members of the broader earth community in a mutual union and into an exulted mystery. In other words Udaya and Adibe (2020) states that nothing curviness by itself in nature for everything is interconnected and interdependent, we humans are not separate from or above nature but part of an interconnected community of plants, animals rivers, mountains of African traditional Religion as an entity has been very rapid in the recent past generations. Furthermore, Udaya and Adibe (2020) reveal that, this rapid decline has brought about consequent ecological religious practice in Igbo Society has both primary and secondary effects. Primarily this decline has created a loss of the sense of the sacred. Coming from this loss of the sense of the sacred is a consequence which forms the second primary effect. The second primary effect is the uninhibited predisposition to environmental over exploitation. The secondary effects are those resulting from the primary effects as mentioned above under the effect of environmental degradation.

Some Effect of Human Activities on Environment

One major problem the world is facing today is the environmental degradation. The biblical order to suppress the earth is what mankind has completely acknowledged. Forests and fields are being converted completely into buildings. The earth dynamism exchange systems have been changed into the harmful condition of biodiversity, toxication of the environment, and contaminable soil and water systems of the world. In the words of Ekpenyong (2021):

Ecologists in their numbers have put the blame on Christian religion as the very serious cause of the ecological wreckage. Humankind has misconstrued the authority to subdue and have power over the earth as a theological backup used for ecological destruction (p. 138).

Affirming the assertion, Bebia (2011) posits thus:

The world is faced with an unprecedented loss of biodiversity as we experience the largest wave of extinction, and this threatens to undermine environmental, economic and social goals. The impact of human ecological footprints on the planet has culminated in climate change with its concomitant global warming which have altered the geophysical support systems of the world (p. 130).

This means that the impact of global environmental catastrophe is a brother to no adherent of any religion as its effect is felt by all. Since the global environmental catastrophe is a friend to no religion, it is the conviction of this work therefore that as a matter of urgency, the world religious and spiritual traditions should take immediate action to protect the biodiversity with their unusual and tremendous power to persuade and to inculcate in their adherents' behaviour, an attitude that can serve as a tool to protect biodiversity. If this is done, the resultant effect will be that it will fast-track the progression in the direction of a safer and better world as the adherents of each religion will encourage one another in the task of becoming aware of and carefully look out for new methods or systems that can be used to advocate and foster nature conservation for global environmental sustainability.

According to Ekpenyong (2013), human activities have unchangingly exerted very large or great impact on the environment, resulting in the depletion of both biological species and climate change. Becoming a threat to life on this environment as well as to the nature itself, it is our development processes and technological practices. Commenting on this threat to life, Ignacimuthu (2010) writes thus:

The threat is constituted by large-scale devastation of the environment, damage to water, air and soil, and to genetic diversity; by destruction of rain forests, extensive soil erosion and desertification, by massive use of pesticides, insecticides and herbicides which deplete and poison the soil, by the squander and destruction of sea resources, mangrove swamps and coral reefs, by anarchic and profligate industrial production and overconsumption as well as overuse and waste of nature's scarce and non-renewable treasures; by the ambiguities of nuclear technology, the horrors of nuclear weaponry and the hazards of radioactive waste (p. 22).

In explaining the above Ekpenyong (2021), these environmental crises caused by human activities are many times depicted in terms of the depletion of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, acid rains, loss of biodiversity, death of rivers and lakes, extinction of species, diseases and death from chemically and radioactively contaminated food, water and air, extinction of water resources, global warming, and denuding of rain forests. There is no doubt that today environment is quite different from what our environment was twenty or thirty years ago. And it is in this that species of both plants and animals go into extinction and never to be recovered. The rate of loss at which this happens is forecast able to go faster 10 fold by 2050. According to Bebia (2011) "the millennium Ecosystem

Assessment Report of United Nation released in January 2006 attests that many mammals and plants population have declined in numbers, geographical spread or both” (p. 130). As a result of this, human activities and their results on the earth have hastened loss in species of both in type and number, in environmental degradation and climatic change just to mention a few.

The Igbo religious and Environmental Conservation

Role of Totems and Taboos in Environment Conservation

Taboos are put in place to safeguard the earth. Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (1990) are of the opinion that “taboo are central to the socialization process, and thus ensure public peace, unity and stability of the society” (p. 68). Taboo is prohibition against an item, person, or type of behaviour. In religious taboos, the forbidden item is believed to be unclean or sacred, and the taboo is imposed for protection against the item's power. According to Udezo and Nweze(2012), violation of these prohibitions is considered moral, spiritual and social pollution of the land, requiring appropriate ritual for the purification of the offender and the community in order to appease the Earth goddess. This violation is regarded as abomination (Aruor NsoAla) and could bring the wrath of the Earth Goddess upon the offenders and the punishment for such mishaps ranged from sudden death, famine, pestilence, and poor harvest as well as loss of property to the inability to have children and defeat in war. In the Igbo traditional society taboos were held in high esteem for the sake of preserving the land. Contravening any of them is regarded as abomination (nsoani). According to Arinze (1974):

Abomination in the first place embraces serious personal and moral crimes according to Igbo morality. Although there are local variations, these acts are generally regarded as such: patricide, incest, stealing of yams and sheep, bestiality, willful abortion, pregnancy within a year of husband's death, suicide by hanging and the killing of sacred animals. Secondly, abomination includes those things which the Igbo consider abnormal or unnatural: giving birth to twins (ejima), a person dying without anyone to attend him (Ikpuiru), pounding of the pestle on the ground instead of in the mortar while pounding fou-fou even if by mistake (isuodudun'ani), a woman climbing a palm tree, abnormal presentation in the birth of a baby (Ijiokpaputauwa), a child cutting the upper teeth first (nnwaeze-enu) and fighting against masquerade (mmuo, mmanwu). Thirdly, certain abnormal behaviour on the part of some animals also calls for expiratory sacrifice. Thus if a dog or a fowl crosses a corpse, if a dog brings forth only one whelp, if a fowl lays only one egg, or if a goat brings forth its young without anyone to attend it (ewuimun'elili) (pp.34-35).

In contrast, some of these taboos are no longer taken serious because of the influence of Christianity on the entire system of human existence. For instance the birth of twins is now being celebrated in most part of the world including Africa where it used to be a taboo. Taboos were used to educate and thereby restrict human beings in their social interactions, relationships to animals, nature, periods of the year, decorum of speech and ritual process. These taboos are not just there but they are meant to be observed by every member of any community in Igboland to ensure the preservation of the land.

Veneration of the Earth Goddess

The emergence of the veneration of “earth goddess” and the mythology related to it can be seen in many forms in many of the ancient tribes and societies including Africa. Udezo and Nweze(2012) reveal that some of the examples are the Aztecs who worshiped goddess Tlalteuctli, the Greek who worshiped Goddess Demeter and the ancient tribes of the northern Germany who worshiped the Germanic tribal goddess Ertha and Igbo who venerate Ala. These are just few examples to name but the veneration of earth goddess was prominent phenomenon in most of the ancient societies. The goddess cult in the form of nature's manifestations has seen a great revival in the modern times. Khali (2008) observed that the concepts of earth goddess, mother goddess and the triple goddess are actually helping us to understand the universal truth how we are in fact connected to nature. The earth goddess and mother goddess manifestation makes us aware about the absolute power of nature. The Igbo people regard Supernatural Being as being more powerful than Earth Goddess but the earth goddess has a direct intervention in the human affairs. This gave rise to the worship of earth goddess (Ala) which was not only universal among Igbo people but also governed the people and their actions in the more perceptible and pervasive ways. Iwe (1979) states that Ala (Anior Ana) is the most common divinity in Igboland (p.18). It is therefore generally the arch-divinity of every locality. It is regarded as the earth goddess of fertility and the custodian of public morality in co-operation with the spirit of our departed and venerable ancestors. The earth goddess is that divinity which is neither Igwe, nor even Chukwu, but Ala, the goddess of the earth. She was the one deity which no man or woman and no community could afford to offend, much less discard. Breaches of public morality or social prohibitions and taboos (nsoala) such as stealing from the barn, homicide, incest, infidelity, woman climbing the palm tree and wrestling her husband down in a fight are all considered offences against the earth (Ala). Ilogu (1974) itemized about twenty-four “abominations” or ethical and social prohibitions and taboos of Igbo moral code (p.34). The

Earth Goddess is held sacred and highly venerated because of her role in the affairs of humanity especially in preserving the land. Preservation of the land is of great interest to the supernatural being. The earth spirit is the most important spirit after Chukwu. Arinze (1970) opined that, “she is the great mother spirit, the queen of the underworld, the owner of men, and the custodian of public morality in conjunction with ancestors” (p. 15). It is a way of ensuring that men are not left to undergo suffering in the world. In African traditional religion, the earth goddess is seen as the preserver of the land and its inhabitants. The Earth goddess is regarded as the goddess of fertility to men, animals and crops. The Earth goddess ensures the sanctity of the earth.

Maintenance of Land Sacrilege

Religion has also helped in the preservation of land, parts of land are declared sacred. Sacred means that which is holy or set apart for religious usage. Ugwu (2002) is of the opinion that “in most religions, a distinction is made between the sacred or holy and the profane or ordinary states. Most communities in the world divide their lands into two: the sacred and profane lands. The sacred lands are set aside for religious purposes whereas human beings use the profane lands for non-religious purpose” (p.28). Almost all the religions of the world have their sacred objects usually kept in well-designated places for the worshippers to see and use them. The presence of these objects makes that place sacred. Every building for religious purpose is said to be sacred, such buildings are usually dedicated for religious usage. For instance, Christianity has its most activities in the church building or temple. Moslems normally use mosque for religious activities. In African Traditional Religion, Udezo and Nweze(2012) document that shrines are founded in sacred places. The lands where these sacred buildings are situated are tagged sacred lands. No individual community is allowed to tamper with any of them without performing the necessary sacrifices to appease the Spirit usually the Earth goddess in charge of the land. If this is defiled, the wrath of the deity would descend on the people who have done the unholy act. The people of the community for whatever reason for donating the land see it as a sacrifice to the earth goddess. Members of the community and any other persons are restrained from having anything done in the said land. They are not allowed to farm on it. Hunting in such land that has stick forest is strictly prohibited. People usually use theirs as refuge because the deity in such land harbors those that ran into the land for protection. Some abandoned children are usually kept in such land for protection.

On the other hand, the advent of Christianity in Igboland in 1857 has brought some changes in these practices in respect to land preservation. According to Udezo and Nweze (2012), Christians especially the Anglicans as contained in the liturgy of the church usually at the beginning of the planting season organize a service for rogation. Rogation means asking, it is the time when the farmer goes round his farm, accompanied by the clergy and villagers, ask God's blessings on the weather, the growing crops and the whole agricultural industries. This prayer is needed because most of the activities in the agricultural industry are performed on the land. Hence, the land is prayerfully committed into the hands of God for more favours for bumper harvest. There are many churches in many parts of Igboland. Udezo and Nweze (2012) enunciate that the traditional methods of preserving the sanctity or purity of the land are giving way to new expression of Christianity. Some communities now organize prayer meetings for the good of the land. Some enthusiastic and zealous Christians have cleared some sacred bushes for religious purposes. Some town unions have hewn down large economic trees in many erstwhile fearful “evil forest” used them in building of town markets, community schools and other modern development projects. Udezo and Nweze(2012) reveals that, there is regular prayers of dedication of the land at the beginning of every year - thus making the land pure and clean them for God's blessings to thrive. We do not have “bad bush” or “evil forest” any more. Evil forest used to be the place where the people suffered from despicable diseases like leprosy, dropsy, elephantiasis, suicidal case and women who died in labour, etc were thrown. These groves have been cleared and often turned into play ground for the youths. The issue is that both Igbo traditional religion and Christianity should dialogue the best ways of land preservation to ensure that none of them is relegated to the background. Above the land preservation should be the concern of every in Igboland to be assured of a conducive environment both spiritually and physically.

Observance of Religious Rituals and Festivals

The significance of public and collective religious rituals and festivals is not far-fetched. Udezo and Nweze(2012) state that, during the religious festivals and rituals, members of the whole community gather together to offer prayers for the general well-being of the people. For instance, Ifejiokuis a period the yam spirit receives his special cult before and after the planting season. Iwaji(lit. the breaking of the yam) marks the beginning of the Ifejioku. The crops are offered to the spirits through the earth goddess. Kalu (1979) presents the prayer said during Iwaji: The ritual master cuts one new yam tuber into four pieces, at the same time praying. New Yam of this year, we are cutting you this day, we are slicing you into four pieces, we have seen how whitish you are. The yam deity, run come Bless this yam, may one tuber become four in the barn of every one of us. Ancestors behold the new yam, share the eating with us (p. 90).

These yams as well as all the farming implements are laid before the Ifejiokushrine. This feast inaugurates officially the eating of new yam for the year. Without it, the Earth goddess cannot assure bumper harvest the following planting season. Arinze (1974) quoting Meek, said, "Not only is it an offence to eat new yams before the performance of the rites, but it is also an offence to introduce new yams from another town, especially in Awgu Division" (p.86).

Observance of Taboos

In Igbo land taboos are known as "Nsuala or Aru". Taboos are believed to have been handed down from the earth goddess (Ala) from an unknown time. Like all other mores, they originated from unwritten laws. These laws and prohibitions are against moral and religious excesses in the society. The violation of taboo is seen as pollution in Igbo society and it usually attracts punishment or some sort of ceremonial purification. The rites for removal of pollutions are known as ikwaala is seen as a form of remediation. Mairi (1998) posit that taboo is anything which is forbidden or disapproved of for religious reasons or by social customs. Hornby (1974) sees taboo as "... prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated or unclean and therefore is considered dangerous." For Igbokwe and Omeire (2020), "Taboo has its source essentially in the fear of the unknown, the unusual and abnormal contact in human pattern" (p. 3149). In traditional Igbo society, the ancestors sought for the meaning and essence of life, peace, order and existence, and how checks and restrictions will be placed on man thus taboos were introduced. Igbo taboo system derives its footing from morality, carefulness, veracity, productivity and reverence to God; thereby promoting stability, cohesion and progress in the society (Igbokwe and Omeire (2020). In this section, we shall highlight some aspect of taboos in Igbo land that help in environmental protection.

Conclusion

The exploration of the role of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in promoting environmental conservation in South East Nigeria reveals a symbiotic relationship between cultural beliefs and ecological stewardship. ATR, with its inherent reverence for nature and spiritual interconnectedness, has historically fostered a respect for the environment that contemporary conservation efforts can learn from and integrate. Sacred groves, totemic species, and ritual practices all illustrate how ATR intrinsically values biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources. These traditional beliefs and practices emphasize the moral and spiritual responsibility of individuals and communities towards their natural surroundings. By recognizing and integrating these indigenous knowledge systems, modern environmental conservation programs can enhance their effectiveness and cultural relevance. This integration fosters a holistic approach that respects and utilizes local traditions while addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

Furthermore, the participatory nature of ATR-based conservation practices can empower local communities, ensuring that conservation efforts are both sustainable and inclusive. By involving community elders, religious leaders, and other stakeholders who hold traditional ecological knowledge, conservation strategies can benefit from a wealth of practical experience and cultural insight. The role of African Traditional Religion in promoting environmental conservation in South East Nigeria underscores the importance of cultural context in ecological stewardship. Embracing these traditional practices not only preserves the environment but also reinforces cultural heritage and community cohesion. The synergy between ATR and modern conservation efforts offers a promising pathway towards achieving sustainable environmental management in the region.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations to schools, church; traditionalist, workers, non-governmental organizations and government which if adopted can be useful in curbing the challenges of environmental conservation:

- i. Government should involve communities in the conservation and management of natural resources.
- ii. All institutions should be involved in conservation and management of natural resources.
- iii. Unemployed youths should be employed and engage in the conservation and management of the natural resources, payments should be based on performance on the field. Each should be given a portion to manage effectively and necessary requirements such as seedlings, water, manure, and barbed wire, adequately and regularly provided.
- iv. There should be thorough sensitization of rural communities on environmental stewardship and incentives attached.
- v. Environmental education should be included in the schools' curriculums right from the primary schools to tertiary levels.

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