
Ritual in Igbo Tradition and Sustainable Environment

Okwor, Christopher O. (PhD)* – corresponding author & Okoli, Anuli B. (PhD)**

Department of Religion & Cultural Studies University of Nigeria, Nsukka. *

Department of Religion & Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka**

E-mail: christopher.okwor@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

The study attempts to explore the relevance of rituals in Igbo tradition towards sustaining the environment in Igboland. It further argues that ritual elements embedded in Igbo attitude to the environment can be used in the efforts at mitigating the current crisis in the environment. Using Interpretive Retrieval method, the paper establishes that the idea of Igbo worldview, relationship between ritual and environment, ritual activities involving animate and inanimate objects, natural objects and phenomenon, cycles of nature and agricultural activities can be used to guide human attitudes and relationships with the environment. The paper found that ritual underlies most aspects of traditional Igbo beliefs and practices, and contributed significantly to sustainable environment in traditional Igbo society. Its practical application to relationships with nature in contemporary society will help in checking anthropogenic activities responsible for the degradation in the environment.

Key words: Ritual, Igbo tradition, Environment, Sustainable environment, Ecological.

Introduction

Indigenous tradition is replete with beliefs and practices woven around maintaining the intricate web of relationships in the environment. Earlier studies on African traditional religion such as those conducted by Parrinder (1962), Mbiti (1969), Arinze (1970), Idowu (1973), Kalu (1978), Awolalu & Dopamu (1979), Ikenga-Metuh (1987), Onunwa (1990) to mention but a few, have alluded to the relationship between religion and environment. These scholars, while highlighting the social, religious, aesthetic and spiritual values of indigenous traditions, paid significant attention to their ethical values which underpin human-earth relationship. However, in the wake of the current global ecological crisis threatening human existence, there have been sustained discussions by scholars of religion, on the relevance of religion to sustainable environment. Gbenda (2010, p.32), argues that this development, has stimulated scholars of religion to embark upon a process of retrieving, re-evaluating, reconstructing and adapting religious traditions in the light of the growing concern for the crisis in the environment. The entire process has opened up the field of religious studies to a broader understanding and highlighting of the relationship between religion and environment.

Fortunately, as nature is being valued from various religious traditions, indigenous traditions are replete with elements that clearly express human understanding and relationship with the environment long before the

current crisis. Ritual is a significant element that underpins religious beliefs and practices in Africa. It is somewhat in a mutual relationship with the environment. On one hand, ritual objects are drawn from the environment. While on the other hand, ritual helps in eliciting the religious sentiments as they impinge on man's relationship with, and attitude to the environment.

Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is the ecological meaning and significance of ritual in Igbo tradition, in relation to sustainable environment. On account of this, the study aims at showing how indigenous traditions function beyond traditional categories of religious, spiritual and social interpretations to meet ecological needs. To achieve this, Interpretive Retrieval method which “seeks to uncover resources latent within the religious tradition and identifies ethical codes and ritual customs of the tradition” (Gbenda, 2010, 36), is used. Against this backdrop, the paper beams its searchlight on Igbo worldview, the relationship between ritual and environment, and the ritual activities that maintained the balance of elements in the natural environment. It discovers that ritual underlies most aspects of traditional Igbo beliefs and practices, and contributed significantly to sustainable environment in traditional Igbo society.

Conceptual clarifications of terms

The work gravitates around two related terms; ritual and sustainable environment which require clarification. Other terms which require clarification, for a better understanding of the subject matter of this paper, include Igbo Tradition and the Environment.

Ritual

Ritual is implied in any form of patterned behaviour which involves repetition. In every day usage, which is beyond the scope of this study, it is any formalised activity (Enekwe, 1987). In religion, it is “a prescribed ways of performing religious acts...” (Agha, 2012, p.96), which “reveals the religious sentiments as well as the doctrines of faith” and “helps to show the relationship of religion to the structure of society” (Arinze, 2001, p. 38). Pointedly, there are social and religious rituals (Onwubiko, 1991), as there are ritual specialists (Ekwunife, 2003). In context, ritual goes beyond the regulation of religious language and feeling to behavioural patterns in religious practice. In this sense, it defines the relationship between beliefs and practices and distinguishes religion from mere philosophy (Okeke, 2002). In contrast to mere philosophy, it is a prescribed method for performing religious ceremonies through which religious beliefs and practices are expressed in a somewhat meaningful manner.

However, the meaning of ritual cannot be understood without reference to the environment of belief in which it is performed. The Igbo being “deeply religious” (Leonard, 1948), every day normal human activities are invested with sacred significance by relating them to the divine world” (Okeke, 2002, p. 122). This explains why most actions in Igbo society are ritualised and directed to the divine. Prayer, songs, dance, birth, marriage, death and festivals, have sacred connections and connotations in Igboland. Ritual is used and understood in this work in its religious context and it refers to those prescribed religious activities which express the intentions and sentiments humans attach to religious beliefs and practices often repeated in a definite behavioural pattern in such ways that they become understandable and meaningful to man.

Igbo tradition

The word tradition comes from the Latin word *traditio* which is a noun form of the verb *tradere*, meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safe keeping (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition>). Literally, it means that which is handed down from one generation to another, the transmission of custom or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on

this way, a long established custom or belief that has been passed on this way (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tradition). From the above etymological definitions, an understanding is given of what tradition is in a general sense.

However, for the Igbo, tradition may equate with their worldview as it is “the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence...” (Nwala, 1985, p. 26). The Igbo concept which expresses tradition is *Omenala*. It literally means, as the name suggests, in Igbo language, that which obtains in the land. According to Nwala (1985) it refers to “what accords to the basic beliefs, ideas and mores without which, in fact, as the Igbo express it, the community would cease to exist because it must have lost touch with reality and the source of their existence” (p. 27). Continuing in the line of thought in which Ojike (1955) regarded *Omenala* as an attempt to attain a “balance of cosmic forces” (Nwala (1985) maintains that *Omenala* “is an instrument for attaining a balance of the spiritual and material forces, of man with his environment, nay with nature, the universe, the cosmos” (p.27).

In a somehow comprehensive manner, Ekwunife (2003) has this to say about Igbo tradition; Igbo tradition (*omenani*) ... are the sum total of beliefs and practices, principles, values and taboos believed to have been handed down to Igbo forebears during the cosmogonic and cultural time; to be constantly re-interpreted and renewed by the living elders and ritual specialists... which the present Igbo generation are to uphold in the light of their situations and experiences. (p. 112)

This rather all encompassing rendering of Igbo tradition by Ekwunife is adopted in this work.

Environment

Surrounding, circle, to encircle or to surround, are key ideas conveyed from both the Greek (*viron*) and French (*environer*) roots of the word environment (Udezo, 2007, p.172). The surrounding of, to encircle or surround suggests something external to another to which it sets limits or boundaries or sphere of interaction. It is in this sense that environment has been defined “as the surrounding of an organism in the place where it lives” (Fatubarin, 2009, p. 1); or in a broader sense, as all the external factors affecting an organism.

These external factors include living and non-living things, material and spiritual, atmospheric elements and weather conditions.

The New Penguin English Dictionary (as cited in Obasola, 2013, p.199) defines environment as “the natural surroundings of or the complex of external factors that acts upon an organism, an ecological community, or plants and animals' life in general”. Similarly, *the Dictionary of Geological Terms* defines environment as “the sum total of all external conditions which may act upon an organism or community to influence its development or existence: the surrounding air, light, moisture, wind, soil and other organism are parts of the environment or environmental factors” (Faniran, 1997, p. 62). In the context of this paper, it refers to all external conditions affecting the life, development and survival of an organism. The external conditions in this context are the living and non-living organisms such as plants, animals, water, air, land, etc.

In the meantime, due to human activities, there is the tendency to describe the environment as either natural or built. Natural environment which has been described as biological environment (Adesiyon, 2005), or ecological environment (Fatubarin, 2009) refers to an area which bio-diversity has not been affected by human activities. Such an area still retains its natural features and forms. On the other hand, a built environment has been tampered by human activities. Environment is often used interchangeably with ecosystem. Where such is the case, it is a sphere of interaction of organisms with biotic and abiotic factors, often as a term that encompasses all living and non-living things occurring naturally on earth. In the context in which the Igbo understand the environment, which this paper adopts, it comprises “... land inhabited by people, all that the land supports- plant, animal lives, water bodies; natural phenomena like mountains, hills and the atmosphere (sky)” (Gbenda, 2010:53).

Sustainable Environment

The adjective sustainable is derived from sustainability which is its noun form. Defining sustainability is, therefore, imperative to the understanding of sustainable environment. Sustainability is a concept that is associated with natural resources management. It was first used by the people who were concerned with the environment. From its literal sense it is the capacity to endure. Applied to ecology, the word describes how biological systems remain diverse and productive over time (<http://environment-ecology.com/what-is-sustainability/247-sustainability.html> (08/10/2015). This principle was first applied in Europe within the economics of forestry (Vogt, 2012). In this sense, it

refers to the capacity of forests to endure over time.

However, sustainability has been applied to almost every facet of life and systems to determine how organisms (plants and animals) have fared with time. As it concerns human condition, it is the potential for long-term maintenance of well being, which in turn depends on the maintenance of the natural world and natural resources. In essence, the well being of human and animal species is predicated on sustainable natural resources such as oxygen, water, etc. Hence, the balance of substances such as oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere and the natural cycle of water is imperative to survival of plant species and other biological systems.

Therefore, sustainable environment is where the balance of nature's cycle has been maintained over time. Thus, any disruption in the balance of systems will bring disorder in the natural environment. Since human activities have been linked with changes in the balance of natural cycles (Ajaero, 2010), a sustainable environment is where the disruptive human activities have been checked over time. It involves stabilising the nature's living and non-living systems. It is in this light that Hawken sees sustainability “as stabilising the currently disruptive relationship between earth's two most complex systems - human culture and the living world”. Following the traditional understanding of the environment, Gbenda (2010) submits that “sustainability is about the use of environment resources without exploitation to the detriment of the environment” (p. 61). It is with this understanding that sustainable environment is used in this paper.

Igbo worldview

It is important to understand the attitude of the Igbo to the environment in the context of their worldview. Some scholars who have written on Igbo worldviews include; Kalu (2003), Ekwunife (1990), Onwuejeogwu (1981), Onwubiko (1991), Nwala (1985), Madu (2004), Opata (1998) and Ifesieh (1990). Their contributions on this subject matter provide useful insight into what Onwubiko (1991) regards as “the basis of the African's ideology in relation to his existence in the world” (p. 3). This worldview shares with many other African tribes “that everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment is profoundly religious” (Gbenda, 2010:53). By worldview is meant; “... the intellectual or rational explanation of the order which undergird human lives and environment” (Kalu, 2003:3). From the opinions of the above scholars, it is clear that Igbo worldview is predicated upon certain basic beliefs in relation to the environment. First, the Igbo worldview is deeply rooted in the belief that all things in the universe were created by God (Umeh, 1999). This is

clearly demonstrated in Igbo myth of creation. According to Ugwu (2014:18-20) and Onwu (2002) Igbo myth of creation traces the origin of life and existence of nature to *Chukwu*. In Nri mythology which Ugwu and Onwu alluded to, *Eri*, the founding father of Igbo race, was sent down from heaven with his wife *Namaku* by *Chukwu*, the Igbo Supreme God and they landed at Aguleri. They sat on an anthill as the land was still water-logged; a condition which necessitated the sending of an Awka smith who used his bellows to dry up the land. In this creation myth, *Chukwu* (God), was depicted as the creator who created man. When the need arose, man as *Chukwu's* subordinate, carried out his instruction and brought into existence different food crops at a great cost; through ritual sacrifice of his son, daughter and slaves to *Chukwu*.

Second, the environment is profoundly spiritual and sacred. It is believed that nature having been created by God is imbued with the power of its creator. In other words, nature is spiritually connected to its maker in Igbo cosmology. On account of this, many things on earth are held in high esteem for religious reasons, especially when they are thought to be “dwelling places for spirits” (Gbenda, 2010:5). Natural elements and objects such as sun, moon, sky, land, mountains, hill, caves, groves, trees, animals, rivers and natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning, rainfall, seasonal cycles and patterns, feature prominently in Igbo religion as spirits, abodes of spirits or emblems of their manifestation. For the Igbo, nature is not lifeless and material. Rather, it is believed that life force permeates the whole universe and that matter and spirit are inseparable realities. This belief in no small measure, influences the Igbo to adopt positive attitude to nature.

Third, there is organic unity and principle of balance in the eco-system. This view holds that all creatures, gods, spirits, man, and nature are kiths and kins. Consistent with this belief is the view that man is created to co-exist with objects of nature, both animate and inanimate, material and non-material. In a shared belief with the Judaeo-Christian tradition (Gen. 1:27-30), the Igbo believe that man is to tend and care for nature, not to exploit it. Although the Igbo recognise a distinction between man and the rest of nature, this does not allow them to see things in isolation. This is premised on the fact that all things originated from the same source as attested to by their myth of creation. The Igbo believe that man and nature, because they share the same source, are intricately bound by one moral order.

Sequel to the above position, the Igbo work in harmony with nature to maintain the balance of nature. The Igbo

believe that there is organic unity in the eco-system, wherein the principle of balance and harmony in nature and mutual interdependence must be maintained. To this end, man explores and benefits from the environment and in turn has a moral obligation not to exploit nature. The general notion is that nature is created on the principles of balance and all the systems in nature must exist and function in harmony with their balance to maintain equilibrium. This accounts for the ritual performance which is carried out when there is a deliberate or unconscious attempt to disrupt this order in the eco-system such as when trees are felled or when someone inadvertently killed a totem.

Fourth and closely related to the third is the belief that though the Igbo world consists of two realities of material and spiritual, they fuse into a single reality. The Igbo believe that there is no dichotomy between the two realities. Ekwunife (1990) observes that “the Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting realities- the spiritual and the material, each impinging on the other” (p.18). Hence, for the Igbo, the spiritual reality consists of God (*Chukwu*), Ancestors (*Ndiichie*), and other spirits. While the material world belongs to man, animate and inanimate objects including other objects associated with non-biological life. Thus, in this sphere of interaction, the Igbo believe that there is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane. It is a sphere of interaction of man with spiritual beings, with other animate and inanimate objects that form the physical reality of the world.

Therefore, for the Igbo the two worlds constitute the same environment and fuse into a single reality. The two realities are in a relationship in many ways as complementary worlds; there is no opposition between them, the physical overlaps with the spiritual, and thus visible with the invisible, and the sacred with the profane. This view is supported in Igbo myths of creation which ascribes creation to God and goes on to show the relationship between man and nature.

Fifth, the Igbo worldview is anthropocentric and world-affirming. Everything is considered in terms of its relation to human beings. This is so because the Igbo world consists of the physical plane, a three-decker compartment of the universe (Kalu, 2003), where man is conceived as the being occupying the middle layer. This places man at the centre of activities in the universe. By virtue of this position, it is incumbent upon man to maintain through rituals, a cordial relationship with all the spiritual agents and forces in order to enjoy a harmonious existence. In this sense, man is seen as a servant of his environment. By being world-affirming

the view holds that this world is a place of enjoyment and that the well-being of humans is dependent on healthy environment. The Igbo doctrine of reincarnation in which man is engaged in a series of births and deaths up to seven times portrays this world seemingly a more permanent place and confers on the Igbo the sense of care for the environment. Life in the, hereafter, for the Igbo, is a shadowy existence, of quiet solitude and inactivity. Hence, it is this world that offers him real existence.

Thus far, it is clear that the Igbo have a holistic view of the environment. Their understanding of the creation, as the handiwork of God, enables the Igbo to develop a friendly attitude to and relationship with the environment. It is a holistic view of the environment wherein the Igbo cohabit in the same environment with their domestic animals, plants and vegetation, which they consider sacred.

Relationship between Ritual and Environment

The place of ritual in Igbo religion and its relationship with nature is significant to this study. Ifesieh (1989) lays emphasis on the meaning ritual gives to socio-religious act which expresses man's experience of the cosmos when he sees ritual “as a socio-religious act capable of levels of meaning, which may be portrayed as symbol of cosmic truth” (p. 123). Ekwunife (2003) notes that “the heart of people's religion is in their ritual”, and that through them “man's daily activities as well as his cosmos are sanctified, so that he becomes one with all realities” (p. 168). Olupona (2006) stresses the relationship between ritual and environment by remarking that “... many, if not almost all aspects of African traditional religious rituals exhibit dimensions linked to the environment” (p. 278). In this sense, it can be argued that ritual emerges as a result of the people's effort to understand and cope with their environment.

In ritual, the Igbo equip themselves to maintain a lively relationship with the spiritual beings and by extension, the balance in the cosmic order. This explains the numerous sacrifices that are offered to spiritual agents. For instance, there are sacrifices to the sky god, *aja eze enu*, during planting season for preservation of life and crops (Madu, 2004, p. 128). Sacrifices and offerings are made to the gods and ancestors when the land is tilled and planted, and during harvests, often as festival celebrations (Achebe, 1964, p.2). Rain is of utmost importance to the people, since upon it, depends the agricultural cycle. So, *Amadioha*, the god of rain and *Njoku*, the god of agriculture, without whose blessings farmers would record poor harvests, receive regular sacrifices. It is with this understanding that agricultural

activities are ritualised. Hence, ritual is associated with human activities and events of nature.

Certain animals, on account of possession of perceived special characters such as craftiness, agility, and special features such as colour or even size are ritual objects. In Igboland, tortoise is associated with craftiness and cunning, horse and cow are ritual animals because of their size and strength, lion and leopard, for their power. Cocks are ancestors' favourite on account of myth of the withdrawn God which shows that God gave man a cock with tender palm fronds (*omu*) in its mouth when he was withdrawing and instructed man to always approach him through this. Some others become ritual animals in connection with totemic tradition. It should be noted that as totems, they are not killed, except when permitted by ritual occasions (Taringa, 2006). Inanimate natural objects feature prominently as ritual symbols, as ritual objects and in ritual processes in Igboland. For instance, kola-nut (*oji*), chalk (*nzu*), sacred *ofo* tree - *Detarium Elastica* (Ejizu, 1986:31) or *Detarium Senegalense* (Nwankwo, 2007:14), are naturally some of the ritual elements in Igboland. Shells or cowries used in divination, costumes and masks worn during festivals and in masquerading, are all derived from natural sources. These natural objects are cut and used in their raw state as ritual elements. For instance, *ofo*, is a stick of a plant species which grows in the Igbo area, “the twig or branchlet from the wood of that tree” (Ejizu, 1986:31).

The ecological import to be noted in the ritualised efforts of the Igbo to maintain harmonious relationships existing in nature is that the Igbo make use of animate and inanimate natural objects found in their environment. It is clear, on the cosmological level, that the Igbo through ritual processes create media of interaction with the ecosystem to meet peculiar social and natural events that affect human conditions. For instance, rituals associated with agriculture, observance of numerous taboos, land use etc., are measures to check vagaries of weather, exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. Thus, for the Igbo, ritual gives them the confidence and feeling of control over unpredictable phenomena. Hence, the Igbo engage in rituals in their efforts to produce the desired results in the ecological plane. Thus, ritual action for the Igbo becomes “a dramatisation of the human experience of the universe (Uzukwu, 1988:92).

Rituals as activities towards maintenance of the order in the cosmic plane

It is clear from the preceding discourse on the Igbo worldview and the relationship between ritual and the environment that the Igbo had a “religious” view of the

environment and achieved environmental sustainability through ritualising the environment. And that true to the African world, the Igbo environment is a “ritualised environment” (Olupona, 2006). The rituals that underlie religious beliefs and practices in Igboland have ecological implications. It is an indisputable fact that there is a relationship between ritual and environment, and that this connection makes Igbo religion environmental friendly.

Based on this fact, rituals associated with the environment shall be examined in four categories in this work. They are: ritual activities involving cycles of nature and natural phenomena, rituals involving animate and inanimate objects, agricultural festivals and general attitude to land as the mother of nature, all of which contribute to sustainable environment in Igboland.

(a) Rituals involving natural phenomena and cycles of nature

Natural phenomena in Igbo environment are those features occurring naturally in their environment. It has been noted that the Igbo consider such natural elements or objects as the sun, moon, sky, land, mountains, hills, caves, groves, as occurring naturally and sacred. Also imbued with sacredness include cycles of nature such as day and night, rising and setting of the sun, seasonal changes and variations of weather, rainfall, thunder and lightning. Mountains, hills, rivers, lakes, forests, groves, caves, are naturally holy places where shrines dedicated to deities are located. As a result, there are rituals associated with them.

There are rituals associated with astronomical objects. The sun which the Igbo call *Anyanwu* stands in a special relationship with the Supreme Being as “a child of the Supreme God” (Parrinder, 1962:45). On account of this relationship with the Supreme God, there is the tendency to direct worship to it as *Anyanwu okike*; the creative principle, most significantly in Northern Igboland (Ugwu & Ugwueye, 2002). The movement of the sun across the sky is important for certain rituals involving medicine and sacrifices. Observing such rituals are most critical when the sun is overhead. Ritual attends the appearance and sighting of the new moon. On sighting a new moon the Igbo prays to it and invokes its blessing thus; “may your face meeting mine bring good fortune” (Achebe, 1964:2). Mere rumbling of thunder in the sky evokes smacking of lips.

Water plays significant roles in rituals as a purifier. This is based on the premise that “water is in principle a purer element than what it is made to purify” (Olupona, 2006:278). To this end, water is used in ritual cleansing,

in ritual bath and in ritual purification. Water is equally used in ritual rain making where rainmakers throw water up in the sky and allow it to fall to the ground, thereby mimicking rainfall. Certain sacrifices require that items used in performing such sacrifices are not consumed; in which case, they are usually dumped inside water (river, stream, lake). A person carrying potent medicine across rivers or lakes performs certain ritual such that the medicine will not lose its potency.

Igbo market days *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor* and *Nkwo* are deities in themselves and are associated with ritual consecration of time (Ekwunife, 1990:92). In some Igbo societies death on a particular market day is considered a bad death. It is either, required ritual cleansing is carried out or people are forbidden from wailing at all for the dead.

(b) Rituals involving animate and inanimate objects

Among the Igbo, certain animals stand in a special relationship with humans. Such animals as lions, leopards, monkeys, crocodiles, snakes (python), tortoise, feature prominently in totemic tradition. Some reasons given for totemic association include descent from the totem, beneficial service rendered in the past by the totem, connection with myths of origin of the clan and desirable qualities which the totem possesses (Quarcoopome, 1987, p. 177). These totems are held sacred and enjoy the status of humans in Igbo traditional society. For instance, people bear names related to animals; *Mgbada* (wild goat), *Nwokerekwu* (descendant of mouse), *Uto* (a specie monkey), *Agu* (leopard), *Odum* (lion), *Umuagwo* (descended from snakes).

There are various rituals connected with totemic tradition. First, the people are expected to treat them with the same respect accorded human beings and to handle them carefully while relating with them. It is believed that a visit by a totem signifies a special blessing coming to the home where it visited. It is incumbent on those visited to reciprocate the kind gesture by singing its praise and making available gifts of food item usually its favourites. For instance, python receives a gift of chicken when it strays into people's homes or is allowed to help itself with eggs where they are laid (Achebe, 1964, p. 48).

It is forbidden to intentionally kill and eat a totem. It is believed that any intentional harm done to a totem by a clan member may result in some misfortune to the individual and the entire community which may not be relieved until ritual cleansing is carried out. A dead totem receives funeral rites befitting of a human being from the one who killed it. Such a heavy sanction serves in protecting the animal from wanton destruction. However, there are occasions when totems are intentionally killed. These occasions include some

special religious ceremonies when the skin of the totem is worn (especially by priests and kings) and when it is used as sacrificial animal to the deity that owns the totem.

With particular reference to trees, Ekwunife (1990) gave reason some natural objects are connected with rituals. He observes that “the Igbo believe that certain trees are by nature sacred since they have their prototype planted from eternity in the invisible creator's compound. Such trees are: *akpu* (silk cotton); Iroko tree; kola-nut tree (*oji*); *Ngwu*; *ofo* tree; *ogirisi/ogilisi*, *utulubenyi ebe*, etc.” (p.128). *Akpu* (silk cotton tree), Iroko, and *Ngwu* are regarded as abodes of spirits. Naturally, shrines or altars are located at their foot. *Ofo* and kola-nut stand out as ritual agents in Igboland. *Ofo* stands as the symbol of justice and staff of office to title holders and elders. A holder of *Ofo* is expected to always speak the truth and maintain justice. On the other hand, kola nut is an instrument of prayer. Ritual is observed in its presentation, breaking and sharing. Certain rituals are also observed depending on the number of lobes in a particular nut. For instance, a lobe is thrown out to the spirits if upon breaking, a nut is found to have six lobes.

(c) Rituals attend agricultural activities

Rituals associated with agriculture in Igboland usually take the form of festivals. Onwubiko (1991) observes that in Africa, “the connections between sacred symbols of culture, myths and rituals are put into practical expression” through festivals. And further states that festivals “are occasions for commemorating certain events which are of vital importance to the celebrating community” (p. 43). In this instance, agriculture is of vital importance to the Igbo as it constituted in the traditional setting, the major economic activity. The people depended upon it for their daily survival. This explains why most Igbo festivals follow agricultural and seasonal patterns.

These festivals, on the surface value, appear to serve social and religious purposes. Beneath these, they also have ecological imports. In fact, it can be argued that agricultural festivals serve more ecological purposes than religious or social. The periods for festivals are connected with agricultural activities which in turn follow seasonal patterns. Besides, the purely social and religious ones are celebrated within the period between harvest and the next planting season. It is a period when there is less work to do in the farm; a period of resting when musical instruments are brought down from where they hung above the fire place (Achebe, 1958). Expectedly, festivals connected with agriculture take place within the planting seasons following stages in the cycle of nature and the development of crops. It is

noteworthy to observe that every planting activity is either preceded or punctuated with a festival which rituals are specific acts and rites instituted for agricultural motives and directed to deities who are believed to be fertility gods, whose roles are directed in the community towards agriculture. There are festivals associated with preparation for planting, during planting, first fruit and the harvest proper.

In Igboland, yam is the king of crops. The god of yam *Njioku*, is principally, the god of agriculture also (Ugwu & Ugwueye, 2004, p. 43). It is one of the gods in Igboland honoured with annual festival. *Ifejioku* (new yam festival) is celebrated in thanksgiving to the deity for a successful agricultural year. In the traditional setting no one ate yam until the entire community performed the thanksgiving ceremony by observing the *Ifejioku* festival. It was celebrated in recognition of human-earth relationship of which Madu (1997) writes; “the principle behind the new yam festival in Igboland may not be unconnected with the covenant between the soil and man, in which man is dependent on the soil for his existence and survival” (p. 67)

Among the traditional Igbo all aspects of these festivals are geared towards the promotion of food crop production. It is in their belief system that failure to observe these rituals may anger the gods and the ancestors, which may result in drastic changes in weather conditions or loss of fertility of the land. Failure to sacrifice to the sky god at the appropriate time may cause the withdrawal of rain and in its place drought. The land would refuse to give its yield if *Ani* (the earth goddess) did not receive its appropriate sacrifice as and when due. This is why some of the sacrifices offered during the planting season “are intended to assist the growth of the plants and hallow the work of the farmer” (Onwubiko, 1990:50).

(d) Rituals associated with *Ala* (the earth)

The Igbo do not regard the earth (*Ala*) as mere solid part of the earth surface where plants and animals including man grow and live; not even in a wider sense of geography as just one of the planets. Igbo understanding of the earth is beyond all of these. To the Igbo, the earth is first and foremost a goddess, the mother of all gods and everything that has life, the source and sustainer of life (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979:91). She stands in a special relationship with *Igwe*, the sky god, as his wife and with the ancestors as their hostess. As a moral agent, “she is also responsible for public morality, and offences against the law are crimes against *Ala* who makes the law and by whom oaths are sworn” (Parrinder, 1962:49). By this, she supervises Chukwu's *ogu* or body of righteousness” (Iwuagwu, 1998:96) and directs the activities of man in relation to his fellow man and with

the environment.

Okwueze (2003) corroborates this position when he said that “the moral code of the Igboland commonly spoken of as *omenani*, “is built up from the injunctions of the earth goddess through the ancestors” (p. 68). The moral code spoken of here as *omenani* is ethical sanctions of the earth deity which stipulate how man should relate to his fellow man and to nature, the breach of which have both sociological and ecological consequences. So then, as a deity in charge of morality, the Igbo look up to the earth deity for order and harmony in the human society and the natural environment. Thus understood, the general attitude to *Ala* is that of respect and adoration to the point of worship.

The ritual involving *Ala* is first and foremost seen in the belief that she is a goddess. In this respect, *Ala* (the earth deity) is mentioned second to the Supreme Being and then other gods follow in most Igbo prayers. Ugwu (2002), as a keen observer, has reasoned that the earth goddess occupies a large position in the mind of a West African whenever he is making some offering. This is seen in the ritual pouring of libation which is not only observed during sacrifice but in ordinary daily life. The ritual pouring of libation is directed to *Ala*, believed to be the abode of ancestors. Pouring of libation is an act of worship wherein the ancestors receive their due share of drinks or food through *Ala* before they are consumed by humans.

All forms of abomination (*nso-ani*) and pollution (*aru*) are against the earth goddess and appropriate ritual performances are observed whenever such offences are committed. Thus, some sacrifices are ritual efforts at either preventing the earth from being polluted or for cleansing the desecrated land. This is aptly demonstrated by Achebe (1958) who notes that a week of peace was usually observed before planting when people were expected to live at peace with their neighbours. The seriousness associated with the practice came to limelight when Okonkwo violated this rule by beating his wife and a heavy fine was imposed on him by the priest of *Ani* to cleanse the desecrated land.

Another striking aspect of traditional Igbo belief concerning land that should be mentioned here is that which held against its commercialisation. Ijoma (2002) aptly captures the view thus; “land among the Igbo was not commercialised until the European intervention. The sanction against the sale of land arose from the general belief that land was a sacred trust held by the present generation of users on behalf of the dead ancestors of the group as well as on behalf of the unborn generation” (p. 45). For the traditional Igbo, the current practice of commercialising land is a violation of sacred trust and equates abomination and desecration of land

with its attendant ecological consequences. It was a held belief that sale of land would affect crop yield.

In summary, the question why the Igbo engage in ritual activities has been examined. It is deducible from Igbo worldview that the Igbo had a clear view of a universe created by *Chukwu* where there is a balance and harmonious relationship existing in the created order. It was clear to the Igbo that disastrous consequences follow if the balance and harmony in the universe were disrupted. Hence, the view that man is at the centre of activities in the universe and that his well being is dependent on his ability to maintain a harmonious relationship with all the beings and forces that impinge on his enjoyment of the universe, gave rise to rituals as means of keeping and maintaining the natural order.

Recommendations

This study has shown that the Igbo had environmental friendly attitude to nature in the past. For instance, certain natural objects are considered sacred thereby protecting them from the exploitative tendency of human being. Totemic tradition allows some animals regarded as totems to enjoy a kinship relationship with humans. This paper recommends as follows;

Firstly, there is the need for a change of attitude to nature whereby we begin to regard nature as being somewhat in a relationship with humans if the fight against environmental degradation would be won. Christians in particular are called to change their attitude to sacred objects and places. Things regarded as sacred in Igbo traditional society should remain sacred and totemic animals should remain as such. In this way sacred forests and some endangered species of plants and animals are preserved.

Secondly, in the traditional Igbo society, there were practices in place to care and protect the environment. There were agricultural festivals in thanksgiving to God as a way of showing appreciation for his benevolence in granting of fertility to the soil. Fetching of water from streams was forbidden on certain market day and totemic tradition was kept. Revival of some of these traditional elements would be helpful.

Thirdly, governments at all levels are not left out as they have major roles to play in sustaining the environment. Government should make relevant laws that will protect sacred forests and groves from destruction and punish offenders adequately.

Conclusion

Thus far, the work has argued that the ritual actions in traditional Igbo society were by extension, attempts to forge harmonious relationships with the created order predicated upon their understanding of their environment (the universe). It indicated that the efforts

of the Igbo at ritualizing nature were intended towards environmental conservation. Arguably, the study has shown that it is worthwhile to carry out research to determine the relationship between religion and ecology. It faults argument in some quarters that research of this nature is aimed at romanticizing with the African religious belief systems in order to glorify the past. Obviously, it is an honest attempt at rediscovering hidden truths in the belief of the people regarding man's perception of, attitude to, and relationship with the environment.

Remarkably, the work shows that the Igbo worldview which is deeply religious places on them the consciousness to ritualize virtually all human activities involving nature. Therefore, it is remarkable as the work has demonstrated, to note that environmental preservation was intended in ritual observances and ritual actions in the traditional Igbo society. That through ritual processes animate and inanimate objects and even natural phenomena not associated with biological life came to be preserved. It also shows that the ecological dimension of Igbo tradition hinges on the fact that it is a nature religion. In other words, it is a product of its environment; a reflection on and of the natural environment. Indeed, Igbo religion engendered respect and care for nature and the environment. The traditional Igbo environment was truly a ritualized environment.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958), *Things fall Apart*. London: Heinemann (2008 classic edition)
- Achebe, C. (1964), *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann (1974 edition)
- Adesiyani, S. A. (2005), *Man and his biological environment*. Ibadan: University press
- Agha, A. U. (2012), *Religion and culture in a permissive society*. Enugu: Idika press
- Ajaero, C. K. et al (2010), “Climate change: concepts and issues”, In Anyadike R. N. C., Madu, I. A., Ajaero, C. K. (eds), *Climate Change and the Nigerian Environment*. Enugu: Jamoe
- Alokwu, C. O. (2013), *The Oikos tragedy: A Theological Blueprint for Ecological footprints*. Awka: SCOA heritage
- Anyacho, E. O. (2005), *Essential themes in the study of Religion*. Obudu: Niger Link
- Anyadike, R. N. C. (2002), “Climate and vegetation”, in Ofomata, G. E. K. (ed) *A survey of Igbo nation*. Onitsha: Africana First
- Arinze, F. A. (1970), *Sacrifice in Igbo religion*. Ibadan: University Press
- Arinze, R. N. (2001), *African traditional religion*.

Enugu: Rabboni

- Awolalu, J. O. & Dopamu, P. A. (1979), *West African traditional religion*. Ibadan: Onibonaje
- Ayantayo, J. K. (2015), *Rudiments of research & research in religious studies*. Ibadan: Samprints and Graphics
- Ejizu, C. I. (1986), *Ofo: Igbo ritual symbol*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension
- Ekwunife, A. N. O. (1990), *Consecration in Igbo religion*. Enugu: SNAAP (2003 edition)
- Enekwe, O. (1981). *Igbo masks: The oneness of ritual and theatre*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine
- Eze, I. (2013), *Being a christian in Igbo Land: facts, fictions and challenges*. Berlin: Logos
- Faniran, A. (1997), “Land, land degradation and global environmental change: What every citizen must know”, in Osuntokun A. (ed). *Dimensions of environmental problems in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Davidson.
- Fatubarin, A. (2009), *Fundamentals of ecology*. Ilesa: Keynotes
- Fatubarin, A. (2009), *Tropical ecology*. Ilesa: Keynotes
- Gbenda, J. S. (2010), *Religion and ecology: A comparative study*. Makurdi: Obeta
- (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition>)
- Idowu, E. B. (1973), *African traditional religion*. London: SCM
- Ifesieh, E. (1989), *Religion at the grassroots: studies in Igbo religion*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension
- Ijoma, J. O. (2002), “Igboland: s historical perspective”, in Ofomata, G. E. K. (ed), *A survey of Igbo nation*. Onitsha: Africana First
- Ikenga-Metuh, E. (1987), *Comparative studies of African traditional religion*. Onitsha: Imico
- Iwuagwu, A. O. (1998), *African traditional religion*. Owerri: Ager
- Leonard, M. A. G. (1948), *The lower Niger and its tribe*. London: Frank Cass
- Madu, J. E. (1999), *Honest to African heritage*. Calabar: Franedoh (2004 Edition)
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969), *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann
- Nwankwo, T. N. (2007), *The Igbo and their Nri neighbours*. Enugu: SNAAP
- Nwosu, P. U. (2010), “The role of Okonko society in preserving Igbo environment”. Retrieved from www.krepublishers.com/...Nwosu-P
- Obasola, K. (2013), “African religion and environmental dynamics: implications for human and sustainable development”, in *Journal of Studies in social sciences* 4(2), 199-212. Retrieved from <http://infinitypress.info/index.php/jssc/article/viewFile/211/1167>

- Ojike, M. (1955), *My Africa*. London: blandford
- Okeke, D. C., (2002), *Foundations of religious studies*. Enugu: Rabboni
- Okwor, C. O. (2012), “Igbo traditional religious life: panacea for democratic governance in Nigeria”, in Ezeani, E. O., and Oguonu, C. N. (eds). *Nigerian journal of social sciences (NJSS)* 8(1)
- Okwueze, M. I. (2003). *Ethics, religion & society: biblical, traditional & contemporary perspectives*. Nsukka: Prize
- Olupona, J. (2006), “Religion and ecology in Africa culture and society. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.ng/books?id=LIdELvqQNs=PA259&lpg=PA259&dq=religion+and+ecology+in+African+Culture+and+Society>
- Onunwa U. (1990), *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*. Obosi: Pacific
- Onwu, E. N. (2002), *Uzo Ndu na Eziokwu: Towards an understanding of Igbo traditional religious life and philosophy*. Ahiajoku lecture. Retrieved from <http://ahiajoku.igbonet.com/2002/> on 10th March 14, 2016.
- Onwubiko, O. A. (1991), *African thought, religion & culture*. Enugu: SNAAP
- Opata, D. U. (1998), *Essays on Igbo worldviews*. Nsukka: APExpress
- Parrinder, E. G. (1962), *African traditional religion*. London: Sheldon
- Taringa, N., (2006), “How environmental is African religion?” Retrieved from www.msc.ac.zw/elearning/material/1347260586 on 16/2/2016
- Udezo, B. O. S., (2007), “Management of the human environmental hazards in Nigeria: A christian response”, in Ugwu, C. O. T. (ed) *Nigerian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1
- Ugwu, C. O. T., (2002). *Man and his culture in a contemporary society*. Nsukka: Chuka
- Ugwu, C. O. T. (2014). *The demise of the African God(s): fallacy or reality*, 84th Inaugural Lecture of the University of Nigeria. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Senate Ceremonials Committee
- Ugwu, C. O. T. & Ugwueye, L. E. (2004), *African traditional religion: a prolegomenon*. Lagos: MIP
- Umeh, J. A. (1999), *After God is Dibia*. London: Karnak House
- Uzokwu, E. E. (1988), “Nri myth of origin and its ritualization: an essay in interpretation”, in Uzokwu, E. E. (Ed) *religion and African culture: inculturation- A Nigerian perspective*. Enugu: SNAAP (92-101)
- Vogt, M. (2012). From a christian perspective: What is sustainability? <http://ecojesuit.com/from-a-christian-perspective-what-is-sustainability/2721>. retrieved on 08/10/15
- www.merriam-webster.com/dictionay/tradition