

Chapter One

SACRED ANIMALS AND IGBO- AFRICAN ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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Executive Summary

A cursory glance at the developments in ecological studies reveal that a wide range of environmental problems have emerged in Africa and beyond with huge physical manifestations. These problems include global warming, the depletion of stratospheric ozone, the acidification of surface waters, often referred to as acid rain, the destruction of tropical forests, the depletion and extinction of species, and the precipitous decline of biodiversity. While these manifestations are physical in the main, the solutions to them does not entirely depend on the physical. This is where religion comes in given that a good number of human persons are bound up with beliefs among other factors. While there are a few papers written on sacred animals in Igbo traditional societies, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or their ecological relevance. It is, therefore, from this background that this work discusses the place of sacred animals in Igbo-African religious context in the entire project of preserving the environment, especially in traditional African societies. Sacred animals occupy a fundamental place in African traditional religion. If they are not considered the symbol of the ancestors and deities, they are considered more suitable for the offering of

sacrifice, etc. The scope of this study is the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and Western Africa. The phenomenological approach was employed for the collection of data, while the hermeneutical and analytical methods of investigation will be used for the evaluation of the data at hand. The Conservation of Resources Theory would be employed for the purpose of this study. This paper shows that the Igbo-African indigenous beliefs, taboos, sanctions and knowledge have contributed hugely to the checking of the abuse of the environment.

Keywords: Sacred, Animals, Igbo, African, Anthroposophy, Eco-system, Conservation

Introduction

Over the years, a wide range of environmental problems have emerged with huge physical manifestations. These problems include global warming, the depletion of stratospheric ozone, the acidification of surface waters, often referred to as acid rain, the destruction of tropical forests, the depletion and extinction of species, and the precipitous decline of biodiversity. While these manifestations are physical in the main, the solutions to them does not entirely depend on the physical realm. This is where religion comes in given that a good number of human persons are bound up with beliefs among other factors.

It is, therefore, from this background that this work discusses the place of sacred animals in Igbo-African religious context in the entire project of preserving the environment. Sacred animals occupy a fundamental place in African traditional religion. If they are not considered the symbol of the ancestors and deities, they are considered more suitable for the offering of sacrifice, etc. For the purpose of this research, the Igbo-African world of the Eastern part of Nigeria and Western part of Africa will be studied, given that the entirety of the African will be an area to

wide too be captured in a research of few pages such as this. However, because of the ideological relationships in Africa, an understanding of the Igbo would advance a better understanding of the African perspective. The phenomenological approach will be employed for the collection of data, while the hermeneutical and analytical methods of investigation will be used for the evaluation of the data at hand.

Theoretical Framework

The preservation of sacred animals in African traditional societies was based on the Conservation of Resources Theory (CRT) that was proposed by Stevan E. Hobfoll in 1989, which describes psychological stress as the motivation that moves human beings to preserve the resources that they have and also go for new ones (Hobfoll 1989). This stress emerges whenever there is a threat to loss of resources, and by resources, it is meant that which a person values (Halbesleben, Paustian-Underdal and Westman 2014). The theory was developed from the works of Walter Canon, Hans Selye, Elliot and Eisddorfer and McGrath who were among the first scholars to study stress as it applies to human beings (Canon 1932; Selye 1950; Elliot and Eisddorfer 1982; McGrath 1970). This theory stresses that it is more harmful for individuals to lose resources than to gain resources, and thus, people will invest resources so as to avoid the loss of resources.

In relation to sacred animals among the African people, the creation of taboos for the preservation of sacred animals and the effort towards ensuring that these taboos are kept is based on the African belief that the loss of natural resources (animal species) must be avoided as the loss of it is more stressful than the gain of it. The traditional African society knew the importance of these animals in the balancing of the eco-system and they also knew the consequences of losing these animals on the lives of individuals in the society. The preservation of these animals

through taboos was to avoid the stress, in the form of ecological crisis, that would come as a result of the loss of these species.

The Need for an African Religious Input on Ecological Discourse

Several convergencies make the African religious input indispensable in the fight against ecological crisis, especially as it relates to the place of sacred animals in the entire project of environmental sustainability:

- a. Religious perspectives have been able to articulate an understanding of nature as the outcome of divine ordering which must not be manipulated and exploited for the purpose of maintaining a balance, harmony and equilibrium in nature. This is based on the interconnectedness and interdependence of the different dimensions of creation (Francis 2015 & Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective, 2015).
- b. As a result of the connection of the greater number of human beings to religious beliefs, there has been an effort to respond to ecological questions within the context of stewardship and trusteeship. Thus, the human person is understood as being entrusted with nature to care for and account for (Halpert 2012; Islamic International Climate Change Symposium, 2015; Northcott, 2013 & Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective, 2015).
- c. There is a better understanding of scientific positions on climate change even by those in religious circles. This has led to those adhering to religious beliefs to queue behind the policies that have been made from the outcome of these scientific findings. This is evident in the position of the Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective 2015 and *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis.

- d. The connection between religious beliefs and the belief in limitless pursuit of prosperity has made religious perspectives on the issue of climate change very necessary. There is the need for a new model of wellbeing from the religious perspective (Northcott, 2013; Khalid, 2013; Izzi Dien, 2013).

In the face of the contributions of religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and, religious bodies and alliances, it is very important that the position of African traditional religion be made manifest on the important issue of eco-system conservation.

Sacred Animals in Igbo traditional Societies

Among world religions, animals belong to an important class of nature that feature prominently (Durkheim 1995). Gods were named after animals- like the goddess *Epona* in ancient Celtic religion whose name means Horse, whose icon includes a horse (Durkheim 2008). Among the Igbo, different communities and families hold different animals as sacred and they some affinity with the clan or to be the manifestation of some spirit (Kanu 2015a; Aniako 1978, 1984, 2002). There are times the sacred animals are treated as property of some deities. The python, eke, is not to be killed in many Igbo communities because it belongs to the deity Idemili (Achebe, 1982; Ifesieh, 1989).

Particular animals are considered sacred because the supernatural reveals himself in them. Boyle (1981) defines the sacred as the opposite of the profane. Mckenzie (1995) uses holiness and sacredness interchangeably. He further identifies the holy with the numinous, the mysterious quality of the divine, which is tremendous (fear) and at the same time fascinating (attracts). Hornby (1989) sees the sacred as something connected

with religion, and for Haladus (1997), it is a relation between an objective and transcendent reality and a man. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, Okeke (2008) avers that the terms sacred and profane throw light on the attitude the people adopt towards the world and material things. Thus Robertson (1971) thinks that “The sacred is to be treated with a certain specific attitude of respect” (p. 55).

What makes animals sacred in African ontology is the spirit that is related to them. And because spirits dwell in them, these sacred animals possess great powers and are respected. Thus, Hemingway (1984) sees the sacred as power. Metuh (1981) opines that “they are ferocious and ruthless and inspire great fear and extreme caution” (p. 72). Some of these sacred animals in Igbo-African traditional societies include:

1. *Eke (Python)*

It is a sacred animal and is called *Nne anyi* (our mother) when it visits homes. It is a snake that does not look for trouble and so it is not killed in most parts of Igbo land. The people of Arondizuogu honor it. If a person steps on it, it will hiss and recoil itself. It respects citizens because the citizens revere it, however, if an outsider steps on it, it would attack the person. It is respected because it is believed to be the abode of spirits. It is a symbol of ancestral spirits. According to Adibe (2008), no one makes the mistake of killing it voluntarily or involuntarily. When it is done accidentally, it is buried as though it were a human being, with the appropriate religious rituals and rites accorded to it. If it is killed knowingly, it is considered an abomination. The eggs are also useful to the *dibia* for medicines. In some Igbo communities, the python is understood as a symbol of wisdom, object of ancestral adoration, earthly bliss and benefaction (Rim-Rukeh et al 2013; Eneji, et al 2009).

2. Ikwikwi (Owl)

The owl among the Igbo is a symbol of vigilance. When it moves or makes a sound it is believed that it is alerting a person about a movement or alerting that somebody is coming. This is based on the belief that the owl does not move or make a sound without a reason. There is also the belief that when the owl makes a sound that the ancestors are sending a message. This explains why when its cry is heard people go to ask questions as regards what the ancestors might be saying to a person or the community. As a consequence, the Owl is not killed by hunters or members of the community. To kill it will mean shutting oneself off the message of the gods (Kanu 2015b).

3. Udene (Vulture)

The African vulture is a monogamous bird that stay with their mates for many years, and feed their young for several months. They do not attack healthy animals like the eagle do, however, they may kill a wounded animal to feast on its flesh. They have very powerful eye sights as they can see a three-foot carcass from four miles away in the sky. **It** is a mystical religious symbol of the spirits; in fact, it is a ritual consumer of the spirits. When a sacrifice is offered and thrown into the open and a vulture does not come to pick it up or to eat it, it would be interpreted that something must have gone wrong in the world of the spirits. May be, that the sacrifice was not accepted by the spirits, since they consume the offering through the agency of the vulture (Kanu 2015a). From the foregoing, the presence of vultures signify the presence of the spirits and the ancestors. This explains why it is not killed or eaten by the Igbo.

4. Icho-Oku (Parrot)

The African parrot is a small bird with colorful wings that inhabits the warmer parts of the African world. They feed on insects and seeds and are mostly found in many African homes for various reasons. The Igbo-African believes that it is a bird that

is capable of seeing all and saying all. According to Adibe (2008) “The feather is regarded as the power of insight in the spirit world. The diviners use the feather in their caps and for other rituals. It is diviner’s mystical symbol of sight and proclamation” (p. 214). Like the owl, it is also a symbol of surveillance and, therefore, not killed or eaten.

5. *Ebuna* (Ram)

Among the Igbo, *Ebuna* is a great symbol and stands for something great or big, especially in terms of ceremonies, festivals or rituals. It is used for offering sacrifices. It is a symbol of *Amadioha* and *Amadioha*’s choice animal for sacrifices. The symbol of *Ebuna* is so important that the name “The killer of *Ebuna*” is used to refer to a *dibia* (medicine man). During burials, *Ebuna* is also used to bury a strong man. On the day of the burial ceremony, the *Ebuna* is brought forward and the jaw is cut while it is still alive and lowered to the coffin where the diseased is laid so that the blood is allowed to drip into the eye of the dead man. The *Ebuna* is later slaughtered and eaten by those who consider themselves sincere and recognized by the society as courageous. The *Ebuna* is also used to activate an *ofo* (symbol of authority). Once an *ofo* has been designed by the community, it is still without power. However, one of rites that gives it power to stand for what it represents is the dripping of the blood of an *Ebuna* on it (Kanu 2013).

6. *Mbekwu* (Tortoise)

It is considered by the Igbo as a wise and cunning animal. It is, therefore, a religious mystical symbol of wisdom and discernment. It is capable of manoeuvring all traps and obstacles. Its shell is used by diviners in mystical religious rituals, like during the activation of an *ofo* (Kanu 2015).

7. Okuko (Chicken)

There is a myth told about the chicken to little children. It is about a meeting that was fixed by the animals in their kingdom and when the day came, other animals discovered that the chicken was absent. When the chicken was asked why it was not attending, it said that there was no reason, however, that the animals can go ahead with the meeting in its absence and that whatever they decided would be accepted by it. The animals decided that all of them will be eating chicken. This explains why the chicken is a favorite meal for most animals. The kite eats chicken, cat eats chicken, snakes take chicken for meal, dogs eat chicken, fox eats chicken, etc. It is not only a choice animal for other animals, it is also a choice animal for particular sacrifices as in the case of *Iru Agwu* (dispelling of spirits that affect the success of a person).

The ecological significance of sacred animals

Sacred animals were protected through taboos used in traditional African societies for the preservation of nature and the promotion of biodiversity. Some of these taboos include not killing or hunting of the animals like python, fish, vulture, tortoise, parrot, not washing in some particular parts of water bodies or not using metal containers to fetch water, knowing fully well that the chemical in the soup or detergent and the metal could be destructive of the fishes in the water body. These taboos were the ecological guardians that played major roles in the conservation of animal species (Adu-Gyamfi 2011; Johannes 1978, 1982, 1984; Chapman 1985, 1987; Gadgil 1987).

Strongly connected to the preservation of sacred animals is the preservation of sacred forests and water bodies. These forests and water bodies were areas set aside by the Igbo ancestors as sacred sites and strictly protected by customary laws, beliefs and enforced taboos. They were regarded as abodes of the spirits and

deities and places for worship, sacrifice, etc., (Kanu 2015). Due to the lack of human disturbance, as in the case of forests, monkeys and other animals often live in these forests, and because it was free of human activities, it provided a ground for biodiversity. In some of the groves in these forests, the sanctuary for wildlife is provided for which is absent in the surrounding lands. Here in, reside rodents of all kinds, butterflies, bats, birds, primates, minor mammals and fauna. In some of these forests where exists water bodies, it is forbidden to fish. Herein you find fish in big sizes and in large numbers. These sacred water bodies connected to other waters become breeding grounds for fishes in other water bodies.

Very important is the understanding of the natural environment, including sacred animals as integral part of the world. It is not just an animal, but sacred personalities as a result of the spirits that inhabit them and thus are given respect. The ecological significance of this understanding is that it made human persons to treat the sacred animals with the respect that their sacred personalities deserved.

The understanding of sacred animals as a dimension of the human life, of which whose destruction will have consequences on the health of the human inhabitants of the universe had great ecological implications in terms of preserving the environment. The human person in traditional Igbo-African societies understood sacred animals as a part of himself or herself and so to treat them without respect is to treat oneself without respect, and to exploit them will mean waging war against oneself as there are future consequences. As a part of humanity, these sacred animals are not only respected but interacted with in various capacities.

In some of these cases, such animals referred to as sacred and revered as such have low productivity rate and so their species were preserved through such restrictions. There are some Igbo communities where it was forbidden of hunters to kill an animal and not eat it; this had a way of reducing wastage; and in some cases, they were forbidden from hunting animals that were pregnant or hunting the young ones of such species, or hunting animals that are fending for their young ones. The punishment associated with these include dying at ones, or not having children.

Some of these sacred animals were protected not just because they were sacred, but also because of the medicinal value that their existence offered the community as in the case of a python whose eggs were used by medicine men for the production of particular medicine. As such, keeping it alive was necessary for the sustenance of the supply of that particular medicine. The oil and the shells of the tortoise were very important to medicine men too.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following recommendations are, therefore, made:

1. The indigenous religious beliefs of the African people should be restudied within the context of respect for the particular experience of the African rather than dismissing them as fetish. There should be a focus on the rationale behind the taboos.
2. Society should work towards the utilization of indigenous knowledge, especially as it relates to the preservation of the environment among indigenous people. This is very important as indigenous groups adapt to their natural environment in ways that conserve both their eco-systems and themselves as an integrated social ecological system.

3. Traditional leaders who are the custodians of African traditional values should be involved in the process of environmental preservation among indigenous people.
4. African indigenous knowledge should be considered while developing policies for the preservation of the eco-system.
5. The government should draw up strategies for the preservation of the eco-system in such a manner that the indigenous knowledge systems are supported and employed.
6. There is need for legislative protection to traditional or indigenous methods of conservation of the environment.
7. There is need for a scientific study and documentation of indigenous ecological knowledge systems, and should also be incorporated into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools so that people can know the rationale behind indigenous ecological knowledge systems from their early stages of development.

Conclusion

A cursory glance at the different world cultures, reveal that animals of different kinds have been regarded at one point or the other as a symbol either to life and culture or to the religious sphere in terms of symbolizing the gods. In any of these, they have contributed immensely to the shaping of culture and the establishment of a connection between religion and the natural environment. These animals received veneration because of their connection with particular deities, as in, they were believed to be manifestations, representations, epiphany or incarnation of the gods. However, this association is usually done in such a manner that the nature of the deity is visible in the nature of the animal that is symbolizing the deity. Thus, Society for Conservation Biology (2008) holds that religion has played significant role in defining relationships and creating links between religious systems and natural systems. This, according to Ghanashyam

and Singh (2015) and Rukeh et al (2013) positions religion to contribute to the rethinking and responding to the crisis in world environment.

As there is an increasing threat to sacred animals among many African communities, given the spread of modernism and urbanization, which has weakened traditional taboos and belief systems, this paper recognizes that there is an urgent need to investigate traditional methods for the preservation of the environment and to repackage these traditional values for the saving of the environment. This explains why this work on sacred animals among the Igbo African people was written. This work has, therefore, given an overview of the place of sacred animals with regard to their spiritual, socio-cultural and ecological status. The taboos and sacred folk tales regarding these sacred animals and their habitats are the prime reasons for the preservation of these animals in traditional African societies. This work submits that religious beliefs and practices such as the belief in sacred animals can affect the way species of animals are understood, utilized and preserved. This points to the fact that religious perspectives and practices have played significant roles in the preservation of the ecosystem and can still be useful.

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