

Chapter Three

IGBO-AFRICAN MARKET DAYS AND THE CONSERVATION OF THE ECO-SYSTEM

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Executive Summary

Among the most powerful religious and social elements in Igbo religion, history and culture are the Igbo market days. These market days include- Eke, Orie, Afo and Nkwo. Thus, the English calendar which has 7 days in a week, 30 days in a month, 4 weeks in a month, 52 weeks in a year, 12 months in a year and 365 days in a year differs from the Igbo calendar which has 4 days in a week, 7 weeks in a month, 28 days in a month, 13 months in a year, 91 weeks in a year, and 364 days in a year. Also observable is that the four-day market days are not only observed in Igboland but in other parts of Southern and Northern Nigeria like Edo, Calabar, Igala, Ogoni (Gokana), Ahoada, Emuoha, Ikwerre, Etche, Ogba/Ndoni, Abua/Odual, Ogoja, which border the Igboland, however, these market days come under different names to suit the local dialects of the people concerned. While there are a few papers written on Igbo sacred days, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or its ecological relevance. This research, therefore, focused on how Igbo traditional societies through these days worked towards the preservation of the environment through the promulgation of taboos. The taboos for each of the days had a way of preventing particular activities that had exploitative consequences on the eco-system. The scope of

this study is the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and Western Africa, who as far back as the beginning of their history knew the consequences of environmental degradation and the need to preserve it. The phenomenological approach was employed for the collection of data, while the hermeneutical and analytical methods of investigation were used for the evaluation of data. 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, Market, Days, Igbo, African, Anthroposophy, Eco-system, Conservation

Introduction

Particular days among the African people are considered sacred, not on account of themselves but 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 days sacred in Igbo-African ontology is the spirit that is related to the particular days. Basden (1966) writes that: "these trees are not worshipped themselves, the Ibo pagan does not bow down to the wood and stones. It is the spirit dwelling

within them that supplicatory and intercessory prayers are said” (p. 40). This research focuses on the four market days in Igbo-African ontology with the particular interest of understanding how these days through taboos contributed to the conservation of the environment in traditional African societies. For the purpose of this study, 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 theoretical framework to be used for this study is the African Religious-Based Conservation Theory, which has been developed by Kanu Anthony. The theoretical framework is based on the nature of the Igbo-African universe. It is a universe that consists of the spiritual and physical realms, however, created by one and same Supreme Being called *Chukwu*. He controls, sustains and upholds the universe. This also explains why he is called *Osebuluwa* (the sustainer of the universe). Because of the connection of the physical and spiritual realms of reality connected to through *Chukwu*, the Igbo-African perceives the world around him in terms of religion (Kanu 2015). According to Adu-Gyamfi (2011):

The implication of this outlook is that everything in the universe, both visible and invisible, is religiously interpreted. Thus, the social, economic and political institutions and aspirations are closely linked to the people’s assumptions, beliefs and interpretations of the universe- God, humankind, society and nature. (p. 146).

The implication of the religious based perception of the universe is a religious based conservation theory. Since the physical and spiritual realms are understood as dependent on each other, the sacred and the mundane are not dichotomized. It is within such

a context that Market Days are understood in terms of the spiritual, and associatable with spiritual beings. It is believed that it is the spirit beings that control the physical universe, and that the physical realm of reality is the arena where spiritual forces or spirit beings display their power (Ezeanya 1969; Gyekye 1987). Thus, no human activity can be achieved successfully without settling or appealing first to the spiritual world (Assimeng 1981; Asante 1995). With the association of these days with sacred beings, taboos associated with them are given due respect, and thus the purpose of the taboo achievable. The African Religious-Based Conservation Theory, therefore, holds that nature deserve respect not exploitation because they are sacred personalities. They are not just natural realities but are the abodes of the sacred (Kanu 2015).

The Origin of Igbo Market Days

These market days according to Kanu (2015) were introduced into Igboland during the reign of *Eze Nriijofor* (1300-1390 BCE). He was visited by four strangers who arrived his palace pretending to be deaf and dumb. Each of them carried a basket, not greeting the Eze, or responding to his greetings. Even when the kola nut was presented to them, they said no word. When they went to bed at night, the soothsayer of the Eze sent a rat to disturb them. When the rat was nibbling at Eke's basket, Oye called Eke by his name and told him that a rat was trying to get into his basket. Eke woke up and ran away. And gradually the rat went from one basket to another and in this way they revealed the names of one another by trying to alert the other to the presence of the rat.

The next morning, the Eze went to them with the kola nut and called them each by their names: *Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwo*. At this, they were astonished and asked for water to wash their hands and faces. After eating the kola, they gave the king four earthen pots

to keep at the front of the Nri shrine, with each pot facing the sun. Eke who was their spokesperson introduced himself and the others as messengers from *Chukwu*, and said to the Eze that the first pot belongs to him, the second to *Oye*, the third to *Afo*, and the fourth to *Nkwo*. These pots he said were gifts from Chukwu and that the king and his people should observe these names as market days during which they should be buying and selling. Since then, these market days have been used in Igbo-land to count Izu- days, Onwa- Months, and Aro- year. He further instructed that these names be given to their male children: Okeke, Nweke, Okoye, Nwoye, Okafor, Okonkwo and Nwankwo. To their female children the names: Mgbeke, Mgboye, Mgbafor, Mgbankwor should be given. At noon, these men shone like angels. The news was spread throughout Igbo-land and these market days have been observed since then.

The Igbo Market days

The word market is derived from the Greek and Latin word “mercatus” which means the market place. Generally, a market is a specific and authorized place where people assemble at regular intervals to buy or sell goods and services (Good 1970). It has existed long before the advent of Europeans to Africa. In the contention of Scott (1970), a market as a public gathering or buyers and sellers at an appointed place and at regular intervals for the purpose of doing business under specified conditions. Kotler (1967) goes further to define markets as “all persons or business units who buy or may be induced to buy a product or service” (p. 6). While Shaw (1912) included a discussion on demand in the concept of market, Coutant (1936) links markets to the creation of needs.

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calendar which has 7 days in a week, 30 days in a month, 4 weeks in a month, 52 weeks in a year, 12 months in a year and 365 days in a year, the Igbo calendar has 4 days in a week, 7 weeks in a month, 28 days in a month, 13 months in a year, 91 weeks in a year, and 364 days in a year. These four days represent the four cardinal points.

<i>Eke</i> -----	East
<i>Orie</i> -----	West
<i>Afo</i> -----	North
<i>Nkwo</i> -----	South

Together, these days make up *Izu nta* (four days), and when doubled *Izu ukwu* (eight days) which is the complete round of the native week of eight days among the Igbo. There are particular deities that are worshipped on different market days. Some streams or rivers are not fetched during particular market days, for such days are considered sacred to the deity that owns or inhabits the stream or river. On days like *Eke*, there are communities that do not allow their members to go to the farm (Kanu 2015).

a. Eke

Eke market day is regarded as *Isi Mbido Ahia* (the beginning of the market days or market). It is also referred to as *diokpara ubosi* (the first son of the week). Among the people of Arondizuogu, there is a market dedicated to this day called *Eke Market*. It is a general market that is was instituted for all Ndizuogu people, and thus it is called *Eke Ndi'zuogu* but located in *Ndi Aniche*, the center of *Iheme* community. On this day, *Ndi Aniche* people do not bury the dead as a form of respect to the day. There is also an economic dimension to it- so that it doesn't distract their market or the economic activity of the day. The *Eke* day is also a day for oath taking. In some Igbo communities, those who die on *Eke* day are considered guilty, and thus a special sacrifice is offered for

cleansing, to avoid calamity upon the family or community. Marriage ceremonies are also not allowed on this day, even if it is only about the introduction of the male couple to the family. It is considered a sacred day to be honored by everyone; and sometimes associated with Eke- python, a sacred animal among the Igbo and at other times Eke- the creator God. This last perspective is however not a popular one.

There is an anthropological dimension to Eke day, and this is seen in the names that the Igbo give to their children:

Nweke: the child of *Eke*

Okeke: the share of *Eke* or the young man of *Eke*

Okemma: the beauty of *Eke*

Mgbeke: the daughter of *Eke*

These names are given to persons who were born on Eke day or to persons who are dedicated to the spirit of Eke.

b. *Orie*

Orie is understood as *Ada Ubosi* (the first daughter of the week). As a market day, it is the day when the opening of farming season is done or declared by the Arodizuogu people of Igbo land. If there is a major celebration, it is fixed for *Orie* day. This is because people go to the market on *Eke* so as to prepare for the celebration on *Orie*, and also given that major celebrations have been cancelled on *Eke* day. It is from this perspective that we understand better why *Ikeji* and *New Yam* Festivals are celebrated on *Orie* day among the people of Arondizuogu. However, even though it is a day for celebrations, the people where the *Orie* market is located might have several taboos to be respected on this day. For instance, among the Arondizuogu people, *Orie* market is domiciled in *Ndi Ejezie*, and on this day, they do not fix or attend meetings.

Among the *Uturu* people of Igbo land, *Orie* is a day with several obligations attached. As a holy day of obligation, the *Ututu*

farmer rests from farming on this day and feasts together with his family. Also traditional marriage ceremonies in Uturu are not scheduled on *Orie* day. A married Uturu woman does not have the right to pass the night of an *Orie* day outside her matrimonial home without the permission of her husband. A woman or man cannot divorce her husband or his wife on an *Orie* day.

The anthropological dimension of *Orie* is seen in the names that the Igbo give to their children:

Nworie: the child of *Orie*

Okorie: the share of *Orie* or the young man of *Orie*

Okoye: the share of *Orie* or the young man of *Orie*

Orieji: the yam of *Orie*

These names are given to persons who were born on *Orie* day or to persons who are dedicated to the spirit of *Orie*.

c. Afo

Afo is understood among the Igbo as *Osote Diokpara* (second son). It is the day of merriment and masquerade displays. It is also a day of commerce and socializing with peers, friends and to hold meetings of all kinds. Among the Arondizuogu people, it is situated and dominated by *Ndi Awa*, however people from other towns come to sell their goods there too.

The anthropological dimension of *Afo* is seen in the names that the Igbo give to their children:

Okorafa: the young man of *Afo*

Nwafa: the child of *Afo*

Mgbafo: the daughter of *Afo*

Okafo: the young man of *Afo*

These names are given to persons who were born on *Afo* day or to persons who are dedicated to the spirit of *Afo*.

d. Nkwo

Nkwo is referred to as the *Isote Ada Ubosi* (the second daughter). Generally, those who die on *Nkwo* day are considered to be

righteous. It is a day when many celebrations or feasts among the Igbo begin. Among the Arondizuogu people, the Nkwo market is specifically dominated by and located in *Ndi Akaeme*. However, people from other towns come to sell their goods there too. On this day, Ndi Akaeme women do not go for burial. This law was put in place to avoid a situation where their market would be empty on that day. Those who are directly involved might go but not every woman.

Nwankwo: the child of *Nkwo*

Okonkwo: the young man of *Nkwo*

Osunkwo: he that is dedicated to *Nkwo*

Mgbankwo: a young lady of *Nkwo*

These names are given to persons who were born on *Nkwo* day or to persons who are dedicated to the spirit of *Nkwo*.

In traditional Igbo societies, there were two kinds of trades the local and the long distance trade. The above discussion on market days were shaped by local distance trades which dealt principally on food and agricultural product (palm oil and palm kernels), products of smiths, sculptors, potters, cloth weavers and so on, that served the commercial needs and interests of the neighbouring communities. During long distance trades, the Igbo left their communities and moved into other regions or continents or states. The items exchanged in the market satisfied the needs of the people beyond the subsistence level. The trade commodities were food items, slaves, horses, products of smiths, cloth weavers, sculptors, etc. This kind of trade was already in existence long before the entity called Nigeria was formally created.

African traders like King Jaja of Opobo and Nana of Itsekiri Kingdom were already part of the international trade, and successfully so long before the creation of Nigeria (Rotimi and Ogen, 2008). According to Ekundara (1973), slave trade and export of palm oil and other products such as cocoa, groundnuts,

etc, characterized the foreign trade going during the traditional market era. The Nri and Aro people were the two major communities that were involved in a conspicuous manner in long-distance trade. They traded with Europe, which began with the arrival of the Portuguese traders in the Bight of Biafra in the Fifteenth Century. The archaeological sites at Igbo-Ukwu among others reveal long distance trade in copper, bronze, objects of high quality and distinctive design, beads, weaving, pottery works as well as regional trade in salt, cloths, beads, etc. The discussion on Igbo market days and trade goes far below the capacity of the long distance trade. It was and is still a local affair.

Ecological Significance of Market Days

Sacred market days among the Igbo people have ecological significance, and the achievement of these significances is based on the association of these days with particular spirits. The nature of these spirits and the taboos associated with them to a great extent affects the particular demands of the particular days or what the days abhor. In the main, a lot of the activities that particular sacred days abhor contribute to the protection or preservation of the environment or the eco-system.

For instance, there were particular days that it was required, depending on the nature of the community that no one should go fishing from a particular water body. The advantage of this is that it allowed the water body to regenerate or rebuild itself from the use it had experienced during the other days. This was done on the basis of the relationship of the water body with a particular deity; if the particular day is devoted to the particular deity, keeping away from the water body becomes a way of honoring the deity in question. At the spiritual level, it is taken that the particular deity is having time with his or her children, which include the fish and other water animals in the water body. This might sound unscientific to many, but those who

went against the law were either drowned or got sick afterwards (Adu-Gyamfi 2011). There were some fish that were not eaten at all even if it were outside the days during which fishing was forbidden. These species were referred to as the children of the sea or river goddess. There were also particular festivals or seasons during which fishing was forbidden. This had a way of preserving the animals in the water body.

There were days when hunting was forbidden completely. As already observed, this depends on the nature of the deity that is being honored on that particular day and what it forbids. What keeping away from hunting on these particular days did was to slow down the destruction of the ecosystem through the loss of these animals. In the case of sacred animals, it was such that they were not killed at all. Killing them, as in the case of a python, a person is required to bury them as if they were human beings.

Conclusion

Local people in time past have developed a variety of methods to manage their resources or to regulate their interactions with their natural environment, and these methods are not entirely out of use even in the modern time (Appiah-Opoku 2007). This for some scholars dates back to the creation stories of these local communities (Berkes et al 2000; Turner et al 2000; Shastri et al 2002). As already studied above, one of such traditional ecological knowledge systems among the Igbo local people are the sacred days. Sacred days play fundamental roles at various levels of the life of the Igbo traditional communities: at the socio-cultural, economic, religious and political levels in the wise use of earth's resources in such a manner that is friendly and sustainable, thus contributing to natural resources sustainability and conservation. This was achievable because of the relationships of these days to the deities. While the gods provide protection for the traditional people, the people were bound to

keep the taboos that were associated with these days. These taboos were prime factors in the guidance of the conduct of the community in relation to the exploitation of the environment.

This management of earth's resources in terms of ecosystem diversity were sometimes done for economic reasons (Usher 2000; Thomas 2003); at other times for the preservation of the future generation (Smith and Wishnie 2000). With the incursion of modernity, many of the rites and rituals associated with these sacred days among other sacred personalities are gradually dying off. This is worsened by the fact that many young people are not interested in the rites and rituals associated with these days; in most cases, they refer to them as superstitions. With the weakening of the values of these days, the consequence is that its ecological relevance begins to die.

This work, therefore, has brought out the salient aspect of conservation borne out of the taboo system associated with the sacred days in Igbo traditional societies. It submits that religious beliefs and practices such as the belief in sacred days can affect the way our environment is 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. It also calls for the restudying of indigenous religious beliefs of the African people so as to understand the rationale behind the taboos; it asserts that society needs to utilize indigenous knowledge in her relationship with indigenous people, especially as it relates to the preservation of the environment; traditional leaders who are the custodians of African traditional values should be involved in the process of environmental preservation among indigenous people; the government should draw up strategies for the preservation of the ecosystem in such a manner that the indigenous knowledge systems are supported and employed.

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