

Chapter Five

SACRED TREES/PLANTS: THE GREENING OF IGBO-AFRICAN RELIGION

Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, OSA, PhD

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State

ikee_mario@yahoo.com

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-1977-202X

Executive Summary

Ecological issues as a matter of concern have gradually moved beyond the parameters of the public domain, in terms of issues for the government to handle to matters of religious concerns. This development is evident in the writings and teachings of the Popes over recent years; the writings of various religious groups and bodies such as the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Alliance of Religions and Conservation, etc. These have emerged because the environmental challenges are far beyond what should be left alone to the government to respond to. This development has been of help in terms of the achievement of results given that four persons out of every five in the world have some religious affiliation. This paper begins by pointing out the seriousness of ecological crisis in the world and how it connects to every religion for the finding of ways for the sustainability of the universe. While there are a few papers written on sacred trees in Igbo traditional societies, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or its ecological relevance. This article, therefore, distinguishes itself as it focused on African religious reality, which are sacred trees. Discussions on the connection between the environment and religion have focused on the other religions with little or no connection with

the African religion. Sacred trees in African traditional religious world are a fundamental religious reality which shows how the traditional African has attended to the care that his or her immediate environment requires. 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 were used for the evaluation of the data at hand. This paper shows that the Igbo-African indigenous beliefs, taboos, sanctions and knowledge have contributed hugely to the preservation of the ecosystem.

Keywords: Sacred, Trees, Plants, Igbo, African, Anthroposophy, Eco-system, Conservation

Introduction

During the last 60 years, ecological issues as a matter of concern have moved beyond the parameters of the public domain, in terms of issues for the government to handle to matters of religious concerns. This development is evident in the writings and teachings of the Popes over recent years (Paul VI 1971; Paul II 1991, 1990; Benedict XVI 2009, 2010; Francis 2015). As Chaplin (2016) observes, this development is also evident in the writings of various religious groups and bodies such as the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Alliance of Religions and Conservation, etc. These have emerged because environmental challenges are far beyond what should be left alone to the government to respond to.

This development has been of help in terms of the achievement of results given that four persons out of every five in the world have some religious affiliations. Thus, Dasgupta and Ramanathan (2014) aver that: "Finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only

engagement of scientists and political leaders, but also moral leadership that religious institutions are in a position to offer” (p. 1457). Several researches by individuals (Oelschlaeger 1994; Northcott 2013; Khalid F 2013; Izzi Dien 2013; Halpert 2012) and religious bodies and movements (Cornwall Alliance 2009; Lausanne Movement 2012; Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective 2015; Evangelical Environmental Network 2006; Islamic International Climate Change Symposium 2015) have further affirmed the relationship between religion and the environment.

This paper begins by pointing out the seriousness of ecological crisis in the world and how it connects to every religion for the finding of a way for the sustainability of the universe. However, this article distinguishes itself as it focuses on the African religious reality of sacred trees. Discussions over the year on the connection between the environment and religion have focused on the other religions with little or no reference to the African religion. Sacred trees in African traditional religious world are a fundamental religious reality which is employed to express how the African over the years have cared for his/her immediate environment.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the *Igwebuike* Conservation Theory, which has been developed by Kanu Anthony. It holds that reality is interconnected and interrelated. *Igwe bu ike* is an Igbo proverb and also a typical Igbo name. Beyond the linguistic expression of *Igwebuike* lies a deeper meaning, where *Igwebuike* is understood as providing an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations (Kanu 2016a; 2021). Literally, *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities

and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016b&c). *Igwe*, *bu* and *Ike* put together, means ‘number is strength’ or ‘number is power’ (Kanu 2017a). However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike*, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. Beyond the literal understanding of *Igwebuike*, it concatenates Igbo forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning, anthropologies, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and Igbo environmentalities (2017b&c).

The *Igwebuike* conservation theory, therefore, holds that reality is interconnected and interrelated. The exploitation and mismanagement of any dimension of reality will, therefore, have consequences on the entirety of reality. The theory is based on the very nature of the African universe or world which consists of both the physical and spiritual dimensions. Although they are different realms, they depend on each other and have their meanings only within the context of complementarity. Still within this context of dependence and complementarity, the traditional African society ensured the protection of dimensions such as scared trees or forests, knowing fully well that the protection of these will ensure the protection of other dimensions of life. The tree was thus, not looked at as an entirely independent reality from the human person or the spiritual world. It was seen as the part of the whole of which the human person constitutes a part.

The Spiritual world and the Sacred Trees

Sacred trees/plants emerged in traditional societies as a result of their connection with a web of spiritual relationships with their biophysical environment. They were the first temples of the gods, places of worship, and thus revered (Hughes and

Chandran 1998). According to Frese and Gray (1995), sacred trees:

Are a form of nature that represent life and the sacred continuity of the spiritual, cosmic and physical worlds. A tree is usually used to symbolize a deity or other sacred beings, or it may stand for what is sacred in general... Trees represent certain deities or ancestors, serve as mediators or as a link to the religious realm, and are associated with cultural beliefs in heave or the afterlife (p. 26).

Beyond the spiritual, Eliade (1958 and 1959) and Dafni (2006) aver that these sacred trees symbolize life, youth, immortality, wisdom, etc. They expressed what the spiritual man and woman considered real and sacred. Gupta (1980) adds that they were worshipped not only because of this but also because of their long life and the protection that they offered the human person. Thus, when the Igbo reverence sacred trees, it is not just because they have spiritual relevance but also because they symbolize life. *Ndu*- life among the Igbo occupies a very important place. This explains why the Igbo will say: *Ndukaku* (Life is better than wealth); *Nduka* (Life is greater); *Ndubisi* (Life is first); *Ndulue* (May life continue), etc. Thus, Ede (1985) observes they also possess human attributes, for instance, appetites, vitues and vicas. These human attributes are conferred on them because they are understood as a part of the human family. And as a part of the human family that is highly religious, they are also vessels for the manifestation of spiritual beings (Mbiti 1970; Nwala, 1985; Nnabuchi 1987; Adibe, 2008).

Sacred Forests

Sacred forests were areas set aside by the Igbo ancestors as sacred sites and strictly protected by customary laws, beliefs and enforced taboos. They are not just limited to the Igbo world but are found all over the world including Ethiopia, Japan, Morocco,

India, Ghana, etc. (Cardelus et al 2013; Hughes and Chandran 1997; Malhotra et al 2007; Bhagwat 2009 and Manikandan et al 2011). These forests, remain storehouse of the life gas oxygen in Igbo traditional societies. They also improve the soil stability and act as soil binder, thus preventing erosion. Among the Igbo, they were regarded as abodes of the spirits and deities and places for worship, sacrifice, etc. Examples of these forests or bushes include: *Ofia Udike* (dedicated to *Udike*); *Ofia Aro* (dedicated to *Aro* deity); in Abatete, *Ofia Omaliko* (dedicated to *Omaliko* deity); in Nnobi, *Ofia Idemili* (dedicated to *Idemili* deity). Umunnachi, there is *Ofia Okpimodu* (dedicated to *Okpimodu* deity). And because spirits dwell in them, these sacred places possess great power and are respected (Kanu 2015). Therefore, it's forbidden to go inside these woods, cut them down or collect its fruits. Due to the lack of human disturbance monkeys and other animals often live in these forests. These animals are also considered sacred.

Sacred Trees

The sacred trees and plants to be discussed include: alligator pepper, *ogirisi*, *oha*, yam, kola nut, *omu* and palm wine, and are considered sacred because of their relationships with spiritual forces.

a. Ose Oji (Aligator Pepper)

Ose oji is understood among the Igbo as a warrior. This is why the Igbo say that the alligator pepper "Is a warrior and it is not opened before the eyes of a person but behind a person". Before it is opened, a person will take his hand behind and opens it before bringing it forward. It is also understood as a dispeller of evil. No wonder, the Igbo would rub it on their body as a repellent for whatever is evil or anything that is not worthy or holy. This explains why when an Igbo gets to a place where he or she does not trust the people or where he or she suspects that

charms are going to be used against him or her, the person will take seven seeds of alligator pepper and throw it on the ground and say:

“Ose oji, you don’t go for a battle that ends in shame”

It is believed by the Igbo that evil spirits like *ose oji*. So when they see *ose oji* they will abandon the person that they would have harmed and concentrate on the *ose oji*.

b. Akpu (Silk Coton)

It is an Igbo sacred tree that has as its botanical name *Ceiba Petandra* (Okonkwo et al., 2006) or *Bombas Buonopozense* (Adibe, 2008). It is regared as the abode of the spirits, and because of the large expanse of its roots, trunk and branches, the Igbo refer to it as a tree of fertility and prosperity. This explaisn why those seeking the fruit of the womb or prosperity go to offer sacrifice by its stem. Nwaubani (2018) refers to it as a path to the unseen world in Igbo ontology.

c. Ofo (Detranium macrocapun)

It is prominent among the Igbo for its use for staff of justice or authority of a family, village or town. It is a symbol of justice, sincerity and truthfulness. It is generally forbidden to cut or place a knife against a living Ofo tree or use its branches for firewood. It serves as a connection between the living and the ancestors and the spirit world. It is also the moveable shrine of most Igbo communities.

d. Achi

Achi is a mystical tree among the Igbo that is the home of spiritual forces or spirits, especially the ancestors. As the abode of the spirits, it is highly respected among the Igbo and cannot be cut down without carrying out the appropriate rituals. It is also used for cooking soup.

e. *Ogirisi*

It is used for making the boundaries of land in the past. Once a land is bought or shared among the members of a family, each person would take *ogirisi* and plant at the agreed boundary between him and the next person. This has helped to curtail conflicts between members of the same family or owners of land. It is such that even today when a person buys a land, one still finds *ogirisi* used by the original owners to signify the boundary of their land. Thus, whenever there are conflicts the presence of the *ogirisi* is used to argue for the original boundary of the piece of land.

The *ogirisi* is also used during worship. Just as you call on the ancestors to come and take kola nut or *nzu*, they can also be invited to take their share of *ogirisi* leaves. It is used for sacrifices and also as a base for the *ofo* to stand on. The *ofo* is not placed on the ground and where it is difficult to get a base for it, the *ogirisi* leaves are used. However, in a case where a person does not have an *ofo*, he can go into the bush and cut four stems of *Ogirisi*, which can be used instead of an *ofo*.

During sacrifices to the ancestors during Ikeji festival called *Ihu mmuo* (literarily meaning 'in front of the spirit'), the *ogirisi* is also used as a base from where the ancestors are called upon. It forms a kind of a temporary altar for the person after which it is disposed.

It is also used as a purifying agent. For instance, if a person dies and is buried, in Igbo traditional societies those who buried the person are believed to have had contact with the dead, to purify themselves of that association, *ogirisi* leaves are cut and soaked in water which they will use to wash their hands and feet.

f. Udara (Chrysophyllum Albidum)

It is a tree used by Igbo traditional mystics to establish contact with the spiritual world. It is also a fruit prescribed for women who are seeking for the fruit of the womb; it, therefore, symbolizes fertility. It is called Mother, and many go to its stem to offer sacrifices. It must not be cut without following the appropriate ritual of appeasing the deity of fertility.

g. Oha

The oha and ogirisi are two stems that are used during *Iru Agwu*, which has got to do with the pacification of spirits that cause harm in person's life. It is used because it is believed to possess spiritual powers. It is also a choice leaf for making of soup during major festivals like the Ikeji festival among the Arondizuogu people. It is believed to be the soup that the ancestors enjoy most. This also helps us to understand better why it is a choice leaf for soup during the Ikeji festival and other festivals that unite both the living and the dead.

h. Ji (Yam)

The history of the emergence of yam is traced to the Nri myth. When Eri needed food from Chukwu, he was asked to sacrifice his first son and daughter. Where they were buried emerged crops. Where the son was buried emerged yam and where the daughter was buried emerged cocoyam. This is why the Igbo celebrate yam because it is not only a crop but life, it is the *diokpara* of Eri that is being celebrated. This also explains why yam is respected among the Igbo people and the choice requirement for sacrifices. When it is offered as a sacrifice, it is offered as life and God's gift to the human person.

Yam is called *Isi Mbido* or *Isi* (which can be translated as the head or the beginning). Yam is the head of everything that is planted by the Igbo. It is the only crop that is celebrated in a season, not

even the palm tree that has great economic value among the Igbo is celebrated as such. Every Igbo community has a time during the year for celebrating the yam.

i. Oji (Kola nut)

The kola nut is a mystical tree among the Igbo used for rituals and sacrificwes. It is understood in many quarters as the food of the gods. The kola nut for the Igbo is not just the biannual crop grown and stored in sacks and baskets. It is a food that must be eaten with relish; it commands adoration and many accolades and must be attended to with deserving feast. It unites the living and dead, and symbolizes a feast of togetherness, love and trust. The Kola nut is a symbol of Life *ndu*, this is why the Igbo say: "He that brings kola brings life" (Kanu 2014). Uchendu (1965) refers to the kola nut as "the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality. It always comes first. 'It is the king'" (p.74). And because of the important place it occupies, presenting the kola is very ceremonial. The ceremony begins with the presentation of the kola nut to the guests through the next ranking male after which it is returned to the host (Uchendu 1964). It is usually presented alongside white chalk (*nzu*), alligator pepper, garden egg, bitter kola, groundnut butter (*Okwa ose*) in a wooden dish (*Okwa oji*). As the heart beat of the Igbo culture and tradition, the Igbo Kola nut is used for several purposes, which include: welcoming a visitor; opening a prayer; for rites, rituals and ceremonies food and nutrition; Commerce; Cleansing; Flavoring; Oath-taking, covenant and settlement of disputes; Divination and prophecy; Sacrifice and worship; Receiving a new day and for Medical and mystical purposes.

j. Omu (Palm Branches)

Omu symbolizes peace. For instance when a person wants to show that he or she is for peace the person would carry the *Omu*. It also symbolizes that there is danger. For instance, when a land

is contentious, one of the parties can decide to place an *Omu* to indicate the need for no body to go there or take possession of it until the owner is determined. More recently, in places where there are potholes that could pose serious danger to travellers, those living around there or by the road side would cut an *omu* and place it at the spot where the pothole is. Also in towns where you have burials, and thus a large number of people moving from one side of the road to another, they usually place the *Omu* on the middle of the road to let drivers know the need to slow down to avoid running over road crossers.

k. *Ube* (*Dacryodes Edulis*)

The *Ube* tree among the Igbo possesses a spiritual personality. It is not considered an ordinary tree. This explains why the *Dibia* (medicine man) will always prescribe it for carving of *Ikenga*, *Agwu*, masquerade masks, royal stools and drums used for religious purposes (Kramer, 2006). Its importance among the Igbo is not only because of its religious purpose, it is also used for medicines of many kinds, notable are its antimicrobial and antioxidant capacities (Conrad and Uche, 2013). Conrad (2014) observes that in some parts of Igbo land like *Amichi* village, when a man discovers that his wife is into adultery, he sends her home with a keg of wine stuffed with *Ube* leaves at the mouth of the keg, which signifies that he does not intend to continue with the marriage.

l. *Oboshi* (*Baphia nitida*)

Oboshi belongs to the class of mystical trees among the Igbo. It is believed to attract spirits, and thus, it is treated with great respect and also located in shrines where spirits are invoked. It was used greatly by medicine men in traditional Igbo society.

m. *Anuneebe*

Anuneebe is an Igbo word that for a mystical, magical and spiritual tree that literarily means “no bird perches on it”. It is a favorite tree among medicine men and women for its various powers, especially to transform reality from one form to another.

n. *Ngwu (Albizia Adcantifolio)*

Ngwu is one of the mystical trees among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, and the home of several spirits (Adibe, 2008). It is also the symbol of *Agwu* deity, magic and mystical power. As a result of the sacred place it occupies, it must not be cut down or used as firewood (Oha 2019). It also offers protection to those that live around it and as land boundaries, given that it is perennial plant.

o. *Ubulu or Uburu*

Uburu or *Ubulu* is a totemic tree which which is highly revered among the Igbo because of its relationship with the ancestors and spirits. It symbolizes life and longevity.

p. *Omu Nkwu (Palm Leaves)*

It symbolizes the presence of ancestral spirits and *Ala* deity in their mediatorial roles as peace makers, for seclusion, and as power brokers. It could be used for all Igbo traditional sacred rituals, even without the priests officiating (Adibe, 2008).

Ecological significance of Sacred Trees/Plants

Societies no matter how primitive, have their own philosophies that underly and guide their definition of life and reality, and thus determines their actions and interactions with fellow human beings and nature. These distinctive philosophies is at the heart of the distinctions that is found from one society to the other. The philosophy of the Igbo traditional society, which is complementary in character is what determines the Igbo

relationship with trees, groves, lands, animals, rivers and even public places. Thus, Onyeocha (1997) holds that the African society and world is one of active engagements and symbiotic relationship ensuring harmony between the human beings and nature, a totality of free, continuous, inclusive and interdependence. This also explains the special names given to particular trees, places and objects (Obianika et al 2015). With the special place that trees occupy among the Igbo, it cannot but play a fundamental role or have a fundamental place in ecological discussions.

The belief in trees, plants and forests as sacred among the Igbo-African people have several ecological consequences, especially, given that ecological crisis has become a matter of global concern. Because of their sacredness, they served various ecological purposes on the basis of the taboos that guided human actions in relation to them. There were no tree planting campaign announcements among traditional Igbo people, but some particular events and times went with the planting of some trees. For instance, when a land is given to someone, he demarcates it by planting the *Ogirisi* around it. During the rite of *Iru Agwu*, the *Oha* and *Ogirisi* are two stems that are positioned in such a manner that they grow into trees. The person concerned is bound to water them and ensure that they don't die. When a lady is married into a man's house, she comes with her *Chi*, which is symbolized in the *Oha* which she will plant in some corner of the house. It is used because it is believed to possess spiritual powers.

An important ecological significance of sacred trees is the understanding of the natural environment, including trees, forests and plants as a living phenomenon. It is not just a tree, 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 makes human persons to treat the trees and forests with the respect that their sacred personalities deserve.

Going beyond the spiritual implications, forests were cultural environmental management systems that served the important purpose of conserving nature, and thus, save the environment. No wonder, there was never a time in the traditional society when the Igbo forefathers died of air pollution. These forests demonstrate the sense of ecology of the Igbo ancestors. The understanding of trees and plants as a part of an eco-system, of which its destruction will have consequences on the health of the human inhabitants of the universe brings in the idea of a wholeness in ecological discourses. The human person in traditional Igbo-African societies understood the trees and forests 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, they were not only respected but interacted with in various capacities.

The trees and forests were protected through taboos. Freud (1975) explains that taboo is from the Polynesian word '*tapu*', which had the meaning of the sacred, consecrated, dangerous, forbidden, etc. Kanu (2015) avers that it is similar to the *sacer* in the Greek, *Kadesh* in Hebrew, *Nso* in Igbo language of Nigeria and *mmusu* in Akan of Ghana. Historically, taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the wellbeing of their worshipping communities. Eyisi (2006) defines it as "actions or behaviours that are in disagreement with culture, tradition and or the belief of a people or the community" (p. 4). The same perspective was

articulated by Uche (2009) when he defined taboos as “anything which is forbidden or disapproved of for religious reasons or by social custom” (p. 239). Given the nature of the African society which is religious, taboos are religious and its violation often linked to the ontological order of the universe, as it can upset the relationship between God and man. Eliade (1976) maintains that “The elements or origins of taboos are always the same: certain things or persons or places belong to different order of being and, therefore, any contact with them would produce an upheaval at the ontological level which might prove fatal” (p. 17). To violate a taboo, among the Igbo is to depart from the norm- *omenani* over which *Ala* the earth goddess presides. They have a strong community dimension. Dauglas (2009) avers that “Taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity” (p. xii).

These taboos were the ecological guardians that played major roles in the conservation of the trees and forests (Adu-Gyamfi 2011; Johannes 1978, 1982, 1984; Chapman 1985, 1987; Gadgil 1987). In relation to trees and forests, there were taboos prohibiting: clearing of sacred forests or bushes, felling of sacred trees without permission, sell of lands, etc., and violating them incurred not only the wrath of the community but of the ancestors. The importance of these taboos lie in the fact that the trees and cedars most times protected were not plenty in the forest, and thus the restrictions through taboos saved them from extinction. This was a way of preserving these plants for the future generation who are not supposed to be deprived of these rare plants.

Conclusion

Igbo traditional societies were characterized by their close relationship with nature and its resources; and it is from this background that sacred trees take their place. The connection between religion and the understanding of nature contributed

immensely to the preservation of the ecosystem. However, modernization, mechanization and globalization in recent years, have transformed the Igbo society and weakened traditional indigenous values in terms of both cultural and biological integrity. Changes in social beliefs and cultural practices are major factors contributing to the degradation of the ecosystem.

This work has shown how African traditional religion and socio-cultural practices like sacred trees have contributed towards the management and conservation of natural resources through ascription to the invisible powers of nature. At the heart of the success of this traditional knowledge system is the relationship between these trees and supernatural beings and the use of taboos to enforce their adherence. Looking at the present condition of the African environment, this work, therefore, argues that there is the need to revive ancient institutional heritage for the sustainability of the environment.

It is, therefore, recommended that indigenous religious beliefs of the African people should be restudied within the context of respect for particular the experience of the African rather than dismissing them as fetish. There is need to go beyond the taboos which look unserious for many to understand the rationale behind the taboos; society should work towards the utilization of indigenous knowledge in her relationship with indigenous people, especially as it relates to the preservation of the environment. This is very important as indigenous groups adapt to their natural environment in ways that conserve both their ecosystems and themselves as an integrated social ecological system; 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; there is need for legislative protection to traditional or indigenous methods of conservation of the environment. This must also be ensured that it is implemented; there is need for a scientific study and documentation of indigenous ecological knowledge systems. In fact, this should also be incorporated into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools so that people get used to it.

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