

Chapter Six

ALA DEITY IN IGBO-AFRICAN RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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

The interconnectedness of reality is a major characteristic of the Igbo world. This interconnectedness is the reason why an imbalance in some aspect of nature could have resounding consequences in other areas where it might not be expected. The Igbo world is divided into two spheres: *uwa ndi mmuo* (the world of the spirits) and *uwa ndi di ndu* (the world of human beings). The two worlds are interconnected and continue to influence one another. The living act carefully so as not to upset the spirit world and cause imbalance in the order of things, while the benevolent spiritual forces work to ensure that the world remains in balance. In the spiritual world are *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being), the ancestors (the living dead), malevolent spirits (bad spirits), primordial spiritual forces like *Anyanwu* (the sun god), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder), *Agwu* (the god of divination), *Mmuo Mmiri* and *Igwe* (the sky god). However, in the earth is *Ani/Ala* goddess, who is believed to reside in the earth. While there are a few papers written on *Ala* deity, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or its ecological relevance. This paper, therefore, focusses on *Ala* deity, which is one of the most important gods in the pantheon of Igbo gods and goddess, especially before the encounter of the

west with the Igbo-African people in the 19th century. It studies the place of *Ala* deity in the approach of the Igbo traditional society in preserving the environment and how this indigenous approach can be of help in our age of ecological crisis. The phenomenological and analytic methods of investigation were employed during the course of this research. It discovered that through belief in *Ala* deity, Igbo traditional societies were able and can still maintain a respectful relationship with the environment.

Keywords: *Ala* Deity, *Nso Ala*, Environment, Ecology, Ecosystem, Sustainability

Introduction

The Igbo world is one of interconnectedness: everything is connected to everything and there is no aspect of reality that is independent of the other. An imbalance in nature could, therefore, have consequences even in areas where not expected. The world is divided into two spheres: *uwa ndi mmuo* (the world of the spirits) and *uwa ndi di ndu* (the world of human beings). The two worlds, as a result of their interconnectedness, continue to influence one another. The living act carefully so as not to upset the spirit world and cause imbalance in the order of things. In the spiritual world are *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being), ancestors (the living dead), benevolent spirits, malevolent spirits (bed spirits), primordial spiritual forces like *Anyanwu* (the sun god), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder), *Agwu* (the god of divination), and *Igwe* (the sky god). However, in the earth is *Ala* the earth goddess, who is believed to reside in the earth.

This paper focusses on *Ala* deity, which is one of the most important spiritual forces in the pantheon of Igbo gods and goddess, especially before the encounter of the West with the

Igbo-African people in the 19th century. Her stamp of authority made many customs and traditions valid. Actions that ran contrary to these traditions and customs were known as *nso ala* or *nso ani*, and were regarded as desecration of the earth which is her dwelling place. Based on this indigenous approach, the Igbo-African people were able to protect and preserve the environment, especially the resources connected to the earth. With the advent of modernity and Western consumeristic approach, exploitation of nature took the center stage and the spiritual relationship between the Igbo-African and the mother earth degenerated. This paper, therefore, studies the place of *Ala* deity in the sustainability of the environment, especially in our age of ecological crisis.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that will be employed for this work so as to determine its framework is the indigenization theory. It is a concept that is very popular within anthropology, and simply means making something more native so that it suits the local culture or people. This transformation is considered necessary when what is being indigenized has been taken from an external culture. It was first used in 1951 in relation to the work of Christian missionaries among local people in India (Oxford English Dictionary 2021), with reference to making the Christian church indigenous to the Indians (Butler 1951). It has been used generally in relation to the adoption of the English language and the colonial culture. Schineller (1990), while proposing what should constitute the relationship between Christianity and local cultures, describes indigenization thus:

The local community, with its own indigenous leadership, has the primary responsibility and task of developing the teaching, liturgy, and practice of that local Church. Outside help may be needed at the beginning and at key

stages, but the major work is done by the local Church as it develops its own identity based on its own cultural heritage and situation. (p. 18).

In the area of eco-spirituality, African eco-spirituality is a process of the indigenization of eco-spirituality. While eco-spirituality is general, indigenization is the particularization of eco-spirituality. It is in this regard that the incorporation of African traditional religious thoughts and images such as *Ala* deity is introduced into the discussion on eco-spirituality. The purpose of this is to communicate eco-spirituality in the language that the Igbo-African understands, using categories that are common to him or her, or a part of his or her worldview. For a better understanding of the process of indigenizing eco-spirituality through the employment of *Ala* deity as an Igbo-African religious category, there is the need to understand what *Ala* deity stands for in Igbo traditional religion.

***Ala* Deity in Igbo Religion**

Ala also referred to as *Ani*, depending on the Igbo dialect, is the most important deity in Igbo public and private cults this is because her sphere of authority extends to virtually every field or aspect of human endeavor. Everything that was done in Igbo traditional society had a bearing to the earth. She is the sole daughter of *Chukwu* and is believed to have made the ground and the vegetable kingdom. In the contention of Ogbukagu (2008), *Ala* as the most important deity in Igbo traditional religion:

The *Ana* is *ipso facto*, the earth-divinity of the Igbo speaking peoples. It is the great mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and the queen of the under-world. It is generally believed to be the most powerful of all divinities who is also the custodian of public morality, assisted by the ancestors. (p. 385)

Onwu (2002) further describes *Ala* thus:

Of all the divinities, *Ala*-the Earth goddess is generally worshipped in Igbo land as the arch-divinity and seen as the goddess of fertility and guardian of Igbo morality, a power which controls - divinities and a force which brings fortune and economic prosperity. (p. 2).

In some places, Kalu (2003) observes that beautiful shrines or worship places are made for *Ala*:

Decorative shrines are built for the goddess. In other places, with plentiful expanse of agricultural land, a non-descript mound may serve. But in all she guards customs and morality. She arbitrates disputes because a false oath in her shrine could be dangerous (p. 35).

According to Odigbo (2012), there is a bond between every child and the *Ala* deity, which determines further relationships between the deity and the member of the Igbo community:

There is a relationship between the child and the goddess of the land. In fact, children were bonded to the land during some rituals and ceremonies. It is for this reason that such a child would be warned not to swear any false oath with the land or commit the stated taboos or all such things. Under such environments too, lands are worshipped as goddess of fruitfulness. Such goddesses make conception possible even for crops to grow to maturity to provide food for its inhabitants... it is almost as if there is a covenant between every child of the community and the goddess of the land. This relationship is spiritual and eternal. Therefore, whenever anything affects this relationship by means of grievous sin or crime then, it is considered an abomination. (p. 451).

The earth goddess has the function of exposing those who secretly commit evil and the evils they commit. It is in this regard that the Igbo say:

- a. *Ani tukwa gi* – may the earth expose you.
- b. *Ani bokwa gi ji n'aja* – which literally means “may the earth put yam and sand on your head”. This means, “may the earth goddess render you miserable and expose your shame”.
- c. *Ani jukwa gi* – (may the earth reject your corpse).

In Igbo land, the earth is holy, and from it, God produces all living things, including human beings. It is also through this earth that human beings rejoin their maker – *Chineke*. When a man therefore, commits a crime, he is said to have “*Meruo Ala*” (defiled the earth). If such a person dies without having “*Mejuo Ala*” (pacified the earth), the earth goddess whose function it is to expose people’s atrocities will reject the corpse of such a person. When the person is buried, the earth goddess throws up the corpse out of the belly of the earth. In this case, the bereaved are left with the option of cremation. The implication being that the soul of the person is destroyed and will never reincarnate. For such a soul, the Igbo would say: *enu erughi ya aka, ani erughi ya aka*, meaning that he has no share in the sky or earth. They end up as wicked spirits (Kanu 2015). Among the offences against *Ala* deity from the perspective of Achebe (1958) and Ilogu (1978) include:

- a. **Suicide:** Life is sacred and must be treated as such. When suicide is committed, the *Ala* goddess must be appeased for the restoration of balance to the earth.
- b. **Incest:** This is a grave sin to *Ala* and the consequences include deafness, blindness, paralysis, extreme poverty to death.

- c. **Stealing:** It is a sin against *Ala* to take what belongs to another without the consent of the owner.
- d. **Murder:** Spilling of the blood of another person is a sin against *Ala*. Especially when it has got to do with an innocent blood.
- e. **Fornication:** *Ala* forbids sexual relationship between persons who are not married or between persons who are married but are not spouse to each other.
- f. **Exploitation of nature:** Nature is considered sacred, the exploitation of it is frowned at by *Ala* deity. Nature in this context include some animals, streams, rivers and forests, etc.

While *Chukwu* is in charge of creation, *Ala* is in charge of conserving that which is created. While *Chukwu* is the giver of the moral law, *Ala* is the enforcer of the law. *Ala* is also the “womb” that holds and nurtures and renews when necessary. This explains why she is always depicted in diagrams as though she is pregnant:

The *Igbo*, an agrarian people, regard her as the “mother” of all crops. Before planting and harvest, they hold days of ritual ceremonies to appease *Ala* so that she will facilitate the growth of healthy crops or to thank her for making possible the abundant harvest soon to begin. In a year of drought or other agricultural misfortunes, the people undertake ritual processes meant to examine how they may have angered *Ala* and caused her to withhold her blessings. After they look for wrongdoing on the part of humans, they seek scientific explanations for crop failures. When religious and natural explanations conflict, mythical narratives are used to overcome contradictions (Kanu 2013).

Ecological Significance of *Ala* Deity

The preservation of the ecosystem by the Igbo occupies a fundamental place in the life, religion and culture of the people (Afigbo, 1975a; Jones, 1961). This explains why *Ani*, the Earth, occupies an important place in the Igbo story of religion and rituals. The *Ani*, as a deity when provoked could destroy the central life of the Igbo which is hinged on agriculture. Afigbo (1975a) writes that the provocation of *Ani* could:

... cause the harvests to fail and men to die prematurely- to the Igbo two of the worst disasters imaginable. It imposed innumerable laws and taboos to guide conduct between man and man, as between man and itself. The transgression of any of these rules known as *omenala* was promptly punished (pp. 42-43).

While the centrality of agriculture could account for the important place that *Ani* occupies among the Igbo, the land is also used by the Igbo for buildings, constructions, infrastructural developments, etc., (Kalu, 2003). There are also scholars who attribute the importance of *Ala* in Igbo society to the scarcity of land especially in the Northern part of Igboland (Afigbo, 1981; Allison, 1962; Hartle, 1967; Ijoma, 2002) which was the first part of Igboland to be occupied by human beings as far back as the Neolithic age or 3rd Century BC (Ezechi 2018; Hartle, 1967). With the important place that this deity occupies in Igbo life, it is difficult to discuss ecological issues without reference to her.

As a result of the relationship between the land and *Ala* deity, keeping the land sacred is a prerequisite for maintaining balance in the earth. The land is not just a solid part of the universe, it is a mother that is the abode of the living and the dead as human beings come from it and are buried in its belly. It is also regarded as a person and not just a thing to be used when needed. It is a person deserving of respect and care. This idea of person comes

from the Igbo understanding of the earth as a manifestation of a great spirit that dwells therein, that is, the *Ala*. What *Ala* deity does for the earth and its relationship with the human person is that it gives the land or earth a personal identity that has consciousness, which is fundamental for a healthy relationship with the earth.

This spiritual understanding of the earth and the world around helped the human person believe that people belong to the land and not the land to the people. Understanding the earth as a mother, they also saw the land as a source of life which nourishes, supports, and teaches. It provides people with resources for their survival and gave a sense of future to their life as life came from within the earth.

As a person, the earth has great representation among the Igbo people, and as such can speak through her representatives in the human world, that is the sacred personalities that serve the *Ala* deity. The land can also be heard since these sacred personalities speak in the language that the Igbo-African understand. This representation helps the human community to feel the land and relate with the land in such a manner that the balance of the earth is maintained. Within the context of representation, given that the earth is represented or is a manifestation of a great spirit, it receives an attention worthy of the great spirit it manifests.

In this relationship between traditional Igbo society and the earth, the understanding of the earth as mother brings in a new dimension to this relationship. Motherhood introduces the concepts of respect, love, care, empathy, support, patience, etc., in the relationship between human beings and the mother earth. These qualities, especially love, empathy, care, respect, etc., are indispensable for the promotion of the good health of the earth

in our modern world, given the very nature of the ecological crisis at hand. These concepts of care, respect, support, empathy, etc., which are missing in the current relationship between human beings and nature are at the heart of the ecological crisis. Another understanding of the earth goddess that has helped the Igbo traditional society to maintain balance in the earth is the understanding of themselves as tenants in a world whose landlord is *Ala*. And as tenants, one must be of good conduct so as to avoid been thrown out of the earth. This brings in the idea of obedience and submission in the relationship between human beings and the earth, not in such a manner that the human person becomes passive, but rather in such a manner that the human person enters into dialogue with the earth in his or her relationship with it. A very important principle that sustains the respect that the Igbo has for the earth is the understanding that whatever the human person sows, that he or she would reap at the end of the day. If the human person sows exploitation, he or she would reap the fruit of disaster. This makes environmental preservation a way of life at different levels: at the family level, community level, age grade level (Orji 1999, Abduftai et al 2014, Afigbo 1992, Odogwu 2013, Egboka 2000, Ogbonna 2009).

A concept used by scholars to express the Igbo-African connection to the earth is the image of the umbilical cord. It is the umbilical cord that links a child to its mother in her womb and cannot survive without this connection to the mother in the womb. Outside of the womb when the child has been born, the umbilical cord is buried immediately in the earth without which the child cannot survive in the world. Thus Megasa (2015) avers that “In many African cultures, when it is cut after the birth of a child, the umbilical cord is buried in a special place in the homestead, to signify the belonging of the new-born not only to the clan and its spirits, but also to the ancestral soil from which

it should normally not be alienated” (122). Just as a woman carefully carries the fetus linked to her through the umbilical cord, the human person is also linked to the mother earth. While in the womb, the death of the mother implies the death of the child, in the same way, while on the earth, the death of the earth spells the death of the human person. In the implication of destroying the mother earth for Magesa (20156) is “the death of humanity in the long run. By destroying nature, humanity slowly loses belonging. It has nowhere to belong to, no other place to call home, and no ambiance to deeply and meaningfully connect with in life and with which to enter into communion after death” (pp. 122-123).

Conclusion

The present work is an academic commitment or engagement on an issue of global concern, which is the relationship between the human person and the natural world, with specific attention on the earth. In dealing with this issue, is accorded the earth a powerful agency and influence in the physical and spiritual worlds, and therefore, worthy of respect and care; it also reveals the intricate connection between the Igbo traditional society and nature. This piece is more than a cultural conception of the earth among the Igbo-African people, it reveals the limitedness of the Western approach to issues of ecology and the need to build a more dynamic and inclusive approach towards the saving of the earth.

What the Western world simply calls ‘nature’ and defined in its broadest sense as the physical or material world or universe, in African traditional religion now becomes a spirit to be related with and respected. What is simply referred to as earth in Western understanding becomes the manifestation of a great spirit. What is seen as a thing to be exploited and used for

economic increase, now becomes in Igbo traditional society a mother who cares and who must be respected; a mother who loves, and who must be supported; a womb that carries the living-dead and thus must be venerated. This is the new perspective that an understanding of *Ala* deity brings into the global discussion on the sustainability of the environment.

References

- Abduftai et al (2014). *Review of gully erosion in Nigeria: Causes, impacts and possible solutions*.
<http://www.pubs.sciencepub.com>
- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.
- Afigbo, A. (1975). Prolegomena to the Study of the Cultural History of the Igbo – Speaking Peoples of Nigeria. In F. C .Ogbalu & E. Emenanjo (Eds.), *Igbo Language and Culture* (pp. 28 – 34). Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Afigbo, A. (1981). *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1992). *Ground work of Igbo history*.
<http://www.booksgoogle.com>
- Allison, P. (1962). Historical Inferences to be Drawn from the Effect of Human Settlement on the Vegetation of Africa. *Journal of African History*, 3, 241-249
- Butler, J. F. (1951). The Indian research series. *The Occasional Bulletin*. 11. 2. 1-8
- Egboka, B. (2000). *Gully erosion in alaigbo*.
<http://www.umuigboland.com>. Vol. 4. Washington.
- Ezechi, J. C. (2018). *Idols or Symbols*. Enugu: Enugu Diocesan Printing Press.
- Hartle, D. (1967). Archeology in Eastern Nigeria. *Nigeria Magazine*, 93, 134-143.
- Ijoma, J. (2002). Igboland: A Historical Perspective. In G.E.K. Ofomata (Ed.), *A Survey of the Igbo Nation* (pp. 39-54). Onitsha: Africana First Publishers.
- Ilogu, Edmund. *Christianity and Ibo Culture*. Boston: Brill, 1974.
- Jones, G. (1961). Ecology and Social Structure Among the North Eastern Ibo. *Africa*, 1 (31) 117-134.
- Kalu, O. (2003). *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991*. New Jersey: African World Press Inc.

- Kanu, I. A. (2013). The Dimensions of African Cosmology. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 2. 2. 533-555.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015a). *A hermeneutic approach to African Traditional Religion, philosophy and theology*. Augustinian Publications: Nigeria
- Kanu, I. A. (2015b). *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Augustinian Publications: Nigeria
- Magesa, L. (2015). African Spirituality and the Environment: Some Principles, Theses, and Orientations. *Hekima Review*, n. 53, December 2015, 119-129.
- Odigbo, Ikechukwu M. *Aspects of Igbo Cultures and Traditions from the Perspective of Umulumgbe Town*. Enugu: Dulacs Co. Ltd, 2012.
- Odogwu, E. (2013). *As erosion brings Anambra to her knees*. <http://www.punchngr.com>
- Ogbonna, R. (2009). *Erosion: Communities at the brink of extinction*. <http://www.nairaland.com>
- Ogbukagu, IK N.T. *Traditional Igbo Beliefs and Practices: A Study on the Culture and People of Adazi-Nnukwu*. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2008.
- Onwu, E. N. (2002). *ỤzỌ ndỤ na eziokwu: Towards an Understanding of Igbo Traditional Religious Life and Philosophy*. <http://ahiajoku.igbonet.com/2002>.
- Orji, M. O. (1999). *History and culture of the Igbo people*. Nkpor: Jet Publishers
- Oxford English Dictionary (2021). *Indigenization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schineller, P. (1990). *A handbook on inculturation*. New York: Paulist.