

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE DEPLETION OF THE AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT AND IN RECOVERING THE AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY

Chika J. B. Gabriel Okpalike

Abstract

This work is a comparative analysis of the connections and disconnections between Africans and their environment from a religious perspective considering two moments. The first is the period before the invasion by foreign religions and the second is the period when African Traditional Religion has almost been decimated. The work is based on the observation that the African environment is degrading and depleting. It builds on the hypothesis that results from environmental abuse and that religion played a great role in maintaining the ecosystem of the African environment of the past. Today foreign religions have overtaken the continent and there is disconnect between the adherents of these religions and the African environment. The work studies the place of the environment in the former religious sensibilities of the African and places it side by side the connection between the modern foreign religions and the environment. The degradation of the environment is one of the major challenges for human beings globally. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction captures environmental degradation as the reduction of the extent to which the earth could meet social and environmental purposes and needs. This degradation actively takes place in practically every little space in the world in as much as the extents to which they are felt vary. Ronaldo Wee had observed: "Human impact is the deciding factor that limits environmental sustainability in all its aspects."¹ In Africa, it is human beings who contribute 95% of the environmental issues that bedevil the continent more than nature. The ill-treatment or otherwise of the environment is not as a result of their hatred for it, but a skewed understanding of it and an acquired attitude of exploitation and manipulation of it. The work posits that it is religion more than anything else which reneged on the sacredness of the African environment and bred Africans who treat the environment irreverently. The work adopted the method of participant observation and contextual analysis of physical data. The area of study is Igbo land and references will be made to areas under coverage.

Keywords: Climate Change, Environmental Degradation, Environmental integrity, Ecosystem, Ecospirituality

¹Rolando Y. Wee, "15 Countries With The Worst Environmental Sustainability CPIA Ratings." *WorldAtlas*, Apr. 25, 2017, worldatlas.com/articles/15-countries-with-the-worst-environmental-sustainability-cpia-ratings.html.

Introduction

While the world is dealing with the challenges of climate change, the human physical environment is gradually deteriorating and becoming threatening to life itself. This work is founded on the hypothesis that it is the abuse of the environment which causes climate change because it does seem that even when human activities are recognized as the major causes of climate change, those activities are presented as more mechanical than ethical and moral. Most times, it is the exotic and sophisticated human activities like gas flaring, carbonemissions, deforestation and sand-filling which are on the radar of investigation whenever the greenhouse effect is touted. We easily hear of greenhouse emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane, water vapour and Chlorofluorocarbons, all useful but dangerous especially when anthropogenic or natural causes alter the natural greenhouse balance. The *National Geographic* represented these human mechanical activities that bring about climate change thus:

One of the first things the IPCC² concluded is that there are several greenhouse gases responsible for warming, and humans emit them in a variety of ways. Most come from the combustion of fossil fuels in cars, buildings, factories, and power plants. The gas responsible for the most warming is carbon dioxide, or CO₂. Other contributors include methane released from landfills, natural gas and petroleum industries, and agriculture (especially from the digestive systems of grazing animals); nitrous oxide from fertilizers; gases used for refrigeration and industrial processes; and the loss of forests that would otherwise store CO₂.³

Without disputing these facts, this work seeks a more fundamental cause of climate change especially in the African environment using the Igbo religious-cultural environment as a paradigm. The work recognizes that the environment under review is located in a religious universe. John S. Mbiti had described the African universe in terms of its religious character thus:

It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs morals, actions and social relationships. Up to a point in history this traditional religious attitude maintained an absolute monopoly over African concepts and experiences of life.⁴

² IPCC - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

³ National Geographic, "Causes of global warming, explained: Human activity is driving climate change, including global temperature rise," January 17, 2019,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/global-warming-causes/>

⁴ John S. Mbiti (1975). *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, p. 262

Religion was everything in Africa and still plays a pivotal role in understanding modern African cultures and social behaviours. Mbiti may have also missed out to add that it is religion which sheds the light into the secret, complicated and unexplored area of African science and technology. Again, contrary to Mbiti's position, there is no point at which religion lost its absolute hold on the African universe, it is the task before the native anthropologist to discover the religious spirit that characterizes each epoch. In line with these thoughts, Oliver A. Onwubiko had opined: "No religionless culture can survive in Africa. It has not survived in the "modern" society nor in the anticipated "post modern" society of today."⁵ In this work, the religious consciousness that defines this African character as such was divided into two by both time and religious essence.

The work was done in Igbo land. The Igbo live predominantly in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Its people largely occupy the western and eastern part of the Niger River. Political intrigues and interests have created divisions among them through the years that some of them deny being Igbo even when every of their evidential identity is Igbo. The area presents a typical African environment because their religious nature and consciousness did not fizzle away in the decades following the drastic cultural distortions engineered by the west and foreign religions. Today, the Igbo are mostly Christians, exhibiting and exercising the same religious zeal and enthusiasm that in many ways dominate all other aspects of human life. Among them, the idea of the extant preservation and conservation of the environment among them have been distorted by the foreign culture and religion they took on. The unintended consequence is that their environment is the one of the worst hit destruction as a result of human activities. As at the time of this research, many communities in Igbo land does not have the *AjoOhia* forest reserve anymore, totem animals that use to be a good part of different environments are extinct, trees that have stood for centuries have been cut down, rivers have dried up and houses have sprung in former sacred spaces, sacred hills have been cut down to make way for asphalted roads and all these human interferences are often than not are plotted and executed by foreign religions. Even in the former sacred spaces occupied by the new foreign religions, the once deep sense of awe exuded by the environment has disappeared

In other words, right at the very interior of African villages, rivers are drying up, hills are transforming into lowlands/valleys, houses are springing up on farmlands and roads are cutting through former sacred bushes. Land has become, for the average African, the most fundamental asset for estate development; having only economic value and social significance. On the contrary, in a typical African environment, land is understood as the counterpart of the sky in a cosmic "Earth". In this work, more than the depletion of the ozone layer, the melting away of ice on the Arctic region and the active decays on the Himalayas, the increasing threat of flooding, erosions and landslides to the lives of simple Africans is a great source of worry. Lives are lost and the environment is being constantly under pressure,

⁵ Oliver A. Onwubiko (1991), *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. Enugu: SNAAP, p. xvii - xviii

producing hundreds of internally displaced persons, unrest and general uncertainties. The failure of governance, poor funding, corruption and the lack of political will are often penned as the causes of these deplorable situations of things in the African environment. In the face of all the research, evaluation and recommendations, not much has been achieved and things are deteriorating from bad to worse.

This work investigates the religious dimension in the present environmental situation in Africa and what religion can do to help bring solution to the ailing environment. The work ventures into the unexplored dimension of the African environmental issues to expose what went wrong in the course of the African development. Through the method of participant observation and analytic hermeneutics, it examined African religious consciousness and significance of religious practices prior to contact with foreign religions, contemporary religious consciousness and the influence of both in the African physical environment. The work aims at the possibility of the new religions in Africa tapping into the persistent and pervasive African religious spirit, to evolve religious practices which preserves and promotes the integrity of the African environment.

Fundamental Beliefs in African Traditional Religion in Relation to the Human Environment

The African Religious and Spiritual Universe

In this section we present the African environment before her encounter with foreign religions, at the point when the traditional religion is the only religion in the continent. African Traditional Religion is a religion founded on nature and driven by nature. Writing about the Ashanti, K. A. Busia pointed out: "To the Ashanti Nature is a world of spirits. It is filled with the spirits of rivers, trees, rocks, and animals and with the malignant spirits of fairies and forest monsters."⁶ It is a religious system in which adherents pay attention to, revere and preserve nature together with the discipline of conforming to nature's demands without hurting it. The African world is fundamentally populated by spirits but peopled by humans whose survival is dependent on the extent to which they served the discernible programs of the spirits. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer consistently referred to Ethiopians as the friends of the gods of Olympus, even Zeus went off to feast with them. In the *Iliad*, Thetis had told Achilles: "Only yesterday Zeus went off to the Ocean River to feast with the Aethiopians, loyal, lordly men, and all of the gods went with him."⁷ The spiritual nature of the African environment was clearly demonstrated by the quantity and quality of religious activities that went on in it, so much so that they attract the gods of Olympus to Africa. Meanwhile the Greeks (Europeans) were heavily laden under the predicament of the capricious will of the

⁶ K. A. Busia (1970), "The Ashanti", in Daryll Forde (Ed), *African Worlds: Studies in the cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 196

⁷ *Iliad*, 1.423-4

gods and fate of the common rivalry among them. Homer's observation underscores the previous position of Mbiti that Africa is a religious universe and Busia puts it succinctly:

To the Ashanti the universe is full of spirits. There is the Great Spirit, the Supreme Being, who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits which animate trees, animals, charms; and then there are the ever-present spirits of the ancestor (*nsamanfo*) whose constant contact with the life of man on earth brings the world of the spirits so close to the land of the living.⁸

In other words, it is not just a religious friendly environment, but an environment in which every space and every object is sacred. Due to the pervasiveness of African Traditional Religion, Africans consecrated almost everything to the gods and spirits. As Anthony N. O. Ekwunife puts it:

The Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting realities – the spiritual and material, each impinging on the other. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate and inanimate beings. In this world, the material mirrors the sacred in different degrees. Though homo-centric (man centred) in practice, yet it finds its ultimate meaning in Transcendence.⁹

Ekwunife went into further depth to show that the Igbo consecrate time, space, animate and inanimate objects to spirits. To an external observer this behavior of the Igbo may appear as the vestiges of an uncivilized and uneducated race that lack the knowledge of natural science. It is rather that with the pervasive character of religion, arts, architecture, science, technology, politics and indeed every aspect of human life is religious. John A. Umeh gave a deep insight into the understanding of nature for the African:

Whatever your profession or calling may be, if your receptive and perceptive faculties are open and alert, you will observe that nature is the supreme adept and the ultimate. Nature is the best scientist, the best architect, the best estate surveyor and valuer, the best musician, the best doctor, the best in anything, just name it.¹⁰

Arthur Glyn Leonard expressed this religious nature of native Africans thus: “[t]he religion of these natives (Africans) is their existence and their existence is their religion... The entire organization of their common life is so interwoven with

⁸K. A. Busia (1970), “The Ashanti”, in Daryll Forde (Ed), *African Worlds: Studies in the cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 191

⁹ Anthony N. O. Ekwunife (2003), *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, Enugu: SNAAP Press, p. 18

¹⁰ J. A. Umeh (1997), *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria*, Vol 1, England: Karnak House

it that they cannot get away from it.”¹¹ In their daily lives and religious practices, it is only an informed insight into understanding of life and expectations from it and their fears about realizing all that life has in stock for them that reveals their scientific approach to the environment especially a futuristic dimension in those practices that may be dismissed as merely religious. It is important to review some of those daily practices which this researcher has encountered through more than four decades by participant observation in order to offer a more critical analysis of them in terms of the subject matter – environment.

Religious Models in the Preservation and conservation of the African Physical Environment: The Igbo Experience

African Traditional Religion is best read in the environment of its practice. It is not one of the religions of the book. Therefore, any student of the religion does not expect to see doctrines, liturgical forms, ritual recommendations or the likes recorded or preserved in written forms. The student of the religion should first of all exercise a commensurate empathy for the religion to read its aspects through direct encounters with the environment of its practice and with the practitioners themselves. This corroborates the position of Oliver A. Onwubiko:

Our (African) cultural values are documented in our myths, songs, symbols and signs, proverbs and riddles, and in our works of art. It only demands a little more hard work to penetrate the cultural values of non-literate cultures to appreciate their meanings.¹²

In doing this study, the student should be able to encounter the inner sense of deposits and practices of the religion without bias. This is because a lot have been distorted and wrongfully taught about the religion. A good instance is *AjoOhia*.

The Sacred Space of AjoOhia (Ofia) in the Igbo Environment

Joseph Ogbonna had a deep insight into the misunderstanding this very important space in the Igbo environment had suffered through more than a century since African encounter with western culture. According to him:

Ajo-ohia is one of the last remaining virgin forests in Southeastern Nigeria. It is second to none in that region of the country in terms of its bio-diversity. Aquatic life has been largely preserved over the centuries due to the traditional beliefs of the local people about ‘sacred’ species like the crocodile. Ajo-ohia’s thick vegetation is home to some of the rarest terrestrial creatures on earth. Its tall shade trees provide cover from the blistering heat of the tropical sun by day. At sunset, its crimson sun is undoubtedly nature to behold. This last fragment of Eden becomes a dreadful place to be by night, due to its belligerent darkness. Thick darkness that is often accompanied by the pervasive coolness of the placid night’s

¹¹The Lower Niger and Its Tribes. London: Macmillan and Company Publishers., p. 429

¹²Oliver A. Onwubiko (1991), African Thought, Religion and Culture. Enugu: SNAAP, p. xi

breeze, in spite of the overwhelming sounds of nocturnal creatures.¹³

Here Ogbonna sounded like *AjoOhia* is a singular location in the whole of Southeastern Nigeria. On the contrary, every community had *AjoOhia* in their environment and he seemed to underscore what this space meant for each community. In this work, *AjoOhia* is understood as a reserve area barred from human interference for the purpose of the preservation of species (plants and animals alike). It is found in every community among the Igbo.¹⁴ The idea of this preservation includes conservation for a more shrewd and controlled use and consumption of such species. In as much as it is a general rule that no human activities whatsoever is allowed in *AjoOhia*, the *Dibia* who are at the apex of the religious hierarchy in Igbo land make copious use of the space. It is there that they can readily find rare herbs, roots, barks of trees, insects, animal extracts and so on for medicinal and ritual purposes. This class knows the nook and crannies of *AjoOhia* and the ritual laws and observances of making a journey through it. To ordinary folks, *AjoOhia* is a no-go area and one goes contrary to it at the risk of one's life. It is believed that deceitful and tricky spirits abound in *AjoOhia* whose spells will make one roam *AjoOhia* for the rest of one's life, ultimately ending in torture and death of such a person in the face of isolation and hunger. In the evidential use case especially for the *Dibia* class, *AjoOhia* is a preserved area where rare species are conserved in a more balanced ecosystem with highly controlled human activities, creating an environment where species are preserved and conserved for the good and enhancement of the life of the community.

Deploying the Moral Principle of *Nso* in Environmental Preservation and Conservation among the Igbo

Nso is one part of the moral couplet *Nso na Ome*. It is a concept that properly describes all prohibitions in the Igbo moral universe. The observance of it keeps one connected to the center of Igbo cosmic energy guaranteeing one sustained existence and survival in the world. According Chika J. B. Gabriel Okpalike:

In morality, *Nso* is made up of prohibitions or taboos which must be strictly avoided. Keeping away from or avoiding *Nso* certainly guaranteed the enhancement of life in the social and spiritual sphere.¹⁵

Here we record some of the evidences of environmental preservation and conservation sustained through the religious deployment of the moral principles of

¹³ Joseph Ogbonna (2021), "The Redemption Of Ajo-ohia Forest", in *Dreamer's Reality*, retrieved June 17, 2021, from http://www.dreamersreality.com/poems/read/18872/Joseph_Ogbonna/The_Redemption_Of_f_Ajo-ohia_Forest/Short_Stories_-_fiction/

¹⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, USA: Anchor Books, 1994, p. 189

¹⁵ Chika J. B. Gabriel Okpalike, "The Re-Birth of African Moral Traditions as Key to the Development of SubSaharan Africa: The Igbo Paradigm", *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, 5, 1, 2015, p. 8.

Nsọ. Every Igbo know the dire consequence of going against the regulations of *Nsọ*. These consequences can be social, spiritual and fatal. For instance, in some Igbo areas like Akpo, Achina and Amesi, all in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, the *Udara* tree is not plucked by any means. It is *Nsọ* to do otherwise. Therefore, whoever desires to enjoy its fruit must be patient enough to wait for it to fall to him/her all by itself. In the olden days, the shade of the *Udara* tree was the traditional playground for children. There, children inadvertently wait on the *Udara* tree to be as benevolent as offering them its fruit. Anyone who was so blessed to pick its fruit in turn is not expected to eat it alone, except in a situation where it fell in numbers as to go round all the children. Among the people of that culture, a contrary behavior is viewed as taboo (*Nsọ*). This idea of conservation informs the reason why many fruiting trees are most likely barred from random harvesting by individuals and passersby simply by symbolically bringing in a masquerade to plant a tender palm leaf on it. The whole idea here is that preservation and conservation of species are inclusive in the traditional intent of the Igbo for which they dedicate spaces and objects to the spirits.

In Umuelem Isuochi, Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia State, bats are preserved and conserved. The bat is a choice protein for the people of the area. According to a traditional legend, the bats migrated from a place called Aku in Okigwe of the neighbouring Imo State. It is prohibited to hunt them with guns so as to make it difficult to kill many of them at the same time and no to scare them away with the sound from guns. According to Kingsley Ekele Eze, “they first settled in Ngodo on a big iroko tree behind Chieringo Diribe’s compound near Obinugwu”¹⁶ They later swarmed Nneochi forest where indigenes were able to hunt them even with bare hands in curiosity since they didn’t know what they were. When they found it was delicious and beneficial, a man known as Ikeawaji hunted them with his gun out of greed. This caused the bats to retreat and the people believed they did because of mindlessly preying on them. Prohibitions, regulations and taboos were contrived to preserve and conserve the specie to foster their continued existence, In these modern times, the bat nests in practically all the trees in Isuochi except in Nneochi where they were treated unkindly.

In Abala, Ndokwa East of Delta State which is one of the riverine areas of Igbo land, natives are barred from fishing at *Ọmụmịlị*. *Ọmụmịlị* is the terminal precipitation point of the hydrological cycle in that environment and Abala people believed it was the source of all waters (also referred to as *Ọnụmmịrị* in other parts of Igbo land). Human activities are always prohibited at such points so that the vital balance in the ecosystem will be maintained for the preservation and conservation of species in the environment. Since fishing is the major pastime of the people of Abala, that activity was prohibited with religious colouring and anybody who flouted it will be visited by vengeful marine spirits.

In Akpo, Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, the native town of the present researcher, natives are prohibited from hunting snail in the Udo forest. This

¹⁶Kingsley EkeleEze, *Personal Communication*, September 9, 2021

is the only area that breeds the giant snails in numbers without any human enhancement. Udo is a popular *Arusi* (god) in Igbo Traditional Religion. Dedicating this area to a god was to ask it to protect the space from the misuse or trespass if anybody. However, snails that crawl away from the Udo forest could be hunted down and eaten. This is another case of preservation and conservation of species among the Igbo.

There are numerous other cases of these ranges of preservation and conservation of the environment among the Igbo. These were cited to give concrete instances. However, there are other models.

Deploying the Social Principle of *İku* in Environmental Preservation and Conservation among the Igbo

İku is a socio-ethical practice among the Igbo whereby a person, place or thing is directly or indirectly appropriated for/by a person thereby furnishing the appropriator with full or partial right over the appropriated. It may also be rendered as *İkuru* (*İkulu*) for emphasis. *İku Mbaa* is the commonest expression of *İku* found even among kids. It is a symbolic embrace that signifies unity of purpose but in its most involving aspect signifies merging of essence with a metaphysical implication. The action of *İku Mbaa* even inadvertently, in many cases has transformed *Diala* (freeborn) into *Osu* (a caste of the compromised, with debilitating social stigmatization). *İku/İkuru Ala* is the appropriation of a physical space by/for a person spirit or thing. Random spaces in the Igbo environment through this socio-ethical practice are dedicated to spirits and they existed in great numbers in the old Igbo environment. The consequence of this old practice was that almost every space in every community one way or another is spiritually connected to a deity and is treated with religious reverence. By *İku/İkuru Ala*, the Igbo may not have intended preservation or conservation directly but same reverts as the unintended consequence of that dedication and consequent reverential treatment of the area. *İku/İkuru Ala* is effected through a ritual process referred to as *İgoMmuo* whose particular aspect is *IdoIyi/Arusi*, *ItuIyi/Arusi*, *IkwaIyi/Arusi* or *İkpoma*, depending on the Igbo culture area represented. By that ritual action, the spirit is invoked for the protection of a space or property interference into which smacks of dire consequences or to witness the agreement entered into by at least two parties renegeing from which also smacks of dire consequences.¹⁷ The Igbo physical environment was an expression of the Igbo religious consciousness in varied ways. That way, religion played a vital role in preserving and conserving the natural ecosystem of the environment.

Method of Data Collection and Interpretation

To do this work, we employed the method of participant observation and contextual analysis. The present researcher is at the same time Igbo, Christian and priest; he has been a center player in the gains made by Christianity and observant

¹⁷Chika J. B. Gabriel Okpalike, *Ichuaja in Igbo Traditional Religion*, New York: Iuniverse, 2008, pp. 119 -123

of the losses recorded in environmental deficits. This work taps from more than two decades of actively participating in the work of Christian evangelization and restructuring the Igbo environment to fit into the new architectural and aesthetic sense offered by Christianity and Western culture. In doing contextual analysis, the researcher is aware of the approach as represented by Stephen C. Behrendt,

A contextual analysis combines features of formal analysis with features of “cultural archeology, ” or the systematic study of social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic conditions that were (or can be assumed to have been) in place at the time and place when the text was created. While this may sound complicated, it is in reality deceptively simple: it means “situating” the text within the milieu of its times and assessing the roles of author, readers (intended and actual), and “commentators” (critics, both professional and otherwise) in the reception of the text.¹⁸

However, context here is understood as physical geographical location of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, together with their acquired world view and culture as influenced by Western culture and Christianity in terms of the extent to which it has impacted on their environment. This dual approach is deployed on data collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are interviews conducted with people who are knowledgeable in the Igbo culture of their areas and who have experienced the social change and factors that engineered them for at least two decades. Secondary sources include books, journal articles and internet materials that address issues around the subject matter under investigation. Further on, the work used qualitative descriptive and comparative method of analysis of collected data. With descriptive method, the primary data cast in a more comprehensible form which any reader can relate to and with comparative method primary data was used to check the specious entries often found in secondary source. A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to penetrate areas of the Igbo life with scanty or no written evidences.

The Decimation of the African Religious Environment by Foreign Religions: The Igbo Experience

The foreign religions especially Christianity and Islam in diverse ways were pitched against African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a fundamental disposition in the historical encounter of both. There was either a lack of readiness/capacity to understand or an outright posture to fight all ATR stood for. Brigid Sackey asserted two similar fundamental dispositions of the scriptural religions – lack of understanding ATR and the conviction that they are in possession of the absolute truth.¹⁹Consequent upon that, any affirmative judgment of the practices of ATR is

¹⁸Stephen C. Behrendt, “Using Contextual Analysis to evaluate texts,” *University of Nebraska – Lincoln*, 2008, <http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html>

¹⁹BrigidSackey, “African Traditional Religions”, *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*, AWACC Publications, 1993, p. 124

equivalent to being unchristian and to be a Christian is to reject (in its totality) the false ways of ATR. Joseph Osei-Bonsu described what conversion to Christianity meant for the early Christians in Africa thus:

The missionaries and the people being evangelized failed to distinguish between the basic Christian message and the Western culture in which it had been couched. As a result many people regarded and still regard Christianity as the White Man's religion". Also the missionaries imposed Western culture on our forefathers whom they evangelized, so that joining the Christian church was virtually equivalent to being estranged from one's culture.²⁰

In other words, it is not only the message of the Christian religion which convinced the African, but that they were also coerced into accepting the "Whiteman's" way of life. That way of life includes his philosophy, culture, architecture, science and technology and so forth; whereas accepting them demanded a total rejection of that of traditional Africa. Sometimes the African is also cajoled into accepting the fatal absence of same or its equivalent among Africans. Therefore, the new ways of the "Whiteman" is "filling in the blank space" in the deplorable African life. This disposition ensured a total and unalloyed conformity to everything Western. The two scriptural religions of Christianity and Islam have dominated the continent of Africa and more so Nigeria, and in public affairs, only a lip service is paid to ATR and is given next to no considerations. Among the Igbo, evidences or vestiges of ATR are being eliminated by every means possible while Christian monuments are being erected. Wellington Ornyezinnuchimm Wotogbe- Weneka²¹, Chukwuma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa and Gloria Tochukwu Okeke²² had decried the varied forms of destroying the vestiges of ATR, highlighting its economic implications for the Igbo. This present researcher is more concerned with the extent to which the Igbo environment has been impacted by it. Those vestiges represented the presence of revered spirits among the Igbo, reverence and worship of whom reverted to the preservation and conservation of the environment.

Various Igbo communities offered the missionaries the areas of the community traditionally known as *Ajo Ohia* not because they intended to give up that most important region of their geographical landscape, but because they trusted that the spirits which sustained the scare-stiff tales about that part of town will deal squarely and decisively with those unwanted intruders to save them from their

²⁰Joseph Osei-Bonsu, "Effective Evangelization in Africa Today: Its Contents, Forms and Priorities", *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*, AWACC Publications, 1993, p. 176.

²¹Wellington Ornyezinnuchimm Wotogbe- Weneka, "The implications of the massive demolition/destruction of sacred groves in the 21st century in Ikwere of Niger Delta", *Paper presented at the 21st annual conference of the Nigeria association for the study of religion (NASR)*, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2013, September 3-6

²²Chukwuma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa, and Gloria Tochukwu Okeke, "Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example", *Sage Open*, 2017, pp1-10, DOI: 10.1177/2158244017709322

weird ways. Chinua Achebe showed same sense when he described such treatment meted out to missionaries in Mbanta.

Every clan and village had its "evil forest." In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An "evil forest" was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.²³

But *AjọOhia* was the apex symbol of the preservation and conservation of species in the Igbo environment. It is the traditional reserve to balance out the ecosystem which is obviously affected by various kinds of human activities in the community. The fact that the missionaries cleared *AjọOhia* built on and lived in it unscathed earned the Christian religion the credibility and validity it came to enjoy among the Igbo. The decimation of *AjọOhia* was the beginning of the conquest of the gods and spirits of ATR by the Christian missionaries. Unknown to the Igbo was that the consequence of accepting the Christian God was accepting alongside it the culture, philosophy, architecture, science and technology of the his bearers.

The vicinity of *AjọOhia* was not a thoroughfare for the native people. On the contrary, when the missionaries occupied it, it became the center of community gathering; this amounted to a complete turn around and reversing of the status quo ante. Sequel to this all other spaces that reminded the Igbo of the sacred duty to preserve and conserve the environment was condemned as devil infested areas. Consequently, the Igbo lost all respect and reverence formerly accorded them. In their new found faith, they found it expedient to destroy those spaces. Furthermore, the new way of life furnished them with a new sense of environment and aesthetics. Forests and bushes became symbols of uncivilized and primitive environment, bricks and metal sheets were preferred to mud/clay and thatched/bamboo, narrow paths became broad ways and so on. The former community consciousness gave way to a more individualist consciousness while estate became a capitalist venture instead of a communalist treasure. It has been highlighted above that the missionaries did not understand the African way of life. They did not also care to factor in that African way of life in the process of evangelizing Africans. The ripple effect of their method resulted in a sustained and continued destruction of the environment by a people held under the sway of a western scheme.

The Restoration of African Environmental Integrity: The role of foreign religions

The Christian and Islamic cultures have dominated most part of Africa and have decimated the former traditional culture. They have introduced a new civilization

²³Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, USA: Anchor Books, 1994, p. 148

which has taken over from the former African civilization. The tools of their politics, education, economy, science and technology have been handed on to Africans who now live in accord with what they received like they had none of their own before. Dare Arowolo avers that there are three major effects of western culture on African culture, political, economic and social; he concluded thus:

The trend of cultural westernisation of Africa has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilisation has taken precedence over African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. As with other societies and cultures in the so-called Third World, the impact of Western civilization on Africa has occasioned a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent.²⁴

In a bid to reconstruct the social structure of traditional Africa, the physical structure has to be affected. Thus the place of spiritual encounter moved from amidst the people to isolated areas of the communities. It has been written earlier that most churches in Igbo land were replacements of the former *AjọOhĩa* and became the only place in the community where spirits are encountered. The God of Christianity is permissive and accommodating of human failings and its spirits unfamiliar to the African. The churches have become the only extant sacred spaces in Igbo land, rendering spaces outside them secular and profane. The Igbo have lost that sense of environmental reverence and morality once driven by the consciousness of the sacredness of *Ala* itself and other dedicated spaces is at its lowest ebb. Goals and aspirations of human living have radically changed from a communalist and communitarian ethos to a capitalist and individualist one. To accumulate surplus value and exercise economic dominance, spaces in the environment formerly understood as essentially preserved and conserved reverentially are now valued economically and any part of the environment can be converted to any conceivable use.

In the spiritual domain, while the African runs the risk of not integrally connecting to the spirits, he is also most likely to take advantage of God's benevolence and the remoteness of the spirits. The Christian religion for many Africans is still "Whiteman's religion". There exists an interior spiritual estrangement borne by the African which is often denied or neglected for which the African looks upon his culture, environment and ancestry as flawed; an attitude that empowers him to treat that environment with irreverence.

Holmes Rolston, III contends that the Christian Bible does not have any knowledge of ecology and may not be used as foundation to ecological sciences, citing the survey of the British Ecological Society of the Bible which found that the fifty most important concepts in ecology were totally absent. However, he

²⁴Dare Arowolo, "The Effects of Western Civilisation and Culture on Africa," *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* Volume 1, No. 1 Quarter IV, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/45049018/THE_EFFECTS_OF_WESTERN_CIVILISATION_AND_CULTURE_ON_AFRICA

suggested that the people of the Fertile Crescent were deep into their “native range ecology.” For instance:

They see their promised land, fertile and productive, as a gift from Yahweh. They do not obey Nature...but Torah, the commandments of God: "Happy are those ... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord. ... They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season . . . The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away" (Ps. 1:1-3). The Hebrews interpret their crop failures owing to drought as divine wrath (Jer. 14)²⁵

In that interesting study, Holmes Rolston, III sought the connection between the Bible and ecological sciences and found it in human values which he understands as the domain of the Bible. He asserts that it is rather the human ecology, which dominated biblical discourses that could ground ecological sciences on the Bible. Going by this study, Christianity which has taken over the Igbo spiritual sphere can comfortably drive the Igbo religious consciousness to more eco-friendly religious expressions. Foreign religions in general should seek the essence of African religiosity and incorporate it in their mode of religious expressions in Africa. It is only religion which can play the role of reconnecting Africans and the Igbo to their former reverential treatment of the environment and thereby restoring its environmental integrity.

Summary and Conclusion

This study was conducted against the backdrop of environmental degradation in Africa which has resulted in climate change. The drying up of rivers, desertification, flooding, landslides and so on are some of the common experiences in Africa, whereas deforestation, blocking of waterways, bush burning, reclaiming lands from oceans, are some of the evidential human activities going on in the continent. The study agreed with the position of Brigid Sackey that in as much as there exists religious diversity in Africa in accordance with ethnic groupings, yet there are visible patterns that enable the discussion on one ethnic group to suffice for the rest of Africa. In this study, we understood the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria as a typical African setting. The study found that the Christian religion played a major role in decimating the former religious environment in Igbo land in as much as it confined the area of spiritual encounter in the church and inadvertently created more profane and secular spaces in Igbo land. Christianity posed to possess the ultimate truth of human relationship with God and spirits. However, that posture was not reason why it was able to sway the Igbo spirit. Rather the fatal appropriation of the sacred spaces of ATR among the Igbo and the inability of the spirits of the religion to prove their mettle cowed the Igbo spirit which the

²⁵Holmes Rolston, *The Bible and Ecology, Interpretation - Journal of Bible and Theology*, 50, 1996, p. 19.

missionaries cashed in on and accomplished a wholesale transfer of the Western culture to the Igbo in the name of Christianity. Western culture had isolated human elements and severed the Holy/Church from the Profane/State. It is this culture of isolationism which the missionaries fused with Christianity, and Africans were not able to figure out the difference. The work acknowledged that the religious culture of Africa especially the Igbo was eco-friendly; preserving and conserving various kinds of species to keep the ecosystem in a natural balance. Christianity looked down on nature just as its beginning is the acknowledgement of a flawed humanity characterized by the “Original sin”. Nature was a phase through which a super nature will be gained. On the contrary, it was nature itself which offered the area of spiritual encounter to traditional Africa and nothing is removed from nature for that experience to come through. Every component of nature is a veritable abode of the spirit. Therefore, in ATR, the spiritual intertwined the physical and spirits walked the streets of men. The continued existence of the African in a universe peopled by spirits as well as humans demanded that humans accord to nature commensurate reverence to attract the benevolence of the spirits. In so doing, nature is preserved and conserved and environmental degradation checked to a large extent. It is religion which will play a pivotal role in addressing the issues of climate change in Africa. Since religion and religious regulations were at the service of nature to preserve and conserve it in traditional Africa, foreign religions, especially Christianity in the case of the Igbo, which have replaced ATR, should device ways and means to evolve more eco-friendly religious practices.

Chika J.B. Gabriel Okpalike

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka-Nigeria

Email: cg.okpalike@unizik.edu.ng

References

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*, USA: Anchor Books, 1994.

Arowolo, Dare “The Effects of Western Civilisation and Culture on Africa,” *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 1, No. 1 Quarter IV, 2010, https://www.academia.edu/45049018/THE_EFFECTS_OF_WESTERN_CIVILISATION_AND_CULTURE_ON_AFRICA

Behrendt, Stephen C., “Using Contextual Analysis to evaluate texts,” *University of Nebraska* – *Lincoln*, 2008, <http://english.unl.edu/sbehrndt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html>

Busia, K. A. (1970), “The Ashanti”, in Daryll Forde (Ed), *African Worlds: Studies in the cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, London: Oxford University Press.

- Leomard, A. G. (1906), *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes*. London: Macmillan and Company Publishers.
- Ekwunife, A. N. O. (2003), *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, Enugu: SNAAP Press.
- Eze. Kingsley Ekele, *Personal Communication*, September 9, 2021.
- Mabogunje, Akin L. “The Environmental Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa” African Technology Forum, Reprinted from *Environment*, Volume 37, Number 4, page 4, May 1995, <http://web.mit.edu/africantech/www/articles/EnvChall.htm>
- Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann.
- National Geographic, “*Causes of global warming, explained: Human activity is driving climate change, including global temperature rise,*” January 17, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/global-warming-causes/>
- Ogbonna, J. (2021), “The Redemption Of Ajo-ohia Forest”, in *Dreamer’s Reality*, retrieved June 17, 2021, from http://www.dreamersreality.com/poems/read/18872/Joseph_Ogbonna/The_Redemption_Of_Ajo-ohia_Forest/Short_Stories_-_fiction/
- Okeke, Chukwuma O., Ibenwa, Christopher N. and Okeke, Gloria Tochukwu, “Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example”, *Sage Open*, 2017, pp 1–10, DOI: 10.1177/2158244017709322
- Okpalike, Chika J. B. Gabriel, *Ichuaja in Igbo Traditional Religion*, New York: Iuniverse, 2008,
- Okpalike, Chika J. B. Gabriel, “The Re-Birth of African Moral Traditions as Key to the Development of Sub-Saharan Africa: The Igbo Paradigm”, *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, 5, 1, 2015, p. 8.
- Onwubiko, Oliver Alozie, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. Enugu: SNAAP, 1991.
- Osei-Bonsu, Joseph, “Effective Evangelization in Africa Today: Its Contents, Forms and Priorities”, *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*, AWACC Publications, 1993,
- Rolston, Holmes, *The Bible and Ecology, Interpretation - Journal of Bible and Theology*, 50, 1996.
- Sackey, Brigid, “African Traditional Religions”, *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*, AWACC Publications, 1993.

Umeh, JohnAnene, *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria*, Vol 1, England: Karnak House, 1997.

Wee, Rolando Y. "15 Countries With The Worst Environmental Sustainability CPIA Ratings." *WorldAtlas*, Apr. 25, 2017, retrieved September 21, 2021, worldatlas.com/articles/15-countries-with-the-worst-environmental-sustainability-cpia-ratings.html.

Wotogbe-Weneka, Wellington Ornyezinnuchimm, "The implications of the massive demolition/destruction of sacred groves in the 21st century in Ikwere of Niger Delta", *Paper presented at the 21st annual conference of the Nigeria association for the study of religion (NASR)*, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2013, September 3-6