

The Role of Traditional Beliefs Systems in Environmental Management: A Case of Igbo Society

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Abstract

In recent times, there has been a growing awareness among both environmentalist and researchers alike about the role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Practices in environmental conservation and climate change mitigation. There are sufficient evidences inherent in indigenous knowledge system and practice across the globe in support of this proposition. Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria, there are numerous proofs in support of this characterization manifest in Igbo cosmology and cultural practices. Traditional conservation practices in Igbo land have existed for many years before western intrusion and subsequent colonization. These cultural practices which are transmitted from one generation to another are infused with pro- environmental values that reinforces resource stewardship and conservation at various levels of Igbo society. This exploratory paper highlights the role of Igbo traditional belief and practices in natural resources conservation and management. Using Values, Beliefs and Norms theory as a theoretical construct the authors opine that the Igbo traditional belief system and practices are imbued with pro-environmental values that promote resource stewardship which should be studied, embraced by all in our quest to save our endangered earth.

Keywords: traditional beliefs systems, environmental management, Igbo society

INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradations and environmental disasters are in the increase worldwide. The International Strategy For Disaster Reduction (International Strategy For Disaster Reduction, 2006), reported that over 478,100 people have lost their lives, while about 2.5 billion people were affected within the past years due to disaster. These disasters have also exerted direct economic losses estimated at billions of US dollars worldwide.

Degradation and deterioration in the environment, coupled with daily human activities, are causes of many disasters like landslide, flooding, fire, desertification and other forms of accident. Environmental conditions, especially the negatives, like deforestation, forest management practices, and some agricultural systems, can worsen the situation, leading to flooding and water contamination (Srinivas, 2015). Disaster Reduction and natural resources conservation have been on the front burner globally. There have been numerous international treaties and conventions, policies, laws and Acts enacted by countries across the world aimed at promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability however, the fact remains that much have to be done in order to save our planet from imminent catastrophe.

Long before the advent of western education and introduction of modern forms of natural resource conservation and management, indigenous tribes across African have well developed mechanism for resource management and environmental sustainability. They have effectively used the knowledge of their local environments to sustain themselves and preserve their ecological diversity for years.

Ecological anthropology literature is replete with vast Traditional Ecological Knowledge and its contributions towards a better understanding of natural resources and its sustainable use in environmental management (Lertzman, 2009; Toledo, 2000; Guerrero-Gatica, M.; Mujica, M.I.; Barceló, M.; Vio-Garay, M.F.; Gelcich, S.; Armesto, J.J. 2020; Attuquayefio and Gyampoh, 2010). For instance among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria, biodiversity conservation of has been an integral aspect of their cultural ethos. The Igbos consider themselves connected with their biophysical environment in a web of spiritual relationship.

They venerate specific plants, animals, or even consider some as their ancestors. Their deep understanding and strong affinity to nature has helped them develop a repertoire of knowledge on biodiversity, conservation systems and the diverse ways in which resources can be managed to bring about sustainability. Only recently has this knowledge been given recognition as a valuable source of environmental and social information by western scientific community. As we are confronted with unprecedented level of environmental challenges locally and globally there is need for a paradigm shift in our worldview toward the use of traditional ecological knowledge in environmental management and resource sustainability. From the foregoing, this article seeks to explore how Igbo traditional belief systems can contribute to natural resources conservation and environmental management in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This explorative work is premised on Values, Beliefs, Norms (VBN) theory as espoused by Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano & Kalof (1999). This theory of environmentalism postulates that values influence pro-environmental behaviour through pro-environmental beliefs and personal norms. Building on earlier theories of environmentalism, Stern et al (1999) formulated the value-belief-norm (VBN) theory, which links value theories (Schwartz, 1992, 1994; Stern & Dietz, 1994), environmental beliefs (Dunlap & Van Liere 1978), new environmental paradigm, and a norm-activation model (Schwartz, 1977) into a causal chain. This theory advanced that individuals' values give rise to beliefs which drive norms that impact individuals' behaviors. According to them, Pro-Environmental Behaviours (PEB) are more likely to occur when a causal series of variables are present. Within this framework, values are defined as motivational constructs that outline desirable end states or behaviours. Personal norms are feelings of moral responsibility to preserve the environment while belief refers to one's views about his environment and human behavior. Over the years, the VBN theory has been a potent explanatory framework of a range of ecological behavior including ecological citizenship, political backing, and private sector engagements.

The Igbo cultural practice cum knowledge system is replete with a variety of values, belief and norms which motivate pro-environmental behaviour among its citizens. This is evidenced in the centrality of Ala (Earth) in Igbo worldview. In Igbo worldview, one of the main deities is the earth goddess "Ala". This deity is highly revered and exerts so much influence in the well-being and sustainability of the society. Among the Igbos, it is believed that one's level of obedience /submission to "Ala" the earth goddess determines the returns he gets with regards to agricultural yield and fertility. This belief System among the Igbos inspires normative values which foster pro-environmental behaviour through taboos and pollution avoidance. Consequently, the Igbos are duty bound to protect the earth from both human and natural harm. This is rooted in the belief that there is usually a spiritual undertone to every illness, the insinuation being that once a disharmony exists between man and the "deities or his environment", sickness is bound to occur (Omeire 2018). Thus several norms and taboos are put in place to protect the earth from being desecrated and polluted. Furthermore, the Igbos have well developed Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) systems infused with pro- environmental values which are passed from one generation to another thereby reinforcing resource stewardship and conservation at various levels. In summary, within Igbo culture and worldview we can say that there is an underlying connection between values, beliefs and norms which in turn produces pro-environmental behaviours among the Igbos.

Igbo Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Practices

Some aspects of Igbo traditional ecological knowledge systems and practices that help in protecting and preserving the environment include:

Igbo Taboo System

From time immemorial, there has always been the need for people interact with one another and live in harmony. Thus taboos were created to ensure that social boundaries between man and his neighbor and between man and nature are respected.

In Igbo land taboos are known as Nsu ala or Aru". Taboos are believed to have been handed down from the earth goddess (Ala) from an unknown time. Like all other mores, they originated from unwritten laws. These laws and prohibitions are against moral and religious

excesses in the society. The violation of taboo is seen as pollution in Igbo society and it usually attracts punishment or some sort of ceremonial purification. The rites for removal of pollutions are known as ikwa ala is seen as a form of remediation.

Mairi (1998) posit that taboo is anything which is forbidden or disapproved of for religious reasons or by social customs. Hornby (1974) sees taboo as "... prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated or unclean and therefore is considered dangerous." For Anderson (1975), "Taboo has its source essentially in the fear of the unknown, the unusual and abnormal contact in human pattern." In traditional Igbo society, the ancestors sought for the meaning and essence of life, peace, order and existence, and how checks and restrictions will be placed on man thus taboo were introduced. Igbo taboo system derives its footing from morality, carefulness, veracity, productivity and reverence to God; thereby promoting stability, cohesion and progress in the society (Uche, 2009). In this section, we shall highlight some aspect of taboos in Igbo land that help in environmental protection.

Taboos on Rivers and Streams

The taboos placed on rivers and streams in Igbo culture deter people from desecrating the streams and rivers, and this helps in achieving clean water reservation. This is unlike some urban cities where people boldly dispose their wastes inside the nearby stream. Some people of other cultural background, especially the riverine areas, build their conventional lavatories on their rivers. It is a taboo in Igbo culture to urinate, defecate, throw wastes into the stream/ river, or even spit inside the water.

According to Onyemegbulam, (2020) (personal communication-PC), anybody caught desecrating or defiling the stream, will be arraigned by the Eze-in Council, and the culprit will be charged with committing abomination and taboo against the land; an offence which could be capable of attracting stiff penalties, like banishment, ostracism or providing the recommended ritual items required for cleansing and purification of the land.

Taboos Placed on the Cutting of Magnificent Trees and Reserved Forests

In Igbo culture, certain magnificent trees and forests are regarded as sacred. People are prohibited from going into such forests to farm, cut the trees or hunt for animals. In some places where such prohibitions exist, there are myths and stories to support the ritualistic essence of such forests and trees. Trees like oji (iroko) and akpu (cotton), represent firmness, massiveness and elegance. Since it is not easy for man to climb to their top at all times, they become the most suitable place for birds to make their nest.

Aguwa (1995:56), as cited in Igbokwe (2013), explains that

“For humans, the trees supply expansive shade, provide exceptionally favored wood for furniture and building, and so they are economically very valuable. Standing in the compound, they are mysteriously expressive of the imposing transcendental reality and are held as sacred through the taboo which are observed on their behalf”.

An informant’s account reveals the consequence of mishandling these trees or entering those forests. It is a common belief that if such trees are pruned, a family member will sustain an injury or become deformed, and if the tree is cut down, it results to death. The people are so attached to such trees that whenever someone dies in the family, a branch of the tree withers. The presence of these trees in the communities, present a serene outlook. Some communities celebrate their cultural festivals under such trees while some markets are situated under those trees. The massive appearance and nature of such trees symbolize protection and shield. Those preserved trees protect houses and humans against windstorm, and their versed roots provide a kind of protection to the soil against erosion and gullies. Thick forests preserved under taboo, play host to beautiful birds and other nature’s creatures.

With respect to the nature of the climate of the Igbo culture area, Okoye, (2019), is of the opinion that “the climate condition promotes the growth of perennial trees and a varied combination of plants groups, such as herbs, shrubs, many parasitic and saprophytic growths, climbers, tall grasses and big trees with robust trunks and buttress roots”. Among the best known of the trees are mahogany, obeche, iroko, etc. The presence of these beautiful creatures of nature, appeal to the eyes and make the environment worth living in.

Pond Water Reservoir (Iyi Ala)

The traditional Igbo society practices the culture of preserving water in a pond reservoir. A community selects a suitable site and constructs this reservoir, by digging a deep and wide pond that is positioned strategically to attract or collect all the flood water running in the streets of that community or village. The rainy season is the period of flood water collection while the dry season is the period when the water stored during the rainy season is utilized.

A personal communication account from the beneficiaries of pond water reservation, in Umunnachi, Nnarambia, Ahiazu-Mbaise Local Government, Imo State, Nigeria and Amakohia Ikeduru, Imo State, reveal that the leaders of those communities, where the pond water reservations are practiced, pronounce a taboo against defiling or desecrating the pond water reservoir. Any person who violates the order faces sanctions. The water reserved in those ponds, amongst other uses, ameliorates the problem of water scarcity experienced by most communities during the dry season. It provides the people water for washing, construction and other household needs. In most places water purifiers are put into the pond for better quality water.

Most appropriate in the topic of discourse is that the pond water reservoir helps to remove flood from the roads and streets, thereby ensuring good roads in the communities. After rainfall, there are usually pools of flood water in many places. The presence of these flood water degenerates to pot holes and gullies in the surroundings, so much so that the roads become impassable and death traps to the people; but places where the pond water reservoir is in existence, it collects the flood waters off the roads, streets and corners, in such a manner that the environments will appear neat and habitable.

Mbomuzo Festival (Road Clearing)

Mbomuzo festival is one of the important aspects of Igbo culture that helps in the protection of the environment. Even though, this festival has different patterns in different Igbo communities, it shares common features and objectives in these communities. Road clearing is in the common interest of the communities, and some communities have a designated day in a selected month of the year when road clearing is carried out. Osuji (2009) explains that:

“One regular occurrence in Ibo Uzo festival then and now is that in most Igbo ethnic communities where the tradition has survived till

today, it is usually done during the dry season, particularly late November, so as to break it away from Christmas festivities. One of the reasons why it is done in the dry season is to ensure a clean environment when grasses and shrubs and weeds are on their decline for the season. Also, it will be easy to remove completely all the debris and rubbish accumulated during the harvesting season”.

On the Mbomuzo festival day, people of the community are grouped according to villages, kindreds and age grades, for the purpose of carrying out the actual task of clearing the roads and making repairs on the areas or spots where there are pot holes and gully erosions. Talking about the roads that are usually cleared, Osuagwu, (1978), explains,

Uzo ndi a na-abo bu uzo mmiri, uzo ahia, uzo si n’ogbe gaa n’ogbe, na uzo oru. O bu ndi nwoke na-abokari uzo oru, ya bu uzo e si aga n’ugbo. Ma n’obodo ufodu, uzo mmiri na uzo ahia na-abukari ndi nwanyi na-abo ya. N’ebe ufodu umunwoke na-esokwa n’ihi ka ha mee ihe ndi ufodu di na ya nke umu nwanyi enweghi ike ime. N’ebe ufodu, umu agbogho na umu nwoke na-etolite etolite na-esokwa aga n’ibo uzo.

Translation:

The roads that are usually cleared are those leading to the stream, market, neighboring communities and the farms. It is usually the responsibility of the men to clear the road leading to the farm, while in some communities, the road leading to the stream and the market, are usually assigned to the women. In some places, men still follow the women in order to assist them do what they are not able to do. In some other communities, the maidens and the young men also participate in road clearing.

The advantages of road clearing to the people that practice it are of much interest to this paper. Road clearing has a lot of benefits to the Igbo, hence they uphold the culture. It makes the road clean and good looking. Road clearing (Mbomuzo) also promotes unity in the community. It strengthens the people and prevents them from falling sick. The culture of the road clearing makes the journey easy for travelers, including those going to the market, the stream and the farm. The fact that such roads are clean and devoid of potholes and other impediments, makes people prefer using them in their movements. (Osuagwu, 1978).

The culture of road clearing has in recent times influenced the people so much that villagers organize themselves for weekly or

monthly clean up of the village and market squares. During this exercise, they clear the adjoining roads and pathways that go through the market and other areas to prevent them from being overtaken by bushes and shrubs.

The Igbo Architecture and Building Patterns

The traditional Igbo society predominantly made use of thatch and mud in constructing their houses. In order to get a quality texture of the mud needed for the construction, a deep excavation is made, and the pit dug in the process turns around to play a vital role in sustaining a healthy environment. Mud is mixed with clay, sand and silt in order to serve as a building material. The clay makes it to be strong and cohesive, while the sand helps to resist water damages.

According to Nsude (1987), as cited in Okoye (2019), “the Igbo use mud for foundations, floors, walls and sometimes roof. For walls, mud is used in varying thickness and is sometimes reinforced with timber, especially in the southern part of Igbo land, where high humidity dictates stronger, but thinner walls”. Mud houses with thatch roof maintain room temperature throughout the day. Mud housing has a lot of benefits to our environment. Firstly, the pit serves as a controlled refuse dump, where the neighborhood, dump their refuse and get them burnt, thereby encouraging cleanliness in the locality.

A personal communication account throws light on how the burrow pit is used for incineration, because of its capacity to contain huge amount of refuse. It mitigates burning of refuse on the earth surface, as this could lead to fire outbreak. The use of burrow pit also prevents the deposition of unpleasant debris which defaces the environment on the earth surface. Furthermore, the burrow pit serves as flood water collector and reservoir, where flood waters are channeled to during the rains. With this, the streets are rid of the menace of flooding and the consequent erosions.

Thatch is the material traditionally used by the Igbo as a roof cover. The two predominantly used thatches are grass and raffia palm leaves. Talking about thatch roofing method, apart from its esthetics, it sends rain waters slowly to the ground without much pressure, in such a way that the fallen water could not create hole on the earth surface, which could degenerate to erosion overtime. Also, using thatches and palm fronds for fencing also allow water to move freely without

pressure, but fencing with block or other hard barriers, usually collect the waters in solidarity to form pressure with which they erode the surface of the earth, where they are channeled to.

Igbo Traditional Land Use and Shifting Cultivation

Shifting cultivation is a system of agriculture in which mapped out land are cultivated for a while, and then left fallow for some time, as planting is transferred to another land area. The Igbos practiced the shifting cultivation method of farming for many years. It was the most popular system of farming practiced by the majority. In this system of farming, the forests are cleared, and the materials slashed out are allowed to decompose, or are burnt in such a way that they will supply nutrients to the soil.

Shifting cultivation is considered to be a sustainable forest use, which has continued for several thousand years. The cleared piece of land is usually small, compared to large land mass in existence. After farming on a particular piece of land, cultivation is shifted to another piece of forested area in order to ensure restoration of soil quality, replace what is removed and improve local food production.

This system boosts the growth of certain trees and timber, like mahogany, iroko, cedar etc which help in protecting the environment, especially from erosion and also from windstorm.

Furthermore, fallow system have been noted to be essential for biodiversity conservation, forest regeneration and traditional agricultural system sustainability (Chazdon, 2014)

Palm nuts, a product of the farm, during its processing has bye products (wastes) which if poured on a muddy or flood prone areas, help in protecting the earth surface, helping the flood water to move on without eating into the earth surface. The palm kernel shell and the fiber grease, prevent flooding and mudding, wherever they are deposited. All these help in no small measure in protecting the environment.

Diminishing Role of Igbo Cultural Practices in Environmental Protection

In recent times, most of the cultural practices that protect the environment have been relegated to the background.

Igbo cultural practices have suffered neglect as a result of colonialism and Christianity. Adherents of Christian faith go about

demonizing the trees, setting sacred grove on fire, in the name of exorcising evil spirits from communities (Igbokwe, 2013). Some Igbo cultural festivals like Mbomuzo (bush clearing) have been eroded by some Christian teachings that make people perceive them as being fetish, whereas in the actual sense they are festivals that promote cleanliness and environmental protection.

The modern day teaching concerning the taboos of the people is another factor that hampers the use of taboos in the protection of the environment. Taboos are used to instill discipline in the people. The people strive not to violate the taboo so that they do not attract punishment from the spirits and disharmony with their neighbors. According to Uche, (2009), taboo imposes the idea of the holy on the people. Bodies of pools of water, hills, trees, jungles and week days are tagged with taboos in order to maintain their sacredness.

From the above citation, it is clear that Igbo culture needs functional taboos to preserve and maintain certain things in our environments. A community where pond water reservoir is in use needs a strict measure in the form of taboo to deter anyone who may want to pollute or desecrate the water. This applies to streams, rivers, caves, trees and forests. Unfortunately, these days, these taboos are no longer taken seriously nor offenders or violators given desirable sanctions the way it should be. This nonchalance is as a result of the teachings by the missionaries, and this militates against the use of the people's culture in protecting their environment and ecology.

CONCLUSION

Many countries across the globe are faced with environmental problems, like flooding, erosions, gullies, landslides and their likes. As a result of these, the lives of the people are negatively affected, both socially and economically. In order to solve these problems, governments of the affected countries and some world donor agencies have set up some machinery, with either full sponsorship or counterpart funding, to tackle these problems. This paper, though not against these external efforts, believes that people can employ their way of lives in tackling the problems of their immediate environment.

The Igbo of the South-Eastern Nigeria have some aspects of their culture, norms and values that can improve and manage their environment, without waiting for external interventions. It is an

indisputable fact that government cannot be everywhere at the same time, therefore people should resort to self-help through those norms that already exist in their culture, in tackling their ecological challenges.

Recommendations

This paper has stated that the people's culture, especially, Igbo culture, can be applied in protecting their environment and ecology. In order to achieve this aim, this paper recommends as follows:

1. The teaching of indigenous languages and cultural studies should be made compulsory in schools, so that the culture, norms and values of the people will be preserved and transmitted to the upcoming generations.
2. Festival, pond water reservation and shifting cultivation cultural practices of the people should be upheld and promoted.
3. People should obey and respect the sanctity of taboos existing in their area.
4. Those in authority should desist from cutting down reserved forests and trees.
5. The adherents of modern day religion should be properly informed about what some of the Igbo norms and values represent, to avoid misinterpretation.
6. Builders and designers should focus on designs that are eco-friendly because of their social, ecological, economic and environmental benefits.
7. The knowledge and skills gained in Igbo traditional architecture should be applied as an effective tool in modern buildings.

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