

The Role of Okonko Society in Preserving Igbo Environment

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ABSTRACT The issue of protecting the environment through indigenous framework or philosophies is the thrust of this study. The paper discusses the increased rate at which the environment is being destroyed since the advent of Christianity and Islam in Southeastern Nigeria. It highlights the efficient ways Igbo protected their environment before the coming of other religions. These efficient ways were parts of the preoccupation of Okonko Society. It is therefore, the considered opinion of the paper that the fullness of human existence on earth cannot be achieved outside a cordial relation to the environment. The paper argues that ecological crisis of today, engaged the attention of our ancestors and they tackled the problem through the principles of ancestral societies, of which Okonko is prominent. The paper advocates a revival, appreciation, and applications of same principles to enhance the well-being of the community, its fields and general ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

The natural environment is closely tied to integral human life, and without it, human life may not be sustained. Natural environment includes social, religious, linguistic, economic, and other cultural elements. In fact, the distinct understanding of these elements and their relative values can be closely correlated. Thus, in this 21st century, people in various sectors of life are coming to understand the central fact that the natural environment has to be protected and sustained. As this awareness of the natural world deepens, it becomes a task to reflect with others on the ways the Igbo protected their environment before the coming of Christianity and Islam. The aim of this paper therefore, is to examine the habits, practices, tradition, and values that respect, protect, and foster the flourishing of the natural environment as reflected in Okonko society of the Igbo. This is because the ecological crisis of today engaged the attention of Igbo ancestors and they tackled the problem through the principles of Okonko Society.

THE IGBO AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

It is no longer a debate among the scholars of Comparative Religious Studies that in African cosmology, human beings exist in relation to their environment. That implies a dynamic "relationship between God, deities, ancestors, human beings and nature" Metu (1987). In ancestral societies, environmental concerns were

shown in many ways. It is axiomatic to say that in Igbo, the environment and human beings are co-existent, such that without human beings environment ceases to exist. Oyewole (2003) again attests to the fact that human beings constitute the environment. Thus, Oyewole (2003) observed that, the area of land inhabited by a people, including all that the land supports constitutes the environment of that people.

Even though, this description is limited to a social scientist's perspective, the environment remains the all-enveloping natural stage on which the drama of a people's life unfolds. This makes the environment a complex reality and much more inclusive. The environment is both physical and spiritual. It encapsules both the life-forms and non-life-forms, which can also be described as internal and external. This is technically known as the biotic and the abiotic. From ecological perspectives, as observed by Oyewole (2003), it is all these features combined with the interactions between and among them which affect the life and thought pattern of individuals and communities. Umejesi (2006) buttressed this point when he submitted that environment and humanity are interrelated.

The Igbo in Nigeria thought of themselves as Awka, Bende, Aro, Ngwa and Ibeku. The word "Igbo" was perhaps derived from "Heebo" which was the name given by Biafran traders on the coast to the hinterland area where they traded. Subsequent European traders slightly changed the word to "Eboe" from which "Igbo" was derived. The European merchants used the word

“Igbo” as a general nomenclature for people living in the hinterland rather than for a tribe in the modern sense of the word. This implies that the word “Igbo” invokes ecology or ecological concern.

As noted by Ilogu (1974), where the Igbos came from and when, will remain for a long time a matter of conjecture, because of absence of helpful records. However, the main groups of southeastern Nigeria were indigenous to the territory and contact among them has existed, through Okonko Society, since primeval times.

The Igboland, in terms of environmental endowment, is well-vegetated throughout the year, lying to a large extent in the basins of Niger River, Cross River, Kwa River and the Imo River. Three-quarter of these river basins are low land less than 400 feet above sea level (Nwosu 2009). Due to the natural ecosystem of the Igbos, Okonko Society functions with most interest, not only in political and historical aspects, but also on the safeguarding of the entire ecological community.

It is this holistic view that affects the life of the Igbo in terms of habits, practices, tradition and values that foster environmental protection expressed through ancestral societies like Okonko. Within this context, Schoffeleers (1979) noted the positive characteristics of traditional societies in Africa. He said that the societies “function in respect of the wellbeing of the community, its fields, and livestock, fishing, hunting and general economic interests. Apart from engaging in ritual action, however, they also issue and enforce directive with regard to a community’s use of the environment. The environment, in fact, embodies elements drawn from knowledge, power, and institutions. In view of its preservation, the energy-devouring civilization of today becomes a threat. This throws up certain questions: How are we, human beings and environment, with common origin and destiny to survive together? How can we safeguard creation in participation and wholeness? In response to these questions, some comments on the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria would not be out of place.

According to Olajubu (2006), “traditional ways of life permeate every culture as shown by attitudes towards nature among different peoples at different times and locations.” The Igbo are no exception to the above observation, especially when we talk of a religiously influenced environment.

Thus, the overall aim of this paper is to highlight how Okonko Society contributed to environmental preservation and to see how this role can be replayed today to further safeguard the planet.

Okonko Society and her Response to Environmental Concerns

In pre- missionary and missionary eras in Africa, traditional societies were in existence all over, especially in Nigeria. And they continue to operate in post missionary Africa, though in a much Christianized forms. Okonko Society is one of such traditional Societies in Igboland. It functions as an authentic component of African Religion (Afrel). While the social units of the family, the kindred and the tribe, have protective values for the environment, Okonko Society operates as additional protection for individuals and the larger environment. Okonko Society in Igboland is of social and religious character, it has standard code, language, ethics and world-view that are environment friendly. The Okonko Society determines ritual behaviours and social practices in most Igbo communities. Thompson (1970) noted that the society, taught pride in their ancestry, the pride that fosters admiration and reverence, and suggests regulations for the conduct of life.

This implies that Okonko Society has cultural resources that can easily support environmental ethic. At the ordinary day to day level, the society encourages non-violence to the natural environment. In traditional set-up where Okonko functions, once one discovers that excessive in-take and output of anything are violent, one is customarily obliged to check such activities. Thus, the elders would remind people, in this circumstance, of “*eneke*” the bird who challenged its god to a wrestling contest after excessive consumption of delicacies. The import of the caution points to the negative effect of unfriendly habit to the self and larger ecosystem.

Again, Okonko Society does believe that human community is related to the non-human. That is, the view that the living, the ancestors, the yet unborn, and the environment are inter-related. According to this belief, human beings are one kind of life in an ecosystem within which all elements are affected in exactly the same way by whatever action. This Okonko Society world-view is nearer to the Buddhist view, in which most

people affirm rebirth. In the Buddhist tradition, “all sentient existence is thought to be interconnected and related by virtue of Karmic ties from past lives, and rebirth in non-human realm” (Gross 1996). Hence, this similar believe system found in Okonko Society provides an insight for environmentally sound practices.

In the light of the above, when the vast day to day guidelines of the Igbo elders and beliefs of Okonko Society are brought into conversation with environmental concerns, one basic concept stands out above all others in its importance; that is, the Okonko Society’s acceptance of the synergy between the living, the ancestors, the yet unborn, and the environment. It is from this belief system that the practice of community living becomes strong in Igbland. Ezekwonna (2005) buttressed this point when he noted that, for Africans, community is very important and vital to what transpires in one’s life. Without the community there is no individual and without the individual there is no community.

Simply put, the synergy strongly linked to community living, means that nothing stands alone in Igbo world. Nothing is independent, and everything is related with everything else within the environment and beyond. Thus, Igbo would say, “*Ife Kwuru, ife akwudobeya*” (if a thing stands, another stands near it).

The implication of this community link and relationship with things and each other invites environmental concern. First, given this synergy, nobody or community can intervene in the ecosystem without affecting everything to some extent. Therefore, when we talk of today’s progress and technological advancement, which is an aspect of human interference in the ecosystem, we must anticipate effects or impacts. For example, oil exploration and production in Niger Delta, through modern means seems like a clear growth. But the failure to see the link between oil exploration and its effects on the quality of life of the host community is an important factor in any environmental discussion. According to Aghalino (2009), “this pattern of lopsided analysis which considers the environment only in relation to pollution, with little or no discussion on its effect on the quality of life has become anachronistic”. Hence, Okonko Society’s world-view draws our attention to the fact that every person feels the effect of actions taken far away by people whom we do not know and whom we cannot influence directly.

According to Okonko Society’s tradition, nothing can be unconnected from anything else. That is why in Okonko Society, it is said that when the eyes start crying, the nose follows (*anya mbew, imi ebewe*).

Today, the natural environment is facing a serious crisis. There is environmental pollution, unlimited exploitation of natural resources and the menace of erosion. All these injure the perfect beauty of the environment. Dopamu (2006) noted that, Scientists have also designed a change in the creation Order whereby, the wetlands are being drained, razing the forest for timber and valuable species of plant animals that are threatened with extinction.

Yet, human beings are integral part of the environment and indeed the ultimate beneficiary in the arrangement of ecosystem. This indeed underscores the need for people to take concrete steps to preserve the environment for sustainable development.

In Okonko Society, people value the natural environment and expressed concerns for it through disciplined habits, practices, tradition and some values that enhance its purity and beauty. This is because the environmental crisis of today as well engaged the attention of our ancestors even though, on a different level. The environment, under our forefathers, suffered serious threats like droughts, floods, pests and epidemic diseases that afflicted cattle and human beings. They tackled their environmental concerns through rituals and disciplined observance of the laws of nature and instruction of the ancestors. According to Dopamu (2003), our forefathers solved their environmental crisis through the use of “available resources of nature to procure non-therapeutic needs of man.” They applied the art of influencing course of events by means of ritual behaviour and invocation of divinities or spirit aids.

Environmental protection in Okonko ethos has a religious as well as social relevance. It recognizes and appreciates the beauty of nature. With conscious efforts, mechanisms were put in place to check deforestation, assortment, pollutants to land, air, and water. In various communities where Okonko Society functions, specific trees are regarded as sacred. They provide shades for the community streams while some trees and plants serve as medicines. All these trees are usually preserved as gardens and parks. Furthermore, it is a forbidden tradition to cut down certain trees

in particular forests, farm on a particular land and fish in certain streams.

With the advent of Christianity and Islam in various traditional communities and Igboland in particular, the above restrictions and ways of life no longer have a hold on people's attitude towards the natural environment. Nowadays, people, in the name of being "born again" exploit the sacred forests, cut-down trees and use them as timbers to build religious houses, the lands that harboured the original ancestral flora and fauna shrines of some deities are no more. Thus, open environmental crisis ensued in Igboland when Christian Missionary began, in various ways to destroy and enter into lands and places where any form of human activity was forbidden. In this regard, Onwubiko (1999) observed sadly that, the foreign religions ignited ecological and community crises in southeastern Nigeria. According to him, they established in ways contrary to the laws of land acquisition, they acquired them unconditionally and without the best intention of the people.

Therefore, they no sooner come to a place than they began activity to destroy the religious, and therefore the ideological foundation of society. In spite of the people general tolerance, it is only a matter of time before serious conflicts develop (Obiechinna 1975).

Yet, such Okonko forests, streams, mountains, and lands constituted "nature reserves" from ecological point of view. Their vegetation was primary especially when the ecosystem has not been disturbed by missionary interference. Severally, in such reserves could be found some rare and threatened plant and animal species of the ecological zone. From an environmental concern point of view, Okonko Society's responses at environmental conservation and protection could be renewed and strengthened by legislation rooted in the traditional institutions. Even though, the scientific bases of Okonko responses are paradoxically not immediately evident, yet her impact on various environmental concerns are quite obvious and the approaches simply unique.

Okonko Society, in preserving the environment, remains the most prominent society of the Igbo that has "*mma mma*" as a form of greeting. The society is primarily a social, political, judicial, and religious organization established for the purpose of justice, peace, order and environmental protection of the land. Okonko

Society still plays a relevant role in the life and culture of the Igbo race especially in the areas of environmental preservation, social behaviour and morals (Nwosu 2009). For example, there are several cases of environmental degradation in customary courts initiated by Okonko Society against some Churches who cut down ancient trees without due clearance. However, such cases have suffered because the influence of Okonko is being challenged by new religious movements.

The Okonko people believe that clean environment dispels sickness, diseases and guarantees integral well-being. Thus, apart from sustaining our "nature reserves" within towns, villages or hamlets, the society ensures that there is regular environmental sanitation especially during major feasts. According to Achebe (1981), women and children, "scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. All cooking-pots, calabashes and wooden bowls were thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortar in which yam was pounded."

In traditional communities influenced by Okonko Society, the practice of occasionally recurrent festivals provided adequate incentive to care for the environment. Then, the challenge for ecological thoughts was to draw on the culture-aesthetic sensitivity to nature found in the ways of Igbo ancestors. Achebe (1981) in *Things Fall Apart*, noted the importance of this sensitivity to nature thus, It was an occasion for giving thanks to the earth goddess, the source of fertility. The earth goddess played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth.

The remark Achebe (1981) made, refers to the earth or the environment and this brings to light the relationship human beings have with the environment prompting its protection and preservation. Therefore, Igbo rituals and customs were derived from the traditions handed down from the ancient. The ancestral rules of environmental preservation have, as their authority, the Earth goddess embodied by the natural environment as the womb where the forefathers lie and where a child's umbilical cord is buried. Hence, in Okonko Society, natural environment means community, which is ruled by an "Eze" together with titled elders representing the ancestors, the real owners of the natural environment. Therefore, in southeastern Nigeria, there are

customs, taboos, and superstitions derived from the natural environment, based on the ancestral codes concerning respect for nature and environmental safeguards. This points to simple interdependence and ethics of nonviolence to the natural environment.

But today, as noted by Ruland (1998), *the environment needs to be protected from us*. The earth's resources are being dug up in unnecessarily large quantities, only to be used carelessly and wastefully.

Not only are they often not put to any constructive use, but they are turned into instruments of harm.... If we were to use the earth's resources according to the laws of nature and within its limits, we would not need to use as much as we do now.

Thus, contemporary humankind should be careful and ensure that the joy of Christian and Islamic missions, coupled with modern city dwelling must not erode adherence to traditional habits and values that enhanced environmental preservation during our forefathers. This is because environmental issues are practical and not just views or theories.

Human beings should begin to rethink and act responsively. In fact, the present environmental threat is a necessary occasion to retard the ways of our forefathers.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The history of African communities is connected with the natural environment. Life affirmation and its interconnectedness to the earth is not doubted as portrayed in various African myths. Therefore, people's hostile interference in the order of nature through "Born again" syndrome as pointed out earlier, ought to be curtailed. As noted by Ruland (1998), to be religious is not to be unrestrictedly dominant over nature, "but actively to promote the growth of natural forces and ideals already in progress."

Again, empowerment through enlightenment programs for the people is required to enable us understand the reality and origin of the 21st century environmental crises. Such program would enable greater number of people to contribute to the solutions of their immediate environmental problems.

Environmental crises are basically human problems resulting from people's greed and irresponsibility in preserving the earth. Conse-

quently, people should embrace a simple lifestyle, which is virtuous and godly. Growing gardens, planting trees and maintenance of sacred nature reserves remain the traditional responsibilities of ancestral societies like Okonko. Therefore, the state governments should hand over such areas to traditional institutions for preservation and maintenance. This measure or step would revive ancestral ways of environmental preservation. It would also insulate the natural environment from the systemic greed and corruption in some government ministries. Here, the role of African governments is to make enabling laws that would strengthen traditional societies like Okonko.

Finally, the fact should not be glossed over that as natural environment and humanity are interrelated, so environmental problems in one part of the world may likely affect another area. Boff (1997). For example, when erosion menace renders a country uninhabitable, other parts of the globe feel the impact through the migration of people from the affected area. Therefore, when environmental problems affect all and sundry in these ways, the solutions should be traced from the times of our ancestors. When this is done, then the principles of subsidiarity should be applied in rescuing the natural environment from colossal doom. This is the spirit of Igbo "umunnacra", joining hands to make the natural environment a likeable place through the ancient ways of the forefathers. This is inescapable because the fullness of human existence on the face of the earth may not be achievable outside a cordial relation to the natural environment.

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