

IKENGA IN AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEM AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Jude I. Onebunne, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
juno.anyi@gmail.com

Abstract

Ikenga is a sculpture in African-Igbo society that symbolises man's prowess and achievements. Though not a god, it is seen as a man's personal chi, often his personal destiny and is believed to have a role to play in the actualizing of a man's dream. Ikenga has a great significance to the ancient African-Igbo and is considered sacred and peculiar to individuals. Eco-spirituality is a term which considers and covers the sacredness of the ecosystem and the strive towards its sustainability. It has been a long imprinted culture (though with a different term) in the African-Igbo society. Using the method of critical analysis the researcher found out that Ikenga in an African cultural belief system has a lot of significance in the appreciation of sustainable values of eco-spirituality. This significant importance is, therefore, suggested for functional resuscitation of many of the African-Igbo value systems as society thrives to preserve the ecosystem.

Keywords: *Ikenga, Igbo, Africa, Africa Belief System, Eco-Spirituality, Sculpture.*

Introduction

The problem of ecological crisis is inseparably linked with the progress in technologies in the contemporary Western society. In the previous few centuries and particularly in the past few decades of the world history, the fruits of technological progress in the modern Western society have been transmitted to various parts of the globe. The result of this transmission of the goods and services of technologies has brought an enormous and abrupt change that is negatively influencing the human environment. The changes are beyond the capacity of ecosystem to adjust or sustain. For a long time now, the resultant effect of climatic and ecological changes has been the deterioration of human environment, explosion of human population, and drastic disharmony within the eco-system

The African and the *Igbo* people especially are known for traditional religious practices that are ecologically friendly. However, their

environmental friendliness has been weakened by the coming of Christianity and western ideas. Traditionally the Igbo nation and her people were environmentalists, but this was greatly weakened after the intrusion of western hegemony. They now have heinous practices that had unspeakable effects on preserving the environment. The *Igbo* people hold that there is a causal connection between the moral conditions of the community and the physical environment. The fundamental attitude to land is a religious one and is based on the fear of mystical sanction by the ancestors.. Traditional African religions view land and its resources as communal property that belongs to the living, dead and generations to follow and this believe is ably represented by the *Igbo* people with the presence of the *Ikeng*. Not just the *Igbo* the Shona people of also hold the environment as sacred. Mhaka (2015) argues that Shona beliefs can be tapped into for purposes of increasing agricultural production in the contemporary society. According to Mhaka (2015) Shona indigenous knowledge hinges on the holistic philosophy which views man as part of the environment. This philosophy directly links to the *Igbo* people and Africans as a whole, encourages people to use natural resources sustainably and it discourages people from damaging the environment. The values of the *Igbo* as valuably represented and guided by the *Ikenga* would be critically examined in the course of this study

African-Igbo Belief System

Africans perceived the cosmos as a rigid and hierarchical pyramid, with every form of life, in descending order, serving the one above it: man-animal, animal- plant, etc. The setting was anthropocentric, meaning that all created things were purely for the benefit of humans. That is to say, Greek philosophy championed the notion that human beings are superior to all other created beings. By implication, Greek philosophy legitimized the destruction of the natural environment since the inception of Industrial Revolution. The dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit means that material is at the service of the spiritual and the aim of this material life is simply to prepare one for the life to come. The resultant effect of this idea is the exploitation of 'nature' and humanity via the dominance of scientific theories of the twentieth century's. By *Igbo* philosophy is meant the "understanding, frame-of-mind, reason and perceptions, undergirding the manner in which the *Igbo* people reason, conceive ideas, think, act, and utter words, and behave in different events of life (Kanu 2015; 2013).

According to some great African scholars, the notion of the universe (Igbo cosmology) and the Igbo idea of human person (Igbo philosophical anthropology) is full of hope and freedom and moves with the dignity of the human person and the respect for the universe and all therein. The worth of life in the idea of an individual is the worth of life at the centre of the universe. Igbo thought pattern revolves around the value of life. Life occupies a central position in the thought of an African person. "When anything happens to life, a *carpe diem* Africa will go every length to restore the equilibrium. The cosmos in Igbo thought includes all forms of life (animal, plant, water, land, etc.). This life emphasizes interconnectedness and personal responsibilities towards each other. The Igbo thought referred to this interconnectedness of the human family as solidarity. Unity of the whole creation best expresses the Igbo philosophy of life. In the Igbo idea of the universe, the universe is perceived as a holistic reality. No fixed dichotomy exists between nature and human beings, the sacred and the secular, the terrestrial, water existents, those living in trees, etc. Igbo people are very religious. They move with this sense of religion into their farms, market places, business centres, rivers, mountains, hills, name them. Aboriginal Igbo people show a sense of connectedness with nature's divine powers, and as such, go after a model of harmony and balance in their interaction with the environment. In as such, go after a model of harmony and balance in their interaction with the environment. In Igbo philosophy of life, there is no room for exploitation of nature, this is further emphasized in the life of an Igbo man as he grows. The spiritual assigning of the *Ikenga* which reminds a young mind of his values and obligations to the mother earth as he strives to succeed in life further enumerates the Igbo mans value for his environment. *Ikenga*, in the African believe system as it relates to the environment is a symbol of mans authority and a reminder of the fact that he must succeed even as he respects the cultures and sacred values of the Igbo environment, it puts a man in charge of his immediate environment as a lord, that ensures its(the ecology) protection in his(man) quest to make a living. The igbo man would always respect the ecosystem in order not to go against his chi (i.e his *Ikenga*).

In the worldview of Igbo people subsists the idea of holistic cosmology. Human beings and non-human beings, that is, other created things complement and aid one another in accordance with the notion of subsidiary. In this thought pattern is found mingling, intermingling

and co-mingling of the fates of humanity and that of other created beings in the universe. In the Igbo worldview, there is a slim demarcation between the sacred and the secular. The context is experienced in the context of the secular – both build an inseparable unity. This salutary manner of understanding the world of nature/creation by the Igbo people must be taken seriously in the issues of ecology in Africa. The fact is understood again by reference to the holy and sacred. In Igbo religious worldviews, the earth and all nature is sacred and energized with the spiritual forces. The Igbo religious views find the presence of the spirits throughout all of nature and the cosmos this spirits they have assigned special trees and animals which they believe guides their daily life and activities. Especially important is the spirits of the ancestors, who bring many blessings, fertility, health and life to the human community and is represented by the *Ikenga* which is assigned to every young teenage boy as he advances into adulthood. This made the earth/nature no longer the object of manipulation by industrialists or economic forces. This worldview enables them to take in hand their own destiny and bring about communities which are truly humane.

What is deducible from the above excerpt is the idea of community. In this community, every human being is highly valued and their life is also unqualifiedly guarded. Derivatively, the lives of non-human beings such as animals, plants, hills, rocks, mountains, rivers, oceans, etc., forming part of the universe, equally have right for care, respect, protection and preservation. That is why it is considered an act of gross injustice the uncontrolled appetite for the exploitation of the natural resources and the unreflective destruction of the life forms. In Igbo thought system, human persons see themselves as connected to nature, the carved *Ikenga* is an embodiment of both human and animal features and is a highly valued item in the Igbo land. The Igbo sees themselves as a knot in the wider cosmic arrangement, which includes the Mother Earth and all therein in terms of plants, animals, air, sun, seas, stars, the moon etc. This idea forms the bedrock of indigenous Igbo world outlook.

Eco-spirituality

Ecology is the science of the mutual relationship of organisms to their environment. It is the relationship of living things to one another and their environment or the study of such relationships. Spirituality means

attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them reach out towards super-sensible realities. Spirituality includes several interrelated levels of reference such as the level of lived experience, which means the attitudes and behaviours of human beings which are typically influenced by their-ultimate values, and therefore their-spirituality.

Eco-spirituality expresses the joining of spirituality with ecological perspectives. There are numerous types, traditions, expressions, and understandings of eco-spirituality. It does not refer to any one set of beliefs, but to a range of ethical or moral, religious, spiritual, or agnostic beliefs, tendencies, or actions that relate to ecological concerns. Eco-spirituality has evolved since the 1960s and is currently part of popular culture in North America. The connection between spirituality and the Earth has deep and historical roots in many religious traditions and in particular with those that have remained in tune with the rhythms and limits of the Earth, such as some indigenous traditions around the world.

Eco-spirituality has many meanings, the first referring to a thirst for connection between spirituality and the Earth, given the extent of and the general lack of religious responses to the ecological crisis. There is a recognition that the ecological crisis threatens all life on Earth, and it is fundamentally a moral, spiritual, and religious problem.

Since the early 1970s there has been a global, public, and political consciousness of the need for ethics and religions to be consistent with ecological and social liberation, noting, as does Steven Rockefeller (1992), that there are many diverse cultural paths joining in this awareness. Discussions have been increasingly cross-cultural and interreligious. Organizations such as the United Nations, the World Wildlife Fund, World Conservation Strategy, and numerous religious groups have been involved in interdisciplinary work aimed at developing religious and spiritual responses to the ecological crisis that are connected to political decision-making. From the initiatives of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the Harvard Centre for the Study of World Religions hosted a Religion and Ecology Project involving ten conferences since 1996, bringing together scholars and environmentalists from Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Jainism, Hinduism, indigenous traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam. This work is entering a phase of discussions with the United Nations.

Eco-spirituality is also a term that can be applied to the work in cosmology and particularly that of Thomas Berry, a cultural historian of religions. Berry's work in scientific and religious cosmologies-stories about the origin of the world that provide orientation, guidance, and meaning to life-has done much to revive a sense of the sacredness of life, the Earth, and all the processes of the universe. He offers a comprehensive context for rethinking our current situation and for understanding ourselves as part of a larger evolutionary whole that is both spiritual and material.

There are several elements within eco-spirituality, and priorities are divergent. One challenges the belief that humans are the centre of life, or anthropocentrism. Some propose a bio centric approach wherein the intrinsic value of animals, plants, rivers, and mountains has a priority over their instrumental value as resources for humans.

Ubuntu and Egbe Bere Ugo Bere (EBUB) in Eco-spirituality

Though the concept of *ubuntu* has gained tremendous prominence in recent years, it is difficult to define. As noted by *Mawere* (2012), this difficult to define *ubuntu* is mainly because the concept is elastic and pragmatic as it is used in almost all the spheres of Bantu worldviews. Current definitions tend to focus on human-to-human relationships but *ubuntu* also includes human to community and human to society relationships. This means that *ubuntu* exists not only at individual level but at community, country and societal levels. *Broodryk* (2012) defines *ubuntu* as an ancient African worldview which is based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values which ensure happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of the family. Those who abide by the *ubuntu* ethic are called *abantu* or *vanhu* in Shona. *Mkize* (2003) further argues that *ubuntu* means qualities such as warmth, empathy, understanding, communication, interaction, participation, reciprocation, harmony, a shared worldview and co-operation. *Bennett and Patrick* (2011) posit that *ubuntu* implies a collective personhood in which an individual becomes a person through other people. As a philosophy, it is allergic to any form of discrimination (*Museka &*

Madondo, 2012). Museka and Madondo (2012) further argue that it is a way of living that contributes positively to the welfare of all members who make up the universe. *Ubuntu* is also seen as an effort to help people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy. The concept has originated from the *Nguni* tribes of South Africa, and it has equivalents among other Bantu languages. For example, the word *hunhu* is used among the Shona. Lately, the *ubuntu* philosophy has taken a centre stage in jurisprudence, management, health in Africa and the African Diaspora.

The *Egbe bere Ugo bere* concept of the traditional Igbo society, often represented by the acronym *EBUB* is literally translated: let the Kite perch, let the Eagle perch, meaning live and lets live can be typically mirrored through the concept of *ubuntu*. It's a relational concept which does not only limit itself to people's relationship with each other but extends to cover peoples' relationship with their environment. In the Igbo society where the concept of *EBUB* sprigged from, perching becomes the locus operandi for the kite and Eagle. Naturally the kite and the Eagle do not fly nor live together. However, they are permitted to perch together and this act of perching we see a relationship of respect and regard, which is possible because they belong to a common world of animals and operate within one human world. The *EBUB* is an Igbo proverb which has a deeper meaning like every other proverbs. It is a principle of justice and in most cases is used by the Igbo man as he attests to his *Ikenga* (chi and ancestors) of his loyalty to the long existing relationship amongst human.

This philosophy can directly be compared to the symbolic *Ikenga* and the notion behind it. The *Ikenga* is a representative of all the Igbo man holds dear to him and is believed to directly guide his relations with his fellow men and environments. The *Ikenga* gives the *Igbo's* a spirit of responsibility to human and nature and as well, encourages them to uphold the legacies of people before them as they imprint solid footsteps for the little ones coming after them. The *Igbo* people believe that if they don't interfere in your progress then by divine will you won't be able to spoil theirs using the sacred *Ikenga* as their divine symbol.

The philosophy of *ubuntu and EBUB* just as the symbolic *Ikenga* plays a critical role in environmental conservation. This is further buttressed by the fact that according to the *ubuntu* philosophy, the community is

important and individual needs are secondary to family and community needs. Likewise, the Igbo EBUB proverb which is often said in front of the *Ikenga* as a prayer to one's chi, values human relationship with his fellow man and the environment, presenting it as a prerequisite for success. In essence all three, (*ubuntu*, *EBUB*, *Ikenga*) holds that one's existence and progress depends solely on the existence of the other living things in its environment and his relationship with them. If a person's behaviour is deemed to benefit the community, then one is deemed to be human. If a person's behaviour endangered the whole community such behaviour is meant to be chastised.

The Shona just like the *Igbo* people of Nigeria, in upholding the values portrayed by the *Ikenga* therefore strived to avoid behaviours that brings problems to the community. Such behaviours include environmental degradation or pollution as the whole community would be punished by God or the guardian spirits. Punishment that affected the whole community came in the form of droughts, hailstorms, locusts or worms. People therefore showed their *Ubuntu* by being friendly to the environment as their philosophical responsibility to the community; likewise the *Igbo* tribe upholds the *EBUB* proverb by allowing a fair play amongst each other as well as shows respect to their *Ikenga* which they see as directly respecting the spirit of nature. The *Ubuntu*, *EBUB* and *Ikenga* values were not limited to fellow human beings but extended to flora and fauna. A person with good *unhu* and a respected *Ikenga* upon which his hope of progress lies would therefore not recklessly cut down trees. *Egbe bere Ugo bere*, is therefore implying that we all exist in a world (human, animal and the ecosystem at large), With the *Egbe* and *Ugo* representing the different aspect of the ecosystem which might not necessarily be of a common specie but is joined by the singular fact of belongingness.

The Symbolismic Significance of *Ikenga* in African society

Ikenga is a personal embodiment of human endeavour, achievement, success, and victory. *Ikenga* is grounded in the belief that the power for a man to accomplish things is in his right hand. It also governs over industry, farming, Chinua Achebe's celebrated novel *Arrow of God* examines the cultural complexities of the *Igbo* people in colonial Nigeria. Set in the early decades of the twentieth century, the book intimately addresses many nuances of *Igbo* beliefs, customs, and rituals, particularly in the context of British colonial rule, which was rapidly

expanding in Nigeria in that era. The fateful interaction between two characters in the novel, *Akukalia* and *Ebo*, is one such instance of a close look at a crucial aspect of Igbo belief. Following a serious altercation, *Akukalia* insults *Ebo* by breaking *Ebo's ikenga*. *Devastated by the loss, Ebo promptly grabs his gun and kills Akukalia. Despite Ebo's grave offense, the village elders cannot punish him, because under no circumstances does anyone in Igbo society have the right to defame, much less destroy, a man's Ikenga.* This tragic incident described by Achebe, himself an Igbo, demonstrates the crucial role of *Ikenga* in Igbo cosmology.

An Igbo man's right hand is the hand of accomplishment because it is the primary agent of action, confronting and overcoming life's challenges. Carved out of wood and anywhere from a few inches to about two feet tall, an *Ikenga* symbolizes its owner's right hand. When an Igbo male comes of age, he may ritually be offered an *Ikenga*, which becomes not only his proud possession to be preserved and honoured for the rest of his life, but is also an integral part of his identity as a unique individual. Signifying the owner's potential for success and his control of his own fate, the object embodies his *chi*, his *ndichie* (ancestors) and *ike* (power).

In short, the man's *Ikenga* becomes the essence of his individuality. Yet at the same time, it also serves as an unequivocal marker of his commitment to his society and environment at large. Though such practice is much less frequently than men, women may also possess *Ikenga*. It is believed by its owners to bring wealth and fortune as well as protection.

***Ikenga* and Eco-spirituality**

Having critically examined the African belief system as it relates to the ecosystem, as well as the *Ikenga* and its significance in an Igbo community. It is therefore important that we take a quality walk down the relational importance of the *Ikenga* as a symbol of authority of the Igbo people to the African eco spirituality at large.

From time immemorial the Igbo people have been known for their prowess in the different works of life, they are one of the most respected ethnic group in Nigeria and has made a name in trade worldwide. Before the invasion of the white men the Igbo people were notably an autonomous community without any known king. This brought about a popular Igbo saying; (*igbo enwe eze*) "Igbo tribe has no king". That

notwithstanding they maintained a unanimous order both with each other and the environment, this order has been visibly noted to be as a result of the culture and practices of this unique *Igbo* people.

Ikenga is a piece of wood carved out of sacred *Orji* or *Ogirisi* tree which are prone to termite infestation. To the *Igbo* man the *Ikenga* is a priceless possession. A story was once carried about an *Igbo* man who ran during the Biafra war, leaving all his possession while holding onto just his *Ikenga*. To the *Igbo* man nature is alive and reacts to all human being according to how they treat it, the man who ran with just his *Ikenga* during the war believes that his *Ikenga* is a connector between his destiny, the nature and his personal *chi*. This believe further implies that as long as he holds his *Ikenga* which signifies his good relationship with the mother earth he would surely succeed no matter where he finds himself.

The *Igbo* people have high regards for the nature which they believe gave birth to all living things they themselves inclusive and therefore empowers every house with a physical reminder of these values, “the *Ikenga*”. The *Ikenga* is believed to be a personal guidance and regulator of ones personal activity towards his fellow humans and most importantly the ecology, doing anything contrary to the natural environment is a direct provocation of ones *ikenga* in the *Igbo* tradition and this brings about failure in one’s life. The *ikenga* which has been colonized by the brutish today and advertised in their prestigious museums is a symbol of African long and beautiful relationship with the ecosystem. In the quest for resuscitating the eco spirituality of the world ecology Africans should be at the fore front as they know from experience what it entails to maintain a good eco-spirituality.

Conclusion

For most African communities and the *Igbo* people in particular, all aspects of nature, plants and wildlife and water bodies are under the mystical tutelage of ancestral spirits and guardian animals. People are therefore mandated to use natural resources sustainably on behalf of these owners – spiritual beings. The *Ikenga* thus represents a symbol for this believe in relation to a mans success in life. It therefore compels them to uphold their eco-spirituality for bright and progressive future. The *Igbo* people have a rich indigenous knowledge system which if used wisely may help in environmental conservation. However, it must

be noted that this Afro centric perspective has its own weaknesses just like any other school of thought.

References

- Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann
- Bennett, T. W. & Patrick, J. (2011). Ubuntu, the ethics of traditional religion. In T.W Bennett (ed) *Traditional African religions in South African Law* (pp 223-242). Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Bosman, M. (n.d). *Shona traditional religion, God the Creator*. www.philadelphiaproject.co.za/downloads/traditions/shona.pdf (Accessed 15/01/17)
- Broodryk, J. (2012). *Ubuntu African Life coping skills: Theory and practice*. Paper presented at CCEAM conference, 12-17 October 2012. Lefkosia: Cyprus.
- Kanu, I. A. (2013). The Dimensions of African Cosmology. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 2. 2. 533-555.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015a). *A hermeneutic approach to African Traditional Religion, philosophy and theology*. Augustinian Publications: Nigeria
- Kanu, I. A. (2015b). *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Augustinian Publications: Nigeria
- Kanu, Ikechukwu A. (Eds.). (2021). *African Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Systems: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment*. Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies.
- Kanu, Ikechukwu A. (Eds.). (2021). *African Eco-Philosophy: Cosmology, Consciousness and the Environment*. Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies.
- Kanu, Ikechukwu A. (Eds.). (2021). *African Eco-Theology: Meaning, Forms and Expressions*. Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies.
- Kanu, Ikechukwu A. (Eds.). (2021). *African Ecological Spirituality: Perspectives on Anthroposophy and Environmentalism. A Hybrid of Approaches*. Maryland, USA: Association for the Promotion of African Studies.

- Mawere, M. (2012). Buried and forgotten but not dead: Reflections on Ubuntu in environmental conservation in South Eastern Zimbabwe. *Afro Asia Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3.2): 1-20.
- Mkize, D. L. (2003). Towards an Afrocentric approach to psychiatry. *South African Journal of Psychiatry*, 9:3-6. Muchinako, G. A. (Forthcoming) Regulating the environment through religion: The case of the Njanja Community in Chikomba District, Zimbabwe. *Journal of Human Ecology*. Paper Ref. Number: JHE- 2811.
- Museka, G. & Madondo, M. M. (2012). The quest for a relevant environmental pedagogy in the African context: Insights from unhu /ubuntu philosophy. *Journal of Ecology and the Natural Environment*, 4(10): 258- 265.
- Mhaka (2015). Attachment Theory and KurovaGuva. *Zambezia*, 36, (i/ii): 20-35.
- Lovelock, James. (1988). *The Ages of Gaia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rockefeller, Steven, and John Elder, eds (1992). *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Grim, eds. (1993). *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.