

SACRED OBJECTS AND IGBO ECOSPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

The Igbo deities are not only associated with nature and natural objects but are also depicted with material objects from nature. The need to depict the gods in material object symbols-sculpted or natural- may be connected with the sophistication of Igbo phenomenological mind. Achebe argues that the Igbo have a natural proclivity to transcribe abstract or spiritual concepts in tangible, visual forms. Phenomenology relates basically to the human mental capacity to make visible what is "hidden" in the spirit world, and to "see" or discover the hidden dimension of physical things. The Igbo believe that the spiritual world can assume physically just as the physical can shed its materiality. This perhaps is the philosophical basis for symbolizing the gods with material objects. Therefore, Igbo phenomenological thought pertains to the peoples tendency to make the invisible visible and the historic historical through art and a variety of other symbolic forms. The intangible elements of the Igbo worldview are perceived through the optics of tangible things, hence the ecospirituality of the Igbo belief system. This piece will, therefore, study Igbo sacred objects in relation to eco-spirituality. For the purpose of the study, the phenomenological method of inquiry will be patronized.

Keywords: Sacred Objects, Igboland, Africa, Eco-spirituality, Ecosystem

Introduction

Man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. Mans understanding of God is strongly coloured by his understanding of the universe of which man himself is part. The invisible world is symbolized or manifested by the visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature. The invisible world presses hard upon the visible one. As the Igbo extend their conceptualization beyond persons to the environment, the continued application of the principle of duality provides recognition that there are also deities which are the complementary or twin elements of the ontological phenomena of thought, action and nature.

The Igbo gods or deities are spirit beings; they are conceived of and worshipped in physical ways. Man as a physical creature, encounters the gods through the medium of nature and the material objects of nature. The probable idea that comes to mind regarding the material aspect of Igbo religion is that it is the product of the ecosystem, or rather a product of the environment. The ecology of Igboland has left its imprint on the people's religion. The Igbo religion basically revolves around natural elements from the Igbo ecosystem- sky, sun, thunder, waterbodies, land, hill, trees and animals. Again, while the gods bear names that are akin to natural elements, the rituals celebrate the seasons and other rhythms of natural life.

The Impact of Ecology on Igbo Traditional Religion

The impact of ecology can be seen and felt through the ecological necessity in the vast materiality of religion in Igboland. Parrinder (1974) observed that in West Africa, religion appears material at first sight. Belief in many gods and their identification with material objects or elements of nature seems consequent upon the vitality of nature in this rain-forest zone. Men fear the forces of nature and try to propitiate them. This is in contrast to the Central and Southern Africa whose peoples, Parrinder says, "have not developed belief in nature gods" (p. 43). Most West African deities have natural elements or material objects that are associated with them and also serve as their temples or medium of interaction with devotees.

In Igboland, *Ani* deity is associated with land; and as the Earth Mother, she is symbolized with a sculpted woman with a child or children on her. *Amadioha* in Umunneoha or *Kamalu* in Ngwa area is associated with thunder. River goddesses are associated with particular rivers or streams that are also known by the same name as the goddesses (Arinze, 2008). For example, *Iyi-oku* in Awhum or *Imoka* in Awka are names of goddesses that are associated with certain rivers. Forest goddesses are associated with particular sacred forests like *Offia* awoke and *Nte ophina* in Ikwo of Ebonyi state. The shrines for the river goddesses are located beside the streams or they may have a pot or bowl of water in the vicinity of the shrines. Deities associated with hills are often located near particular hills, as in the case of the defunct *Ugwu-ezeama* deity in Imezi Owa and *Uto* deity of Ugwu-uto in Nsude.

Spirits and gods are also associated with trees and animals, and often take their names and significance from the names and significances of

those natural elements. In other words, the importance of a particular natural object would highlight the importance the people attach to the deity associated with it. The scarcity of water in the semi-arid zone of Ojebe-Ogene can explain the importance of *Iyi-oku* both as a stream and a goddess of Awhum. Similarly, according to Ezechi (2018) the importance of land to the farmers may also explain the important place of *Ani* deity in Igboland. Some other deities may be associated with man or woman life- birth, death, healing, feeding, protection, etc. For example, *Akwari* is associated to procreation (Metuh, 1999) while *Agwu* is linked with healing (Ejizu, 2002) and *Fiajioku* with feeding- especially with yam, the king of Igbo agricultural products (Afigbo, 1981). Every natural object has a spirit or god associated with it. The people also find in those natural objects an easy contact point for interacting with the spirits and gods. The African Traditional Religion holds that the objects which the spirits inhabit are not permanent habitat for the spirits. The spirits are separate and separable from the objects they are habited in.

The Material Character of Igbo Gods

The outcome of the above study on the impact of ecology on Igbo religion is that the deities are spirit-beings but they are manifest in material things. They are also prone to be represented in man-made images or objects. It is misleading to take these material things or material forces as Igbo deities *de facto*. Parrinder (1974) establishes the fact that spirits in African religions are other than the material things or the energy in things. They are supernatural agents that can inhabit or make their abode in material things- hills, rivers, rocks and trees. Spirits manifest in material things in order to come into communication with humans. But it is not all spirits that are gods. Parrinder suggests that those spirits that become gods are necessarily personified, that is, made tangible. In his words, "some of them are personified as gods in animistic fashion, but they are still potent forces in human life" (p. 23).

The distinctive difference between gods and mere spirits in African religion could be based on whether or not the people are wont to personify such a spirit being. For some writers on African religions, the concept of "personification" implies attributing personhood to objects or forces of nature such as the sun, rivers, trees and animals; thereby regarding them as if they were intelligent beings (Kanu 2015; Arinze, 2008; Hackett, 1998; MacGaffey, 1990; Mbiti, 2011; Metuh, 1999). Their perception of spirits as personified natural forces relates to Muller's

naturism, in which case natural forces are described as performing actions in manners only proper to humans (see Durkheim, 1995). But Muller himself presents spirits derives in this manner as illusion because, they are assumed the products of the error of misappropriated language.

For Parrinder, however, to personify a natural element is not merely to attribute personhood to it. It particularly involves translating that imaginary “person” into a tangible entity through material symbolization. Parrinder seems to highlight the distinctive character of the gods by pointing out that they are often personified in tangible images. He cited the Earth spirit as an example of a widely acclaimed deity among the Africans, particularly the Igbo. This is unlike the Tallensi of northern Ghana who do not personify the Earth as a goddess, some others do. In particular, he says, “the Igbo of Nigeria makes images of Mother Earth with a child in her arms, like an Italian Madonna” (p. 23). Hence, it seems that for him, to personify a spirit is to represent it with images some natural objects, especially man-made images and objects.

The images made for deities are veritable shrines for them as they have become their contact-points with votaries or worshippers. Parrinder in the words of Ezechi (2018) indicates that gods generally have their own temples; and by natural consequence, they normally have attendant priests. The dedication of a specific temple and attendant priest indicates stability of cult and makes organized worship the essential character of a god or deity in Igbo religious setting. Granted this observation by Parrinder, it can be assumed that non deified spirit do not enjoy permanent cult. The validity of this theory can be verified with the *Ogbanje* spirit in Igboland. Like the deities, *Ogbanje* spirits receive sacrifices from votaries seeking to avert their rage and anger. They may also be pacified or decorated with material images such as dolls and or other man made images. They have no designated temple or place of worship, and no specific priest. Therefore, unlike the deities, their worships are sporadic and occasional, arising as need not as a cult.

Indeed, not all spirits are perceived by Africans to be gods; not all are even deserving of worship (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010; Nwoga, 1984a). According to Nwoga, “it is not automatic that every spirit is a god” (p. 34). He perceives in Igbo thought three forms of realities- the physical (matter), the spiritual (spirit) and the conceptual (god). Since the gods

are mere conceptual entities, he surmises, anything can be a god if the people conceive it as such. Thus Nwoga stated that,

Spirits may be gods just as physical material objects may be gods. It is by an act of conceptualization and activation that a god is realized. When an object, material or spiritual, is said to be or appreciated to be, or acts as, a god, then it may be a god (p. 34).

It is worthy of note that he sees the gods as products of human “act of conceptualization”. In other words, for him, deity is a mere fabrication of the human mind. Whatever a man declares as god is god- whether it is spirit or matter. In that case, the existence of deity would be imaginary, not a reality. Ezechi noted that Nwoga does not say how this mentally fabricated or conceptual entity is activated- whether by man’s act of sacrifice or his will-power. At any rate, he gives man the credit of bringing gods into existence. But once conceived, each god or deity would have a physical as well as a spiritual aspect- what Nwoga calls the twin elements of deities. The visible element would be man’s tangible way of identifying the invisible being. For example, the sky god is associated by the human mind with the sky just as Idemili would be both a river and the spirit inhabiting it. It can then be deduced that, for Nwoga, gods or deities must have a physical manifestation to aid their worship and interaction with devotees. It then follows that the physical manifestation with spiritual presence signifies the realities of human relationship and worship of the spirit-beings.

By and large, a deity is a spirit that deserves the peoples worship and it is indeed worshipped. For that reason, also, deities need physical representation or manifestation. The nature of man demands that his interaction with spiritual beings need occur in material form. The image, shrine or temple, the totems and other material ritual forms associated with deities make worship easy as a human phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the non manifestation of a deity would be tantamount to its non existence. And non existing deities cannot be worshipped by the Africans or the Igbo.

The Root of Igbo Rituals and Ecospirituality

Igbo traditional rituals evolve from peoples experiences in their world, from their encounter with environmental perturbations. Therefore, they necessarily manifest a profoundly material character. Rituals are the

physical or material aspect of religion. They translate the intellectual elements of the people's faith to the cultural level of meaning.

What is ritual?

Ritual can be used to describe behaviours in a wide range of fields. For example, the routine morning offerings of an African elder, early morning public worship in Igboland might all qualify as ritual. In all these cases, the idea of a pattern or a repetitive behaviour-pattern is highlighted. Thus technically, ritual refers to prescribed or established method of doing things. From a religious perspective, Turner (1967) defines ritual as "prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" (p. 19). He is criticized for limiting the scope of ritual to religion (Enekwe, 1987; Goody, 1977). Enekwe particularly argues that since ritual basically refers to formalized activity, there is no intrinsic exclusion of "those other rituals that are non-religious, but are concerned with specialized parts of the social/cultural background" (p. 25). Kelleher (2003) recalls the social nature of ritual in general, that it is a function of the dynamics of the social process, "the interplay between two different needs, the need for structure or social order and the need to experience the more basic human bonding that is prior to any order" (p. 906). Therefore, it may be rewarding for proper understanding of ritual to recognize that it is a multi-disciplinary concept.

Rappaport (1999) views ritual as a man's adaptive response to environmental perturbations. Every environment presents its inhabitants with natural challenges. It bears peculiar social and natural event that affect human conditions. Rappaport suggests that in responding to environmental realities, societies, indeed every living system, naturally develop by repeated performance or experience, an established manner of surviving in their world, a formal way of doing things. In other words, ritual emerges often as a result of people's effort to cope with their respective environment. It involves moving from improvising ways of surviving to evolving permanent physiological structures. Or, as Rappaport puts it, ritual entails "short-term reversible changes of state and longer-term irreversible changes in structure" (p. 6). In any case, the repetition of action or manner of response-whether it is mental or physical behaviour-before a given problem would in time become normal for the people, and so stylize as their established and

prescribed system of approaching such problem. Ritual as an adaptation process may manifest in terms of fixed mind-set, belief system, cultures, philosophy of life, behaviour pattern, observances, taboos, and customs or even settlement patterns noticeable in various societies.

For example, in the event of soil degradation, people may decide to enhance yam production by reducing the number of crops planted in the same farm with yam. However, in the long run, this caution may evolve into a sacred observance and custom in which case it is now regarded as offensive to the gods to plant particular crop in a yam farm. It is basically done for the survival of the people in the face of ecological challenges. Most of Igbo traditional rituals could be explained in this way - land observances, agricultural rituals, sex taboos, and even masquerade rituals. They probably evolved from simple but temporary precautionary practices to complex and permanent behaviour-patterns or ways of life. They are efforts of the people to adapt to the situations of their environment.

Ritual is the normal way of doing things within a cultural setting- a way of worshipping a deity, of breaking kola nut, of praying, of handing a daughter over in marriage. Rappaport recognizes, like Turner, the idea of "formal act" or "specific form of action" as a significant feature of ritual. But he curiously argues that the formal actions or rituals are not necessarily associated with physical efficacy. In his words, "formal action of ritual is not instrumental in any ordinary sense nor produce a practical result on the external world" (p. 46). The assertion is questionable because among worshippers in Igbo traditional religion, ritual is thought to produce desired physical result. For example, the masquerade ritual assures the traditional Igbo of material blessings from the gods- children, enough rain, good harvest, protection (Aniako 1978; Enekwe 1981, 1987; Okeke & Okechukwu 1978; Okafor 1995; Onyehalu 1987). Thus, contrary to Rappaport's view, ritual has material efficacy. Among other things, it "reduces anxiety by making people believe that what has been desired has been effected or will be fulfilled" (Enekwe, 1987, p. 25). It equally gives the people confidence and the feeling of control over unpredictable phenomena, (Tauli-Corpuz 2001). For Ray (1976), ritual acts are instrumental in the sense that "they not only say what reality is but they also shape the word to conform with its reality" (p. 17).

As a matter of fact, many non African religions view their rituals as producing desired effects *ex opera operato*, that is, by virtue of their physical performance with requisite conditions. The efficacy of any ritual does not depend on the person who performed it but rather depends on the adherence to the procedural steps demanded by the ritual. Ritual as a religious matter is determined by the peculiarity of a particular religion. The ritual in African Traditional Religion cannot follow the same ritual pattern. It is the differences in ritual processes in different religions that differentiate one religion from the other. Rituals bear the language of different religion. The Priest of any religion performs the ritual acts according to and with the requirements of the religion. Durkheim (1995) in Ezechi (2018) also sees the efficacy of religious rituals to be associated with the action as performed. He recalls the need in some traditional societies to observe specific formulas for religious events in order to produce desired effects. With particular note on Jewish rituals, he observes that during their Feast of Tabernacles the people stirred the air by shaking willow branches in a certain rhythm to make rain to fall. Thus, according to him, it is the people's belief that "the rite produced the desired result automatically, provided it was correctly performed" (p. 33). Then he observes further that:

it is this, by the way, that explains the primary importance that nearly all cults give to the physical aspect of ceremonies. This religious formalism (...) arises from the fact that, having in and of themselves the source of their efficacy, the formulas to be pronounced and the movements to be executed would lose efficacy if they were not exactly the same as those that had already proved successful (p. 33).

In the light of this formalism, Durkheim defines ritual (which he interchanges with rite) as "rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things" (p. 38). For the purpose of this work, ritual is understood as a habitual ceremony or activity expressing the people's worldview and embodying their communal response to existential realities both in the contexts of spiritual and the physical realities. Put the other way, ritual is the people's traditional activity expressed in their physical and spiritual realities as embodied in their worldview.

Ritual Evolution and Ecospirituality among the Igbo

The fact that rituals evolve from ecosystem, and that there is an interaction between people and their environment has been noted by scholars (Grimes, 1995; Kelleher, 1999). It evolves in the process of man's effort to survive within a given environment, against ecological perturbations. It becomes quite logical that rituals not only naturally derive from the environment but they are also coloured by that environment. And, they are coloured in accordance with environmental traits. For example, the fact that Igbo live in the rain-forest zone of West Africa has implications for their vast association with natural elements that form the ecospirituality or the environmental friendly relations with these natural factors- land, sun, water, trees or wood, etc. The importance of ecology or the environment in the evolution of Igbo culture in general is noted by scholars (Afigbo, 1975a; Jones, 1961). Afigbo points to the ecological or ecospirituality factor, especially *Ani*, the Earth, in understanding Igbo religion and rituals. The *Ani*, he says, occupies a prominent place in the people's religious worship and when provoked,

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

The significance of agriculture to traditional Igbo economy seems to account for the importance of land. The Igbo also have the earth goddess or *Ani* for man's spiritual and sacrificial purposes. Land is used for buildings, constructions and infrastructural developments. Sequel to this is the high population density of this rain-forest zone, which induces land scarcity. Thus, the *sacralization* or deification of land in Igboland may have resulted as an inevitable backwash (Kalu, 2003). In some places, Kalu observes:

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

But the avowed scarcity of land is worsened- especially in northern Igboland- by soil erosion and degradation caused, perhaps, by long-time habitation and cultivation of the geographical zone (Afigbo, 1981;

Allison, 1962; Hartle, 1967; Ijoma, 2002). It has been suggested that the northern part of Igbo is the first to be occupied among all parts of modern Igboland (Afigbo, 1975a, 1981). Quoting Hartle, Ezechi (2018) reiterated that the occupation of this part of Igboland is dated as far back as the Neolithic age or 3rd Century BC (Hartle, 1967). The implication of long habitation and cultivation of this area is the replacement of the vegetal cover, which characterized it as a rain forest, with semi-savanna forest or grass land (Afigbo, 1975a).

A Brief look at other Sacred Objects

Trees

Trees form a great part of the forces of nature with huge religious significance for the traditional Igbo. Some of the commonest trees with religious sacred importance to the Igbo include; *Ofo* tree, *Oji* or *Iroko* tree, the kola nut tree, *Akpu* tree, *Ogirisi* tree, *Oha* tree, *Ogbu* tree, *Ngwu* tree as well as *Aja-ezi* tree, *Okwe*, and so forth. Some trees like Palm tree have economic values while some others are herbal (Ifesieh, 1989). To be sure every tree or plant is believed to possess some power or force that can affect man positively or negatively. Some trees are used in marking or identifying the shrine of some deities. Such trees like *Akpu*, *Aja-ezi*, *Ogirisi* and *Oha* are also known to be quick survivors. Some trees are associated with particular spirits and are usually found in their shrines or sacred places. Some other categories of trees, perhaps due to their sizes or the power they exude are regarded as great trees- *Oke osisi*- and they are viewed as embodiments of spirits. *Ofo* is another tree with great religious sacredness and significance among the Igbo. As a ritual object, *Ofo* symbolizes for the Igbo a general concept of justice and propriety (Bentor, 1988). Bentor also observes that it primarily functions as a proof of innocence.

In a society where everything is believed to have indwelling spirit of its own, the great trees tend to acquire personality status like human beings. The activities of the indwelling spirits are viewed as performed by the trees.

Animals

Animals are an important class of nature that features prominently in the sacredness of world religions. In the ancient Celtic religion, gods were named after beasts- like the goddess *Epona* whose name means

Horse, whose icon includes a horse. In Igboland, different communities and families hold different animals as sacred. The animals may merely be assumed to have some affinity with the clan or to be the manifestation of some local deities. For example, *Agu-owulu*, the Leopard is related to *Omabe* spirit (Aniakor, 1978). Sometimes, the animals are treated as property of some deities. In Awka, the Monkey is sacred to *Imoka* deity and it is never to be killed or eaten by the indigenes. The python, *eke*, is not to be killed in many Igbo communities because it belongs to the deity *Idemili* (Achebe, 1982; Ifesieh, 1989).

Arts/Carved Objects

Spirits as the key objects of artistic representation in the traditional religion, are overly conceived in anthropomorphic terms. It seems that man cannot properly conceive the spirit world without forging a representation of it and as Lacroix (1990) points out, "his representation necessarily takes on a human form" (p.94). Ezechi (2018) equips most of the effigies of Igbo deities whether in public or private shrines, have human appearances. Divinized elements of nature like the earth, thunder and other spirit forces and ancestral personages are captured by religious artists in human morphology. Most traditional Igbo sculptures are wood works - varieties of masks, *Ikenga* figures, sacred stools or *okposi* and so forth. The fact is that most products of Igbo traditional art appear crude, ugly, and childish and may not fit into modern or western idea of art.

Conclusion

In addition to the earth, other terrestrial elements of nature or sacred objects that feature prominently in traditional religious symbolism include - trees, hills, water bodies, animals and especially man. Nature in general, Mbiti (2011) affirms, serves for the manifestation or depiction of God or divinity. Most African tribes associate God or the spiritual world with human nature as well as with animals, trees, even stones and water bodies. The African, especially the Igbo say that the universe is a religious entity. Nature is filled with religious sacred objects of significance man gives life where natural objects and phenomena have no biological life. God therefore is seen in and behind these objects and phenomena; they are his creation, they manifest him, they symbolize his being and presence.

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