

## **Igbo Traditional religion and Land Preservation**

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### ***Abstract***

*The study examines Igbo Traditional Religion and Land Preservation in Igboland. The study disclosed that land is very important at the international and national levels especially in the sub-Saharan West Africa with emphasis on Igbo. It also revealed that a lot of cares is taken to preserve this valued and highly cherished gift from God. The Igbo who are highly religious have devoid many of the means to protect the land mass or earth. Supremely, they have used religious elements in doing this such as worship of earth-goddess, taboos, sacrilization of land, religious festivals and rituals. Re-visit of the traditional methods of land preservation, modification of these methods of land preservation so as to accommodate people of other religious affiliation, Christians should be allowed to practice the Christian methods of land preservation without hurting the feeling of others and Christian teachings against human greediness and land speculations should be intensified in order to check the excesses of many greedy individuals and communities from exploiting land users and true owners of the land are highly recommended.*

### **Introduction**

Land stands out as a precious gift to humanity. Land is viewed with high sense of responsibility among Igbo people chiefly living in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The excessive use of land calls for precaution if not it will be abused, polluted, defiled and rendered infertile. The wise Igbo ancestors discovered that religious rituals and ceremonies could be of great assistance in the preservation of this invaluable divine gift of land to humanity. Non compliance to the use of land will amount to several ugly developments in the area. These include abomination (*aru*) in the community which may affect the harvest of the year. Ugwu (2000) asserts that many social offences such as adultery, fornication, stealing, etc. become abomination (*aru*) because they infringe the laws of the Earth Goddess (p.48). It can also attract natural disasters such as pestilence, earthquake, landslides and thunder storm that usually come, as a punishment on the people for the abomination committed. These disasters are usually harmful to the people. They are always dreadful at all times. Sooner or later, there will be no more sacred lands for some wild animals such as python, lion, and antelope to live therein for future uses.

The primary focus of this paper is to examine the traditional religious means by which land is preserved, protected and replenished especially in North-Eastern Igbo land (Nkanu-Awgu-Abakaliki). This is because whenever issues of land preservation around the world are tabled for discussion in the international community the Igbo traditional methods of land preservation seem to be a thing of the past. This to an extent has contributed to the causes of land disputes in most parts of Igbo land that have led to the waste of both human and material resources.

Eze (2010) reported that the communal clash between the people of Ezillo clan who are the aborigines and the Ezza settlers over struggle for land has claimed four prominent people from Cross River State. The quarters were burnt to death during the week on an emissary to the troubled community. The clash which started on May 10, 2008 claimed more than 600 lives with property worth more than N1 billion destroyed. Also in Anambra State, Ujumadu (2011) reported that soldiers and heavily armed policemen have been deployed to the village of Nkputu, Owerre Ezulaka in Orumba South Local Government Area of Anambra State, following last Thursday's killing of two persons in the renewed clash between the community and its Awuka, Ogbunka, neighbours. Several persons were also injured in the violent clash that left, at least, eight houses burnt. The two communities have been fighting over a piece of land that separates them since 1987. These disputes could be averted if people are acquainted with the basic issues involved in land preservation especially now that Christianity has made great impacts in Igboland.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

It is essential to provide some definitions and clarifications of terms associated with land preservation. It would be very difficult, if not impossible to explain and analyze the terms related to the issue to individuals who are not familiar with land preservation without an explanation of the many labels describing land preservation. Each cultural area has its own reasons for land preservation and some of the reasons are apparently religious.

### **Igbo**

Igboland is the home of the Igbo people and it covers most of Southeastern Nigeria. Litvack (1999) noted that the area is divided by the Niger River into two unequal sections – the eastern region (which is the largest) and the mid-western region. The river, however, has not acted as a barrier to cultural unity; rather it has provided an easy means of communication in an area where many settlements claim different origins. The Igbo are also surrounded on all sides by other tribes (the Bini, Warri, Ijaw, Ogoni, Igala, Tiv, Yako and Ibibio). In Nigeria today, Igboland is roughly made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and parts of Delta and Rivers State. Small parts of Akwa Ibom, Cross River,

Benue and Bayelsa States make up the rest of Igboland. There are over 30 million people in Igboland and with a density ranging from 1000 per sq. mile in high density and 350 per sq. mile in low density areas; it could be the densest area in Africa after the Nile Valley. Together it has an area of some 15,800 to 16,000 square miles.

The Igbo are a politically fragmented group, with numerous divisions resulting from geographic differences. There are also various subgroups delineated in accordance with clan, lineage, and village affiliations. They have no centralized chieftaincy, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs, as can be found among their neighbours. Instead, the responsibility of leadership has traditionally been left to the village councils, which include the heads of lineages, elders, titled men, and men who have established themselves economically within the community. It is possible for an Igbo man, through personal success, to become the nominal leader of the council.

The use of land for different purposes has increased to a great extent that even children are aware of man's dependence on it. A land may be used for farming, charm making, oath-taking (*Igba Ndu*), religious festivals and activities of secret societies. Other uses of the land include the worship of the Earth Goddess that is the cult of Earth Goddess and ritual cleansing to ward off any act of abomination committed by the people. Onwuejiogwu (1984) noted that the Igbo culture area may be defined as an area enclosed by an imaginary line running outside of the settlements of Agbor, Kwalle (West Niger Igbo), Ahoada, Diobu, Umuaboyi (Port Harcourt), Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu (Abakaliki area), Enugu Ezike (Nsukka area) and Ebu (West Niger Igbo). Kalu (1998) observed that Igboland is divided into cultural areas. The cultural areas are Western Igboland (Asaba axis), North-Western Igboland (Onitsha axis), Northern Igboland (Udi-Nsukka axis), North-Eastern Igboland (Nkanu-Awgu-Abakaliki axis), Central Igboland (Okigwe-Nkwerre-Orlu-Owerri, Mbaise axis), Southern Igboland (Ngwa, Umuahia, Bende, Ndoki axis) and Cross River/Eastern Igboland (Arochukwu, Abam, Ohafia axis). In these areas, religion ensures that land is preserved.

## **Land**

The land or the earth is the third planet from the Sun, and the densest and the fifth largest of the eight planets in the solar system. It is often referred to as the world. Land refers to ground-surface, the soil that supports vegetation and all life. It is the part of the earth, which is not covered with water. In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. Here, the earth refers to the whole world including the land as opposed to the sea. And God called the dry land, earth and gathering together of the waters called he seas, and God saw it was good (Gen. 1:10). Land was sometimes defined in classical and neoclassical economies as the "original and indestructible powers of the soil. Classical economics, land is considered one of the three factors of production, capital, and labour.

Land, particularly geographic locations and mineral deposits have historically been the cause of much conflict and dispute; land reform programmes, which are designed to redistribute possession and/or use of geographic land, are often the cause of much controversy, and conflicts over the economic rent of mineral deposits have contributed to many civil wars, particularly in Africa. God purposefully created the dry land for the good of man. Hence, it occupies very important position in the affairs of man since creation. Its usages in agriculture for the production of food crops, cash crops and rearing of animals are of great assistance to the benefit of man and his environments. The important position occupied by land in affairs of man and his environment demands that adequate measures should be taken for its preservation.

### **Religion**

It must be noted *ab initio* that no definition of religion has general acceptance. Religion is so amazingly complex. It touches every aspect of human life. It involves morality, psychology, sociology and philosophical spheres of life. Therefore, any meaningful definition must recognize the universal aspects of religion and includes all the humanistic and social aspects of religion. No definition by any scholar has successfully and adequately accommodated the various aspects of this “enigma” called religion.

Okwueze (2003) defines religion as “a regulated pattern of life of people in which experiences, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world (p.3). In his contribution, Abe (2008) defines religion as a pattern of belief and practice through which human beings communicate with or hope to gain experience of that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experience (p.135). However, religion can therefore be understood as an awareness of a supreme being through which we are assured of our existence. It implies that we exist on account of the readiness of this superior being to care for us. Without him, we cannot survive in this world of human existence. Arinze (1974) proffered an explanation of the phenomenon of religion among men from the subjective and objective standpoints. In the first sense, it is “the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship Him”, in the second, “religion is the body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being” (p.21).

### **Igbo Traditional Religion**

Igbo traditional religion is a subset of African traditional religion. It is the religion of Igbo people which formed their religious activities. The Igbo people have very much respect for life. For them, blood is sacred and it is life. This belief is also part of the bases of their theology. They, like other Africans believe in such concepts as sacredness, communalism, respect for life, dignity of the human

person, sense of freedom, unity of purpose, sense of respect, fate and determinism, belief in one God (*Chi Ukwu*), who, however, can only be accessed through intermediaries, who are minor gods or deities. Their relationship and worship of God is what can better be seen under their belief in the Supreme Being.

### **Preservation**

Preservation simply put is the activity of protecting something from loss or danger. This thing could be land, motor, house, certificate, money, drugs among other things. But in this paper we are concerned with land preservation in Igboland.

### **Igbo Traditional Methods of Preservation of Land**

There are Igbo traditional methods of land preservation. For the purpose of this work, we have classified them as the worship of the Earth-Goddess, taboos, sacrilization of land and religious festival and rituals. Beginning with the worship of the Earth-Goddess, the discussion follows below:

### **The Worship of the Earth Goddess**

The emergence of the worship of “earth goddess” and the mythology related to it can be seen in many forms in many of the ancient tribes and societies including Africa. Some of the examples are the Aztecs who worshiped goddess *Tlaltheuctli*, the Greek who worshiped Goddess Demeter and the ancient tribes of the northern Germany who worshiped the Germanic tribal goddess *Ertha* and Igbo who worshipped *Ala*. These are just few examples to name but the worship of earth goddess was prominent phenomenon in most of the ancient societies. The goddess cult in the form of nature's manifestations has seen a great revival in the modern times. Khali (2008) observed that the concepts of earth goddess, mother goddess and the triple goddess are actually helping us to understand the universal truth how we are in fact connected to nature. The earth goddess and mother goddess manifestation makes us aware about the absolute power of nature. The Igbo people regard Supernatural Being as being more powerful than Earth Goddess but the earth goddess has a direct intervention in the human affairs. This gave rise to the worship of earth goddess (*Ala*) which was not only universal among Igbo people but also governed the people and their actions in the more perceptible and pervasive ways.

Iwe (1998) states that *Ala* (*Ani* or *Ana*) is the most common divinity in Igboland (p.18). It is therefore generally the arch-divinity of every locality. It is regarded as the earth goddess of fertility and the custodian of public morality in co-operation with the spirit of our departed and venerable ancestors. The earth goddess is that divinity which is neither *Igwe*, nor even *Chukwu*, but *Ala*, the goddess of the earth. She was the one deity which no man or woman and no

community could afford to offend, much less discard. Breaches of public morality or social prohibitions and taboos (*ns? ala*) such as stealing from the barn, homicide, incest, infidelity, woman climbing the palm tree and wrestling her husband down in a fight are all considered offences against the earth (*Ala*). Ilogu (1970) itemized about twenty-four “abominations” or ethical and social prohibitions and taboos of Igbo moral code (p.34). The Earth Goddess is held sacred and highly venerated because of her role in the affairs of humanity especially in preserving the land.

Preservation of the land is of great interest to the supernatural being. The earth spirit is the most important spirit after Chukwu. Arinze (1970) opined that, “she is the great mother spirit, the queen of the underworld, the owner of men, and the custodian of public morality in conjunction with ancestors (p.15). It is a way of ensuring that men are not left to undergo suffering in the world. In African traditional religion, the earth goddess is seen as the preserver of the land and its inhabitants. The Earth goddess is regarded as the goddess of fertility to men, animals and crops. The Earth goddess ensures the sanctity of the earth.

### **Taboos**

Taboos are put in place to safeguard the earth. Umeagudosu in Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (1990) is of the opinion that “taboo are central to the socialization process, and thus ensure public peace, unity and stability of the society” (p.68). Taboo is prohibition against an item, person, or type of behaviour. In religious taboos, the forbidden item is believed to be unclean or sacred, and the taboo is imposed for protection against the item's power. Violation of these prohibitions is considered moral, spiritual and social pollution of the land, requiring appropriate ritual for the purification of the offender and the community in order to appease the Earth goddess. This violation is regarded as abomination (*Aru* or *Nso Ala*) and could bring the wrath of the Earth Goddess upon the offenders and the punishment for such mishaps ranged from sudden death, famine, pestilence, and poor harvest as well as loss of property to the inability to have children and defeat in war.

In the Igbo traditional society taboos were held in high esteem for the sake of preserving the land. Contravening any of them is regarded as abomination (*nso ani*). According to Arinze (1970), abomination in the first place embraces serious personal and moral crimes according to Igbo morality. Although there are local variations, these acts are generally regarded as such: patricide, incest, stealing of yams and sheep, bestiality, willful abortion, pregnancy within a year of husband's death, suicide by hanging and the killing of sacred animals. Secondly, abomination includes those things which the Igbo consider abnormal or unnatural: giving birth to twins (*ejima*), a person dying without anyone to attend him (*Ikpu iru*), pounding of the pestle on the ground instead of in the mortar while pounding fou-fou even if by mistake (*isu odudu*

*n'ani*), a woman climbing a palm tree, abnormal presentation in the birth of a baby (*Iji okpa puta uwa*), a child cutting the upper teeth first (*nnwa eze-enu*) and fighting against masquerade (*mmuo, mmanwu*). Thirdly, certain abnormal behaviour on the part of some animals also calls for expiratory sacrifice. Thus if a dog or a fowl crosses a corpse, if a dog brings forth only one whelp, if a fowl lays only one egg, or if a goat brings forth its young without anyone to attend it (*ewu imu n'elili*) (p.34f).

In contrast, some of these taboos are no longer taken serious because of the influence of Christianity on the entire system of human existence. For instance the birth of twins is now being celebrated in most part of the world including Africa where it used to be a taboo. Taboos were used to educate and thereby restrict human beings in their social interactions, relationships to animals, nature, periods of the year, decorum of speech and ritual process. These taboos are not just there but they are meant to be observed by every member of any community in Igboland to ensure the preservation of the land.

### **Religious Rituals and Festivals**

The significance of public and collective religious rituals and festivals is not far fetched. During the religious festivals and rituals, members of the whole community gather together to offer prayers for the general well being of the people. For instance, *Ifeji oku* is a period the yam spirit receives his special cult before and after the planting season. *Iwaji* (lit. the breaking of the yam) marks the beginning of the *Ifejioku*. The crops are offered to the spirits through the earth goddess. Kalu (1979) presents the prayer said during *Iwaji*: The ritual master cuts one new yam tuber into four pieces, at the same time praying. New Yam of this year, we are cutting you this day, we are slicing you into four pieces, we have seen how whitish you are. The yam deity, run come Bless this yam, may one tuber become four in the barn of every one of us. Ancestors behold the new yam, share the eating with us (p.90f).

These yams as well as all the farming implements are laid before the *Ifeji oku* shrine. This feast inaugurates officially the eating of new yam for the year. Without it, the Earth goddess cannot assure bumper harvest the following planting season. Arinze (1970) quoting Meek, said, "Not only is it an offence to eat new yams before the performance of the rites, but it is also an offence to introduce new yams from another town, especially in Awgu Division" (p.86).

### **Sacrilization of Land**

Moreover, Religion has also helped in the preservation of land, parts of land are declared sacred. The word "Sacred" is derived from the Latin word "*Sacrum*" which referred to the gods or anything in their power. Sacred means that which is holy or set apart for religious usage. Ugwu (2002) is of the opinion that "in most religions, a distinction is made between the sacred or holy and the

profane or ordinary states. Most communities in the world divide their lands into two: the sacred and profane lands. The sacred lands are set aside for religious purposes whereas human beings use the profane lands for non-religious purpose” (p.28). Almost all the religions of the world have their sacred objects usually kept in well-designated places for the worshippers to see and use them. The presence of these objects makes that place sacred. Every building for religious purpose is said to be sacred, such buildings are usually dedicated for religious usage. For instance, Christianity has its most activities in the church building or temple. Moslems normally use mosque for religious activities. In African Traditional Religion, shrines are founded in sacred places. The lands where these sacred buildings are situated are tagged sacred lands.

No individual community is allowed to tamper with any of them without performing the necessary sacrifices to appease the Spirit usually the Earth goddess in charge of the land. If this is defiled, the wrath of the deity would descend on the people who have done the unholy act. The people of the community for whatever reason for donating the land see it as a sacrifice to the earth goddess. Members of the community and any other persons are restrained from having anything done in the said land. They are not allowed to farm on it. Hunting in such land that has stick forest is strictly prohibited. People usually use theirs as refuge because the deity in such land harbors those that ran into the land for protection. Some abandoned children are usually kept in such land for protection.

On the other hand, the advent of Christianity in Igboland in 1857 has brought some changes in these practices in respect to land preservation. Christians especially the Anglicans as contained in the liturgy of the church usually at the beginning of the planting season organize a service for rogation. Rogation means asking, it is the time when the farmer goes round his farm, accompanied by the clergy and villagers, ask God's blessings on the weather, the growing crops and the whole agricultural industries. This prayer is needed because most of the activities in the agricultural industry are performed on the land. Hence, the land is prayerfully committed into the hands of God for more favours for bumper harvest.

There are many churches in many parts of Igboland. The traditional methods of preserving the sanctity or purity of the land are giving way to new expression of Christianity. Some communities now organize prayer meetings for the good of the land. Some enthusiastic and zealous Christians have cleared some sacred bushes for religious purposes. Some town unions have hewn down large economic trees in many erstwhile fearful “evil forest” used them in building of town markets, community schools and other modern development projects. There is regular prayers of dedication of the land at the beginning of every year - thus making the land pure and clean them for God's blessings to thrive. We do not have “bad bush” or “evil forest” any more. Evil forest used to be the place where

the people suffered from despicable diseases like leprosy, dropsy, elephantiasis, suicidal case and women who died in labour, etc were thrown. These groves have been cleared and often turned into play ground for the youths. The issue is that both Igbo traditional religion and Christianity should dialogue the best ways of land preservation to ensure that none of them is relegated to the background. Above the land preservation should be the concern of every in Igboland to be assured of a conducive environment both spiritually and physically.

### **Recommendations**

- i. The crucial step of trying to find solution to land issues in Igboland should start with the society recognizing that the need to revisit the traditional methods of land preservation. If the society fails to see the problem, then it cannot confront it. And without effecting some positive changes in the mentality of perpetrators of land disputes in Igboland.
- ii. These authors believe that the Igbo can modify these methods of land preservation so as to accommodate people of other religious affiliation.
- iii. The agenda for land preservation here reflects a serious assessment of land disputes and crimes against the land with its attending socio-religious problems.
- iv. The authors are of the view that Christians should be allowed to practice the Christian methods of land preservation without hurting the feeling of others.
- v. Christian teachings against human greediness and land speculations should be intensified in order to check the excesses of many greedy individuals and communities from exploiting land users and true owners of the land.

### **Conclusion**

It is incontrovertible to assert that the use of religion has immensely contributed to the preservation of land in Igboland. The worship of the Earth-Goddess, the use of taboos, sacrilization of land and strict observance of religious festivals and rituals like the New Yam Festival have in no small measure helped to preserve the land at all times in Igboland. Land has remained a very important asset given to man by God. It has assisted man in many ways of human endeavours.

However, it can also be abused if people continue to commit abomination, which is disregarding of the taboos of the land and non worship of earth-goddess. Sacrilization of land is also relevant due to the fact some portions of the land are kept aside for future use. Thus the degradation of the environment and exploitation of the land by a few rich people is severely under heavy surveillance by community and the legal codes of the country.

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