



Traditional Practices among the Igbo in Imo State, Nigeria and their Effect on Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

Environment is the combination of the natural living resources (plants, animals, streams, air and forests), the non-living things made by man and the inter-relationship between these as well as various circumstances which surround people on earth. Environmental sustainability is the capacity to preserve the ecological balance in our natural ecosystem and protect natural resources to be able to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs can be achieved if man is in harmony with the environment through his actions and is inextricably linked to the traditional practices of the people. Traditional Nigerian communities have various traditional practices that utilize the natural environment without abusing the environment resulting in communities living in pristine environment suitable for future generations. Therefore, this study is conducted with the aim of identifying the traditional practices that serve as tools for ensuring environmental sustainability by the Igbo ethnic group in Imo State, South East Nigeria. In-depth qualitative research is adopted as methodology of the study with data sourced largely from books, journals and ethnographic reports of some communities. It was found that traditional practices such as belief in totems which included animal, plants and shrines/deities, and traditional modes of agriculture, namely, shifting cultivation, mixed farming and agroforestry exert significant influence in environmental sustainability in the study area. It is recommended that traditional laws that protect the trees, streams and forests, should be integrated into modern environmental laws and practices for continual environmental sustainability.

Keywords

Traditional practices, Environmental sustainability, Totems, Shrines, Sacred groves, Sanctuaries

INTRODUCTION

African communities have abundance of environmental cultures which are better comprehended by listening to their stories, myths, proverbs, taboos and beliefs in addition to noting their symbols and rituals. Eneji, Ogundu and Ojelade (2019) highlighted some of the traditional African cultural practices to include methods of worship, initiation rites, the incantations aimed at invoking the sacred powers of the supreme beings, modes/mediums of communication of the gods' wills to humans through the chief priests and atoned practices if/when provoked. Some authors (Chikaire, Osuagwu, Ihenacho, Oguebuchulam, Ejiogu- Okereke, & Obi, 2012; Mutasa, 2015; Parrotta & Trosper, 2012) aver that African socio-cultural practices are based on the attribution of supernatural powers to some particular parts of the environment where man finds himself, because it is believed that the gods lives amongst men, and their habitat must be preserve from human interference and disturbances. There is total protection of the habitats of the gods from exploitation, utilization, entrance and agricultural activities, and this can either intentionally or unintentionally significantly contribute to the

successful sustainability of the natural environment. For instance, amongst some indigenous African communities, the exploitation and consumption of certain species of biodiversity, termed totems or totemism is forbidden and the affiliation of these animals and plants with spirits has facilitated environmental sustainability (Forde 1998). In Nigeria and especially among the Igbo communities, cultural values protected through the use of traditional taboos practices (laws) and sanctions are linked with keeping some rivers and forests safe from exploitation, abuse and pollution (Obiora & Emeka 2015). These practices promote the sustainable use of the natural resources (Anoliefo, Nwokeji & Ikhajagi, 2015).

Environmental laws are measures instituted by man to protect the natural resources (trees, forests and rivers) so that they can be conserved for maintenance and for future use. Though some trees have been saved with the aid of environmental laws and policies, forests are still being lost as pertinent global issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological footprint continue to get worse. Existing laws and policies mitigate the ecological damage inflicted by industrial economies and western type lifestyle. Environmental laws exist at all levels including community, national and international levels where traditional values, taboos, mores, and norms are established to protect the people's natural resources. Environmental laws are depicted more like religious policies at the community level, with some natural resources professed as deity, shrines or sacred groves which members of the community respect either because of the values accruing thereof or the consequences of not adhering to. Thus, while the government utilizes legislative measures for the protection of important natural resources, the community uses traditional mores, norms, taboos and deity. This study therefore investigated traditional practices among the Igbo ethnic group in Imo State, South East Nigeria and their effect on environmental sustainability.

Imo state is one of the states located in the South East region of Nigeria and shares its borders to the East, West, North and South with Abia State, River Niger and Delta state, Anambra State and Rivers State. The state lies between latitudes 4°45N – 7°15N and longitude 6°50E – 7°25E with an area of about 5100sqkm and consists of twenty-seven (27) local government areas. Imo is one of the states in Nigeria that is home to the Igbo people. Maduakasi and Ahamba (2020), posits that the Igbo believe the world is divided into two: the visible and invisible world, with the later further divided into two, the heaven and the underworld. The visible world (eluala) is inhabited by an earth goddess, human beings and minor/nature deities whereas heaven is inhabited by the Supreme Being (Chukwu or Chineke), the Creator, with major deities like Anyanwu (god of light) and Amadioha (god of thunder). The underworld on its own part is occupied by the ancestors and scores of other spirit forces, both kind and malicious. The Igbo believe in the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical world, the visible and invisible world, which informs the Igbo cultural norms, unwritten laws, morality, ethics and justice, which are practical guides to action. Nkama, Okoro, and Egbule (2022) posit that “for the Igbos disaster happens when man, who is at the center, fails in his obligation to administer the system in harmony through his actions or inactions. Furthermore, because man is at the center, what concerns the other concerns him; therefore, what concerns the environment concerns him. If the environment is adversely affected as a result of man's actions, everything is affected. Thus, enhancement, preservation and sustainability can only be achievable if man is in sync with the environment through his actions and inactions.

Table 1 below summarizes the basic nature of the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Table 1 The nature of the Igbo people

Variables
<p>The Nature of the Igbo People of Nigeria Belief in an eternal communion and connectedness of the spiritual/invisible and visible world. Practical life, moral/spiritual values, traditions and laws are interwoven with their religion. See themselves as part of nature surrounded by natural phenomena. Treat the sacred earth with respect. Their cosmology is a religious one believed to hold all spheres of cosmic structure and their inhabitants in continuous interaction. Some natural phenomena are believed to be inhabited by the deities and other spiritual agents. Awareness of the interdependence of life in the cosmology.</p>

Source: Adopted from Nkama, Okoro, and Egbule (2022)

Gbenda (2006) avers that land in many Igbo communities in Nigeria belongs to the clans and not the individuals. Individuals are actually custodians of the land, holding it in trust for the clan which consists of the living, living dead and the unborn members thus making it necessary to institute traditional practices that will ensure environmental sustainability. These include;

TOTEMS

Totems are basically plants, animals, or any other objects existing naturally which are attributed to be ancestrally associated with a clan, family, group or tribe as a tutelary spirit. (Mariko,1981). Tribes have ideological, emotional, reverential, as well as genealogical relationships with totems associated with them (Dagba, Sambe, & Shomkegh, 2013). Thus, totems are generally regarded by people as progenitor, companions, helper, relatives and even protectors, with ascribed superhuman powers and abilities, commanding a combination of awe, respect, fear and veneration. Special names and emblems are used to refer to totem in different cultures, by those who engage in partial identification with or

symbolic assimilation to the totem. Their names are associated with the animal related to their clan as a totem. It is considered a taboo or an act of sacrilege for any member of a clan to kill or eat the totem associated with them as they are deemed sacred. Therefore, there is a significant affectionate relationship between the totem and the clan which has resulted in the clan neither eating, killing nor trapping these animals for food or game (Hens, 2006). Different communities in Imo-state are known for their different totems.

Iheriohanma, Chukwuezi, and Nwosu (2021) posit that the Njaba people of Njaba Local Government Area in Imo State do not kill specie of python called Eke Njaba which they regard as a deity hence sacred. Eneji, Ogundu and Ojelade (2019) equally note that the same culture of prohibition of the killing of snakes is also practiced in Mgbidi, Oru West Local government area of Imo State where the snake is regarded as the god of the community. It is believed that killing the sacred creature will anger the gods to the extent of collectively punishing the whole community if the culprit does not perform the required rites to appease them. It is this fear of the putative dire consequences of inviting the wrath of the gods that has protected the snakes, the Njaba River which is their natural habitat and the forests surrounding it. The protected forests help to maintain the water table, 'attract' rainfall and control flooding thereby aiding in conserving the environment sustainably. For the Imerienwe people located in Ngor Okpalla LGA, the enwe (monkey), is their totemic symbol. As their name suggests they do not kill or eat enwe. They regard themselves as having a special affinity with monkeys. It is believed that the dying older people transform into monkeys. The Lagwa people of Aboh Mbaise LGA virtually live with monkeys too. Edet, Akinyemi and Mbagwu (2017) noted that it is taboo to kill or eat the monkey as it is believed to have severe consequences. Thus, totemism which is a traditional practice helps in reducing hunting and killing of some edible fauna thereby helping in sustaining the environment.

SHRINES, SACRED GROVES AND SANCTUARIES

Natural resources are preserved as sacred groves and sanctuaries with traditional belief systems associated with them. Groves are associated with ancestral shrines, being patches of climax vegetation preserved through ancient practices where local people protect the forests to avoid the wrath of its resident deity enshrined in their traditional belief systems taboos and cultural practices. Wadley and Colfer, (2004) aver that certain culturally defined and classified areas and territories were highly upheld by most community members as habitats of the gods and goddesses. These territories include such sites as those for burial, places designated for such ceremonies as oath taking and swearing, appeasing of evil spirits, cleansing of members infected by contagious diseases or members believed to have committed serious crimes such as murder and adultery, places inhabited by clan gods or spirits of once respected community elders and medicine men which were protected by respective clans. Tonukari (2007) and Rutte (2011) highlight sites for community cult initiations, evil forests, ponds, sanctuaries, shrines as some of these notable Infringements of the traditional laws regarding defilement of these sites were regarded as abomination and appeasement came in the form of sacrifices. If the appeasement was not done, the offender would remain under a perpetual curse. Madukasi & Ahamba (2020) cite the Alaogbaga in Chokoneze Mbaise where the Alaogbaga deity is situated as an example. Chima, Ezekwe, Ogbonna and Inya (2009) pointed out that sacred groves occupy a total area of about 15,928.20M² in the Ohaji west area of Imo state, occupied by about thirty-seven (37) juju bushes; nineteen (19) in Umuagwo, seven (7) in Mgbirichi and eleven (11) at Umuapu; believed to be the abodes of deities that are set apart and reserved with landscape elements such as group of trees and other cultural artifacts with ancient cultural meanings. The groves help to preserve, support the growth and conservation of rare endemic and endangered plant and animal species thereby aiding environmental sustainability. In the same vein, some trees, regarded as sacred, are preserved and cannot be felled indiscriminately. For instance, in Umuezeala Nsu, Ehime Mbanjo and Umuchieke Okwe, Onuimo in Okigwe, the Iroko tree (*Milicia Excelsa*), "Uha" tree (*Pterocarpus* Spp.), "akpu" (*Manihot Utilissima*) and ogirishi" (*Newbouldia Laevis*) are regarded as sacred ancestral tress and/or the abode of the spirits of the ancestors to date (Nkama, Okoro, & Egbule, 2022).

INTERCROPPING

Traditional farming practices are manifested in the modes of agriculture by the Igbo which involve intercropping. Here, root crops such as yam and cassava are intercropped with crops that grow above the ground such as maize, and okra to symbiotically relate with each other. Eneji, Ogundu and Ojelade (2019) opine that the leaves shed by the crops on top of the soil worked like compost manure to improve the soil fertility for improved yield of the root crops. In addition to improving the quality of soil fertility, intercropping equally helps in crop pest control. Mutasa (2015) attest that this is achievable since in the event of pest attack on one crop, the farmer still has the other to fall back on thereby ensuring that there will not be total crop failure as a result of crop pest attack on one. Therefore, it can be said that intercropping is a traditional agricultural practice that helps conserve the soil, reduces pests and increases crop yield thus aiding environmental sustainability. Nwaobiala (2018) attests that farmers in Imo state adopt intercropping technologies from which they derive maximum economic benefits in the form of increased yield and income.

Other traditional practices by the Igbos which aid in preserving nature, include roofing using thatch grasses, planting of trees in and around the compound, planting Achalla (Bamboo) and Ogirisi (*Newbouldialaevis*) trees around the areas that are prone to erosion (Nkama, Okoro, & Egbule, 2022). Seemingly in agreement, Eneji, Ogundu, and Ojelade, (2019) attest that the Igbos plant home gardens and hedgerow (trees) as fence to separate either one homestead from another or one family land from another to avoid encroachment in to another's land and home gardens which serve

both the intended purpose of making certain vegetables available at arm's reach as well as acting as windbreakers and shield for the house against direct windstorm, rainstorm effects and carbon sink (Krech, 2005; Mutasa, 2015).

Summarily, the Igbos revere certain natural objects and establish totemic practices around any such objects, such as animals, reptiles, plants/vegetables, stones, rivers and celestial bodies; they institute taboos and have prohibitions on both water and land uses; they designate forests as sacred places and the abode of gods and goddesses; they have farming practices such as mixed cropping and crop rotation to regulate soil exploitation. All these are achieved through traditional laws.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND LOCAL/NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

Two local/natural resource management options are germane to this study. They are the ecological and ethnological approaches. The ecological approach focuses attention on the mutually beneficial relationships between the natural environment and the organisms that inhabit this environment, including human beings. The ideal situation is when this relationship climaxes in a balance being struck between the rate at which resources are extracted and the rate at which they are regenerated. Such equilibrium ensures sustainability in the sense that it minimizes environmental degradation while enhancing the yield of resources over a long period of time. In this way available resources cater for the present and future generations. Among the Igbo, totemism, reference for shrines and other sacred places including forests have been instrumental to ensuring sustained yield. The concept of sustained yield is strategic in natural/local resource management. Understanding sustained yield is essential to nature. It indicates the capacity of various environmental resources ie how much each population can produce and what humans can remove from these populations without disrupting the natural environmental equilibrium. Sustained yield is defined as "A strategy which maintains productivity at a level which is acceptable, beneficial and relatively constant on a long term basis" (Omara-Ojungu 1992:32).

The sustained yield of a specific natural resource is supported by the regenerative capacities of the available local resource management technique(s). Intercropping, shrines, sacred groves and totems among the Igbo therefore serve two main purposes. First, they give room for effective activation of the regenerative capacities of both fauna and flora. In addition, they regulate the harvest by way of production by man of such resources as timber and fish for instance, at a level which is acceptable and relatively constant on a long term basis.

The Ethnological approach to natural/local resource management takes cognizance of the role of culture as a determinant of not only how to harvest/use a particular resource but what actually makes that resource viable in a given society. Thus, it is only when a resource has a high value within the cultural setting of society that such a resource is sought after and used. Cultural practices, traditions and belief systems therefore play an important role in natural/local resource management as observed among the Igbo. The ethnological approach emphasizes the integration of knowledge gained through long term traditional practices in policy enunciation and implementation (Omara-Ojungu 1992). This is in tandem with the cultural practice of preserving shrines, groves and sacred forests among the Igbo of South East Nigeria. In the same vein, long term traditional practices among the Igbo in Okigwe region where the topography is hilly and available land for agriculture are mostly steep slopes have led to terrace farming whereby "steps" known as terraces are built into the slopes of the hills. Some other communities practice contour farming. There, planting is done across the slopes following the slopes elevation contour lines. These methods are combined with crop rotation, intercropping and organic farming to decrease the negative effects of soil erosion, such as flooding, reduced crop productivity and habitat destruction. Contour farming is acknowledged as an active form of sustainable agriculture (Roychowdhury, R., Banerjee, U., Sofkova, S. Tah, J. (2013).

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Traditional practices help in environmental sustainability. Eneji, Ogundu and Ojelade (2019) opine that forbidden items that are many and specific species that are becoming extinct in one place, but are abundant in the area where they are totems, help in the natural regeneration of those species, thus preventing global extinction. This is in line with the earlier finding of Appiah-Opoku (2007), Chacon, (2012), Rim-Rukeh, Ierhievwie, and Agbozu (2013), Awuah-Nyamekye, (2014) that when totem is made of certain species, such species are allowed to blossom in number and abundance, hence their conservation and sustainability. Kala, (2012), found that designated areas culturally such as the grooves, shrines, streams, ponds and sanctuaries meant for the protection of the abodes of the gods are rich in biological diversities. Thus, the stringent penalties attached as punishment for trespassers, unlawful passage and wandering into such a designated place have become a latent way of conserving these resources and the environment.

CONCLUSION

Traditional practices have contributed quite immensely in conserving the biophysical environment. When people restrict themselves through these practices from the exploitation and consumption of certain aspect of the environment and its resources, these species they do not exploit or eat increase in numbers naturally and the species become abundant in supply, hence the environment is sustained for the future generation. The Igbos have conserve animals, vegetation, land and water through use of totems, taboos, organic farming, intercropping etc. The traditional practices among the Igbo ethnic group in Imo State, South East Nigeria have been proved very practicable as environmental sustainability strategies thus, for effectiveness, programs on biodiversity preservation should learn from their context-specific indigenous knowledge and institutional mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATION

For effective implementation of environmental and traditional laws that aid environmental sustainability by protecting the trees, streams and forests, cultures of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria should be revisited, re-evaluated and studied to enable their possible blending into modern day practices for more improved environmental sustainability. It is equally recommended that traditional environmental sustainability education, advocacy and ecosystem activism be incorporated into both the formal and informal education system.

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