
Uwa bu otu – Interconnectivity of Being in Igbo Worldview
(Briefly Introducing an African Perspective to the Discourse on Environment & Ecology)
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Abstract

Normally, each human society has and operates on its own worldview. This worldview generally begins with its cosmology. From the Igbo-African worldview, we have this interconnectivity of being and eco- and nature-friendliness resulting therefrom. We have also the religious consequences and deference that it endows on nature and the environment. There is also its anthropocentricity and the natural harbinger function, which it necessarily bestows specifically on Man as the maintainer of harmony and equilibrium not only in the natural environment but also in the whole universe. Most of these seem to promise so much that in the long run, they may not be totally averse to ecology or even Christianity. This interconnectivity of being in the Igbo worldview, is hereby suggested as a fitting introduction to an African understanding of what should inform a reasonable discourse on environment and ecology today. This has become necessary because today more than ever, ecologists and environmentalists are loudly bemoaning the wanton exploitation of nature, to the detriment of the human environment and living space. They may be said to be frantically in dire need of new dialogue partners that would meaningfully facilitate either the amelioration or even total eradication of this irresponsible assault on nature in general and the environment in particular. The Igbo traditional cosmology and worldview could become such needed capable partners, since both are seen to be characteristically very eco- and nature-friendly.

Key Words: Interconnectivity of being, Numinosity, Igbo Worldview, Cosmology, Mmadu, Environment, Ecology, Anthropocentricity.

Introduction

Every human society generally has a worldview, which actually forms the basis of its culture and civilization, ethos and mores, religion and governance, views about being and life, etc. Such worldview (Weltanschauung) often begins with its cosmology, which has been defined as „the complex of a people’s beliefs about the origin, structure and organisation of the universe, and the laws governing the interaction of the beings in it.“²It is on this background, that this essay intends to consider the relationship between the environment as the living room (Lebensraum) of all creatures, and ecology as the study of this environment and how human beings relate to it; either to their welfare and continued survival or otherwise. It is going to try to do this from the Igbo-African point of view.

To this effect, we note that it has been pointedly stated that „an interesting and dominant idea that runs through the Igbo cosmology is that of an encompassing Oneness in the face of self-evident multiplicity, an overwhelming idea of Unity-in-diversity, that idea of an essential compatibility in spite of manifest

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² Ikenga-Metuh, E. *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, Jos, 1991, Pp.37-38

differences.”³ In other words, Igbo cosmology conceives Being as necessarily and basically interconnected. It is this concept of the encompassing Oneness in Reality so characteristic of the Igbo worldview that mostly interests us here. For the Igbo are convinced that Uwa bu otu – the Universe/World is one/a unit. It is also necessary to remark at this point that the Igbo word Uwa, is so elastic that it translates into the English word ‘world’ as well as ‘universe’ at once; encompassing all reality, both known and yet to be discovered.

Interestingly, Ikenga-Metuh also succinctly informs us concerning the practical implications of all these for the Igbos. He wrote, “Generally, the world of human experience is seen as one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men, animals, plants and the elements are engaged in continuous interactions.”⁴ Understandably, it is thus this phenomenon of the interconnectivity of being, that we hereby intend to proffer as a basic and fitting introduction to an African understanding of what should inform a reasonable discourse on environment and ecology today. This has become necessary because today more than ever, ecologists and environmentalists are loudly bemoaning the wanton exploitation of nature, to the detriment of the human environment and living space. They may be said to be frantically in dire need of new dialogue partners that would meaningfully facilitate either the amelioration or even total eradication of this irresponsible assault on nature in general and the environment in particular.

The point here is that the Igbo traditional cosmology and worldview could become such needed capable partners, since both are seen to be characteristically very eco- and nature-friendly. Though we shall not be delving into the questions of cooperation between religion and science, it will be still interesting to later enquire into how some African characteristically religio-cultural convictions may not be totally averse to modern technology and science, especially with regards to human environment and ecology. However still, being only an introduction, this presentation will understandably turn out in the end to be generally only sketchy and skeletal.

Igbo Worldview: Reality as a Two-Sided Single Phenomenon

At this point, it becomes pertinent to clarify that for the immediate purposes of this essay, Reality is understood to be largely synonymous with Nature in the very general sense of all that is naturally there. Thus, Nature is Reality in its pristine form as much as possible; and this Reality is Nature both in its observable and unobservable forms. Of course, we are not totally unaware of the possible consequences of such an over-zealous and generous generalization.

Furthermore, it is therefore in these respects that we state that this already mentioned unitive duality-in-Reality is often given loud expressions, especially through and in Igbo mythology. In the Igbo traditional worldview, there is always a material as well as a non-material side, a physical as well as numinal side, a seen as well as an unseen side to all reality. Thus for instance, the universe is said to be inhabited not only by visible physical but also invisible spiritual beings. It is all so complex because it is like two worlds in one; the world of humans and the world of spirits. Both are said to be so contiguous and contemporaneous, that they actually dovetail into and compenetrates each other. Fortunately, we know an Igbo aetiology that clearly expresses these:

There was once a feast in the land of the living. Farmers went to their farms to harvest yams, corns, etc for the festive occasion. The hunters’ guild trooped to the forest to hunt for venison. Women waited at home to prepare the food.

³ Ukeh, C.O. *Spirit – Between Man & God (An Igbo-African Christian Appreciation)*, IKO-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, p. 149

⁴ Ikenga-Metuh, E., 1991, p.38

Anxious to be well prepared for the feast, one of the hunters wandered far into the dense forest in search of big game. As he wandered through the forest, oblivious of the time of the day, he bumped into something and fell. A spirit had tripped him. This was about noon (mgbachi) that time of the day when spirits have virtual monopoly of all roads, foot paths, lanes etc on earth, a time when chickens and animals were known to run in panic without apparent provocation. No doubt in command, the spirit angrily demanded to know why the hunter dared trespass on both his territory and time space. The hunter trembling explained that he needed game for a very big feast scheduled to take place that day in his community. While stalking a deer he did not realize that time had been far spent. Not having caught anything for the day, and fearful of the scorn of his family and friends he was determined to follow the deer wherever it went until he killed it.

The spirit was unimpressed. He upbraided the hunter for his foolishness but not too unkindly. (There are wicked and kind spirits just as there are good and bad people in the land of the living). When the hunter had told his story, the spirit explained that his mates would soon travel through that very road on their way to the same feast. They were travelling with a formidable contingent and would certainly frown at any human lurking around. To avert any untoward scene with the spirits, who would take no excuses, the kind spirit pulled the hunter aside to a safe part of the forest and hid him behind a tree. To make sure that no harm came to him, the spirit uprooted a root and herb 'ose nabo' and 'obala nabo'. He rubbed them together and squeezed the liquid into the hunter's eyes. He explained that this would make him invisible to the spirits but that he would be able to hear and communicate with them. Having done this, the spirit warned the hunter not to disclose anything he witnessed that day when he eventually returned to the land of the living.

Soon after, the spirits arrived where the hunter was hiding. They were a bunch of chatty spirits who, very excitedly, discussed the part they would play at the feast in the land of the living. To his surprise, the hunter recognised his dead father's voice and that of a few other dead kinsmen, in this company.

When the hunter arrived at the land of the living, the festival had already begun. After much eating and drinking, he was intoxicated. Off guard, he blurted out all he heard from the spirits. But no sooner had he finished his revelation than he was struck dead. He had however revealed enough. This is how it happened that a few gifted people can hear, and communicate with spirits but cannot see them.⁵

Thus, the relationship between the world of the Living and the world of the Spirits is a practical daily affair. It is very often even described in palpable forms and terms. Ikenga-Metuh seems to have an explanation for this. He writes, "The abode of the good spirits of the dead, ala mmuo, is a carbon copy of the abode of the living. The two differ only in that one is visible and the other invisible. A geographical map of the land of the living would represent the spirit-land in every particular: every town, village and homestead would be situated exactly where it is in the land of the living."⁶ In yet another contribution, he goes on to explain how it all has a clear bearing on ecology: "The pattern of organization of the spirit world varies with each cultural group, just as their ecology and social organization is known to vary. In fact, the organization of the spirit world of most groups often reflects their ecology and social organization simply because it is designed to explain them."⁷ The relationship between the two worlds is thus so close that there is therefore this necessarily mutual lack of independence. None totally excludes the other. They rather mutually include, complement and imply

⁵ Achebe, C. (Mrs), *The World of the Ogbanije*, Enugu, 1986, Pp.11-12.

⁶ Ikenga-Metuh, E. 1991, p.116.

⁷ Ikenga-Metuh, E. "Incarnating Christianity in African World-views" in: J.S.Ukpong et al. (ed.) *The Church in Africa & the Special African Synod*, Port Harcourt, 1993, (9-23)12.

each other. It is such that none could be imagined, except in relationship with as well as in reference to the other.

From every indication however, the Igbo people are not alone in these convictions. They are rather fairly generalizable, since some other African peoples are also of the same opinions. Thus, a Kenyan author writing from his own East African cultural background asserts, “The traditional African world-view is mono-sectional.... In traditional African thought, there is only one world – this world in which we live, consisting in the earth, the sky and all therein. When a person dies, he does not go to another world whether below or above the earth. Rather, he changes his physical mode of existence to a spiritual (ghostly) one.”⁸ The Igbo, and in fact, the Sub-Saharan African cosmology really promotes a worldview that portrays the universe as a Unity that rather expresses itself in Diversity, or if you like, a Diversity which is really a Unity.

Towards a Religious Appreciation of the Environment

According to John Okoro, “The general attitude of the African toward nature is sacredness. Nature is considered as a symbolic reality of a higher value that can act, react, speak and hear, thus, with whom man can communicate.”⁹ The fact is that the African has always valued and respected his natural environment. It is such that Africans –the Igbos especially, generally ascribe to what has been perhaps imperfectly described by some as the **ensoulment** of nature. Here however, we would rather prefer the expression numinosity of nature, to describe the notion that everything that is, actually exists because it possesses, in a not easily explicable manner, an ineluctably and necessarily non-tangible or spiritual side. Perhaps a most outstanding evidence to these facts is to be found in the Igbo-African traditional religion, which is generously populated by Nature-gods like Igwekala - Sky-god, Ala – Earth-goddess, Amadioha/Kamalu – Thunder-god, Mountain-gods and River-gods etc. For these though divine, are simultaneously material. Though natural, they are at the same time considered to be supernatural manifestations. They are actually considered to be theophanies.

Furthermore, when it is claimed that the African is notoriously religious,¹⁰ that is in fact to say the least about the inestimable place and role of religion in human life, from the African perspective. As a matter of fact, all that also stem from the already mentioned African acknowledgement of the innate numinosity of all reality. Thus, among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria for instance, there is traditionally no clear-cut distinction between the mundane and the sacred, the simply ethical and the moral, the religious and the secular, culture and religion, custom and law etc. It therefore bears repetition and is as well hardly surprising, “that the Igbo people...generally give the impression of having a belief that everything which ‘is’, does so either because of some numinous presence in or around it, or because of its ability to harbor such.”¹¹ In the same vein, we must underscore that this same people do not consequently seem to distinguish between nature as a physical reality and this reality as a religious phenomenon.

For the traditional Igbo therefore, nature is the one and self-same simultaneously material and non-material phenomenon. This innate numinosity makes nature and everything related to it automatically into religious phenomena and thus often subjects of rites and ritual observances. Nature thus becomes at once both physical and numinous. As a matter of fact, it is rather like the two sides of one and the

⁸ Mugambi, J.N.K. *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*, Nairobi, 1989, p.51.

⁹ Okoro, J. I., *The Earth as a Living Superorganism (From the Scientific Gaia {Hypothesis} to the Metaphysics of Nature)*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, p. 179

¹⁰ Cf. Leonard, A.G. *The Lower Niger & Its Tribes*, London, 1968, p.429

¹¹ Ukeh, C.O., 2007, p.147

same coin. Since the environment constitutes the most and easily visible part of nature, the implications of all these for it must be therefore very self-evident.

Writing from his South African background, the activist Steve Biko is very much aware of the mental as well as attitudinal disposition that these convictions ordinarily create in the average traditional African person even till the present. Thus, he does not mince words in partially summarizing to this effect that, “We as a community are prepared to accept that nature will have its enigmas which are beyond our powers to solve.”¹² Again, this is clear evidence that these views are fairly generalizable within most of Sub-Saharan Africa; and that they are no exclusive opinions of the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria in West Africa. With this, Biko refers definitely to that almost inborn deference and religious awe with which the average African approaches nature as a major constituent of his environment. Little would one wonder then, that the Igbo of the Nsukka area would humbly enthuse with a sapiential glint in the eyes, Ugwu ka m elu, e fee m ya! – Because the mountain is so ominous, I hold it in awe (worship it).

Igbo Worldview: Traditionally Eco- & Nature-Friendly

The everyday and practical consequences of such a worldview are many and far-reaching. Since the African Universe is traditionally considered to be mono-sectional, it is the locus for both life Here as well as any life Hereafter – this latter life, whether imagined or actual. Consequently, this universe is taken very serious and respected, since the Igbo would not even want to imagine what would happen, if anything should either fatally or permanently go wrong with it or within it. More so, as we can easily also imagine, whatever happens in the Land of the Living – Uwa, is believed to be necessarily, equally and simultaneously replicated in the Land of the Spirits – Ala mmuo. Understandably therefore, the consequences of this ominous simultaneity, is easier imagined and feared than experienced.

Thus for instance, the Igbo people traditionally have a very subtle but effective way of instilling respect for and subsequently duty to protect nature and the natural environment early enough in their little ones. For example, if an insect following the light of a lantern should stray into the house at night, the elders normally restrain the children from ill-treating; talk less of killing such an innocent and harmless creature. Playing on the young ones’ instinct of preservation of life, natural sense of humanity and empathy, they cleverly tell these little ones that such an insect was but the soul of some cute young baby somewhere in the neighbourhood. So, killing such a creature would immediately snuff out the life of such an innocent little baby. This lie had always sufficed to get the young ones to recoil, awaken the human milk and empathy in them enough to make them carefully pick up the straying creature and gently release it again back into the freedom of nature outside.

Yet another typical example of how the Igbo try to maintain the environment is the custom of burying the umbilical cord of a newborn baby (Alo nwata) at a conspicuous spot, with an economic tree planted over it. This could be a palm tree, pear tree, orange tree, coconut tree etc. The tree grows as the baby grows too. As soon as the child is old enough to understand, it is introduced to such a tree and made conscious of its kinship or relationship with that particular tree as well as its duty consequent thereupon, to tend and care for the tree. At a sweep, this custom has the double advantages of ensuring that the baby already has a property of its own, as well as teaching that child human duties of care and upkeep of green vegetation, thereby promoting the human environment.

One more example of Igbo traditional nature- and eco-friendliness is evident in the phenomenon of totemism. This is a direct consequence of the spiritual bonds arising from the reality of the Nature-gods generously constituting most of the Igbo traditional pantheon. Once more, John Okoro explains to this

¹² Biko S., *I Write What I like*, Selected & Edited by Aelred Stubbs CR, England, 1988, p. 58

effect that since, “the Igbo live in a neighbouring agricultural area of Africa, nature spreads out its mystique to them via rivers, trees, forests, animals and birds, insects and reptiles. Some of these items are made sacred and invested with some kind of ontological link or spiritual origin. An animal with such sacredness must not be killed or eaten. A tree of such nature must not be felled.”¹³ Thus, the monkey (Enwe) is such a totem in the Igbo community Imerienwe (literally, Ime that does not eat the flesh of monkeys) where they are considered sacred and are consequently allowed to roam about freely in their numbers. Similarly in and around the Njaba river-basin of the Umuaka-Oru axis especially, the local but majestic short python called Eke Njaba is considered sacred and a totem to the purported deity-owner of the Njaba river. If any one should kill it, either advertently or inadvertently, the local tradition demanded a full-scale burial of the carcass with coffin et al and funeral, as if it were a human being that was killed. Many more instances abound. But these few suffice to show that though these may have been considered religiously, they certainly also helped to ensure much respect and protection for nature and the environment.

Of course, we are not unaware of the problematic for instance, of lumping civil law and customs in the traditional Igbo society into a single system called Omenala. Whereby for instance, the stealing of another person’s yams is not considered as simple theft (oshi) but is also most importantly seen as a sin against Ala the Earth-goddess and thus, Imeruala. Thus, it was not enough to simply retribute what was stolen; the thief was also expected to ritually appease the Earth-goddess. This ritual is called Ikwu-ala; whereby some stipulated sacrifice and rituals are performed at the thief’s expense. The theft is believed to have angered the goddess, which leads to a destabilization of nature and the environment. Restitution in this case goes beyond the material restoration of what was stolen. It involves this other spiritual dimension too.

Man as Agent of Harmony & Equilibrium in the Igbo-African Universe

Of course, all these flow from the awareness of that closeness or intimacy with nature that one ordinarily takes for granted in Sub-Saharan Africa. Interestingly enough too, all these also flow from the fact that for the Igbo, it is Man that is at the epicenter of it all. For the Igbo universe is summarily put, anthropocentric. Consequently, it is necessary to also remind us that, “the Igbo sees life as an intricate web of relationships, made up of both natural and supernatural strings of Essences. It is a harmony that must be nursed and maintained through the meaningful and conscious cooperation of all involved in it, especially that of Man. This is because he suffers it most, if anything should go wrong with the Universe.”¹⁴ This avowed anthropocentricity is therefore a very essential part of the Igbo traditional cosmology that is very prominent and pertinent in any Igbo-African discourse on the relationship between the environment and ecology.

This anthropocentricity of the Igbo universe is such a vast area. The introductory and skeletal nature of this presentation would not allow a detailed treatment of this huge part of Igbo cosmology and worldview. Here, we shall only try to summarize it by a cursory look at the Igbo word for Man or human being, a theme that we have already treated in some reasonable details elsewhere.¹⁵ The point is that the Igbo word for human being or Man – Mmadu (German - Mensch) has two traceable possible roots that coincidentally have two meanings that are actually related as well as mutually inclusive of each other.

¹³Okoro J.I., 2005, p. 179

¹⁴ Ukeh, C.O., 2007, p. 148

¹⁵Ukeh C.O., *Gospel-Culture Dynamics (Random Essays from African Perspectives)* Zestdotcom Ltd, Onitsha, 2018, Pp. 34-60

On the one hand, the root of Mmadu is traceable to two Igbo nouns, Mma meaning Beauty, Goodness, Order and Ndu meaning Life or Being. Thus, we have Mmadu meaning The Beauty/Goodness/Order in/of Life/Being. On the other hand, there is also this other affirmative or indicative connotation of There is Beauty/Goodness/Order, which could also double in the imperative sense of Let there be Beauty/Goodness/Order. These result from a combination of the noun Mma and the Igbo verb To be – Idi. These latter are further supported by the existence of dialectal variations while maintaining the same meanings. Thus, you hear Mmadu in those areas where the verb To be is Idu. You have Mmanu in the Orlu dialects that have Inu for the same verb, and for Nsukka area Mmadi where it is rather spoken Idi.

All in all however, the sense is that the Igbo word for Man or the human being, in whichever dialectal variation – Mmadu or Mmanu or Mmadi is descriptive of human being's natural function as the harbinger of beauty, goodness or order in the Universe or World. When understood in a more active sense however, a simple semantic analysis of the term Mmadu would then reveal and imply that man has the natural function of maintaining harmony and equilibrium in nature and especially in the environment.

Conclusion

Having come this far in this skeletal exposé of the basics of Igbo cosmology, we will stop here; since we only intended to provide certain fundamental materials that we felt might be attractive to dialogue partners interested in the discourse on environment and ecology. Since we maintain that such a new alternative to the usual and Western contexts or positions may be useful at this point in time.

J. P. Jordan in his biography of the legendary Irish missionary of Eastern Nigeria, the venerable Bishop Joseph Shanahan, seems to have summarized the fundamentals of the Igbo traditional worldview and cosmology, into which the Bishop tried to introduce Christianity. He wrote, "Yes, the natives were right, the trees had spirit, the spirit of life put in them by God, and by this they grew and blossomed and thrived; the animals had a spirit, the spirit of life, also put in them by God, which caused them to move and growl and grow; man too had a spirit, called a soul, given by God and responsible for his manifestations of life. And why did all this happen? Because God himself was life. Yes, that is what God is. He is life, and therefore all life comes from him, for tree, animal and man [...]"¹⁶J. Carmody is definitely conscious of the usefulness of most of such opinions as these for the ongoing discourse on ecology and environment, when he wrote: "At the center of any theology of creation I would find adequate is God's endowment of being. All that exists...is real because of the divine largess. Because they were sensitive to this dependency, archaic people found everything fraught with significance. The Holy, the Really-Real, the Ultimate that made the world solid could manifest itself in the storm or the calm, the rock or the sea, the king or the beggar. Let any reality catch an unusual angle of light, tip slightly from its accustomed slot, and it would become revelatory. The mystery of being, the ultimate force both awesome and fascinating was as near as the stirring of the wind, as shaking as a vivid dream."¹⁷ As a matter of fact, we would graciously ignore the possibly offensive denigration in such expressions as 'archaic people'. Thus, we would then be able to state that such a worldview is not only still very largely operative today, even if it does so in a subterranean manner.

From the Igbo-African worldview, we have this interconnectivity of being and the thereby resulting eco- and nature-friendliness. We have also the religious consequences and deference that it endows on nature and the environment. There is also its anthropocentricity and the natural harbinger function, which it

¹⁶ Jordan, J. P. *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*, London, 1965, {1971, first publ. 1947, Dublin} p.125 Fr. Jordan was an Irish priest who lived and worked among the Igbo people as a missionary from 1935 to 1970.

¹⁷Carmody J., *Ecology & Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature*, New York/Ramsey, 1983, p. 118

necessarily bestows specifically on Man as the maintainer of harmony and equilibrium not only in the natural environment but also in the whole universe. Most of these seem to promise so much that in the long run, they may not be totally averse to ecology or even Christianity, too. Once more, we only hope that the foregoing succeeds in at least boosting the already kick-started dialogue with the African perspective in general, this time around with reference to issues relating to human environment and ecology.