

‘Salvation without Conservation’: An Exposition of Anti-Environmental Attitude of Christian Missionaries in Mgbowo, 1919-1999

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Abstract

The paper highlights the environmental impact of Christianity to an Igbo Community, Mgbowo in Enugu State, Nigeria. Using both oral evidences from the community, relevant literature on Christianization of the Igbo and studies on environmental conservation, the paper establishes that until the imposition of Christianity to the Mgbowo in 1919, the people had enjoyed some level of environmental serenity and conservation enshrined in totemic ordinances and rites. The paper identifies some incidents of faith-based environmental disasters in Mgbowo which not only eroded the age-long cultural reserves and conservation but have exposed the community to the ills of climate change. The study suggests a reintroduction of Community-Based Environmental Conservation embedded in totemic ordinances in a bid to save the few surviving natural sites and animals in the community. The study is presented in thematic and chronological order, using the historical research method.

Keywords: Totem, Environment, Christianity, Mgbowo.

Introduction

The Christianization of the Igbo has overtime been celebrated by the missionaries and other Europeans as the triumph of light over darkness, a new dawn and a civilization mission to the backward sect. This was encapsulated in 1854 account of W.B. Baikie on the expedition of the Niger thus:

Gifted as we have been with the revelation from on high, it is only our duty to attempt to impart its doctrines to our less favored brethren, and that a

great, noble task is store for those who will pioneer the way of civilization and Christianity.¹

Similarly, writing in the second decade of the 20th century, George T. Basden wrote:

¹ W.B. Baikie, *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the River Kwora and Binue* (Commonly known as the Niger and Tshadda) in 1854, (London: John Murray, 1856), 387.

It would not be fitting to close the forgoing sketch of the life and customs of the Ibo people without giving a brief account of missionary enterprise among them. The advent of Christianity has had a powerful and stimulating effect and great numbers of these sturdy folks have been led 'out of darkness into light, and the form the power of Satan unto God.²

Furthering on this assertion, Achebe captured the dispositions of the Christian missionaries as harbingers of salvation and civilization to Africans in the character of Reverend James Smith who while in Umuofia as a missionary, 'saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness.'³Suffice it to state that the above declarations of the early Christian missionaries in Igboland pointed to the fact that the missionaries were poised at converting the indigenous people to their light, even at all cost. However, behind the apparatuses of conversion such as missionary education, social welfare, medications, and collaborations with the military when necessary to overwhelm obstinate communities, the missionaries posed as harbingers of salvation in Igboland,

² G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Lagos: Academy Press, 1921), 285

³ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (Essex: Heinemann, 1958), 147.

pulling both the poor and the rich⁴ out of the darkness of fetishisms and barbarism. Nevertheless, amidst all the activities and claims of the missionaries as 'Salvation guarantors' lies an utter neglect of environmental conservation in Igboland. The term conservation entails preservation and use⁵, therefore, when applied to the environment, it means the preservation and usage of our natural environment in a manner that no natural aspect of human environment would be lost, threatened or abused. It is surprising that the missionaries could *ignore* the clarion calls that resonated throughout the 20th century for conservation, preservation and protection of natural flora and fauna from the overexploitation of the 19th century.⁶ The study examines the environmental impact of Christianity in Mgbowo from 1919 when the community received the first band of missionaries to 2000. It reveals the disruption of community-based environmental conservation through totemic ordinances by the Christians in the community.

⁴ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976), 162-163.

⁵ David Lavigne, "Wildlife Conservation and the Pursuit of Ecological Sustainability: A Brief Introduction" in David M. Lavigne (ed.), *Gaining Ground: In pursuit of Ecological Sustainability*, (Guelph: Ampersand Printing, 2006), 2.

⁶ Lavigne, "Wildlife Conservation and the Pursuit of Ecological Sustainability: A Brief Introduction" . . . , 4.

Mgbowo Community and Culture in Pre-Christian Era

Geographically, Mgbowo community is located about forty four kilometers south of the state capital, Enugu. The community lies on the foot of Udi hill along the Enugu-Awgu-Okigwe Port-Harcourt expressways. Mgbowo is bounded in the north by Nenwe, on the south by Awgu, in the east by Ndeaboh and in the west by Mmaku community.⁷ Like many Igbo communities before the advent of Christianity, the community was a traditional society, maintaining its ancestral religious observances, ordinances and rites enshrined in festivals such as *Enwu* (Annual ritual to ward off evil), *Ikeji* (new yam festival), *Iroshi* (sacrifices to personal god, called *chi*), and *Oriri Ali* (Mgbowo feast of the earth goddess) which was celebrated on the fifth month of Mgbowo traditional calendar (*Onwa Ali*). All families contributed part of their agro yield to be used to sacrifice to the earth goddess for fertility, productivity and bountiful harvest in subsequent years. This was celebrated under the headship of *Eze Ali* (the priest of the earth goddess).⁸

Apart from the above feasts and festivals, families had their private gods whose shrines were constituted

at the entrance and sacrifices, libations and Kolanuts were offered by the eldest member of the family. A family can establish a *Chi* stable (family god) where sacrifices and appeals were made through the eldest male of the household.⁹ There were deities and oracles who served as adjudicators of cases, social constabularies, intermediaries between God and the society and disciplinarians. Prominent among these deities were: *Ali Mgbowo* (earth goddess), *Nkwo*, *Egwu* (benevolent spirit that aids in advancing human knowledge on medications, spiritualities, divination and vision), *Ngwu* (war goddess), *Okporuzo Jokushite* (for road safety), *Ngeleishi* (prominent for adjudication of disputes).¹⁰ One revealing aspect of these deities and their adherents is their total submission to nature, environment and conservation. Through the traditional religious observances and rituals, spirit forces were also transcended to animate and inanimate objects who either served as agents of the deities or spirit forces. These objects are designated totems. Suffice it to state that through totemic ordinances, religious observances, the Mgbowo and so many other African societies built community-based environmental conservation, perhaps unaware.

Scholars have overtime acknowledged the ontological interactions between human activities

⁷ Vitalis Nwashindu and Chimee Ihediwa, "Sexuality and Sex-Related Rituals Among the Mgbowo Women of Awgu Local Government Area, Enugu State", *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, vol.24.no.2,(2016): 130

⁸Okechukwu Nweru Augustine, "Mgbowo Traditional Year' in Gabriel Akachukwu (ed.), *Mgbowo Past and Present*, (Enugu: Harris Printing & Publishing Ltd, 1994), 63.

⁹ Mr. Oluoha Ndubuis, c. 78, Farmer, interviewed at Mgbowo Azunkwo Ndeaboh, on November 2014

¹⁰ B.I.Udenta, 'Spirits and Deities in Mgbowo' in Gabriel Akachukwu (ed.), *Mgbowo Past and Present*, . . .54.

and the supernatural activities of God, gods, spirit beings and natural objects. Therefore, natural objects form part of the African ontological relationship and interactions since they are the medium through which the spirit forces maintain physical manifestations to mankind. John Mbiti affirms the spiritualities of natural objects in African society as springboards to shaping the peoples behaviors towards nature and environment. Mbiti argues that such natural features like mountains, rocks, trees, animals, and waters, are revered and thus accorded totemic relevance and protection.¹¹ However, Mbiti's submission to totemic ordinances in African communities was purely religious, as references were not made of the relationship between totemic ordinances and environmental conservation in the traditional African living.

Polycarp Ikuenobe blames the environmental degradation of African society to colonialism and the invasion of Christian missionaries and their values. Ikuenobe posits that 'activities that have raised environmental concerns in Africa did not exist prior to colonial conquest of the Africans because Africans had developed conservationist values, practices, and ways of life enshrined in African worldviews and thoughts, ontology, cosmology, medicine and healing, and religious practices which supported Africa's moral attitudes towards conservation and preservation of

¹¹ J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to Africa Religion*, (London: Heinemann, 1981), 67-69.

nature.¹² Ikuenobe's submission serves as a pointer towards the understanding of the environmental impact of Christianity to African environment.

C.N. Uba interrogates the degree and the extent of religious change among the Igbo, especially in the wave of 20th century Christianization of the people.¹³ The study argues that in as much as there were knotty areas of conflict Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity such as totemic ordinances, ancestral worship, and the position of God as a God in retreat (ontological conflicts), there have been high level of Igbo resistance to Christianity and high level of retention of their traditional religion and values. The study argues that majority of Igbo Christians still pay allegiance to kinship norms, totemic ordinances, festivals and rituals. Uba noted the dangers of overreliance on missionary archives and writings as sources for the reconstruction of the history of Christianity in Igboland. The study provides veritable insight to the understanding of culture clashes, adaptations and impositions that ensued at the introduction of Christianity in Igboland.

E.A. Ayandele's 'Collapse of Pagandom in Igboland'¹⁴ could be

¹² Polycarp Ikuenobe, "Traditional African Environmental Ethics and Colonial Legacy" , *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* ,2, no. 4,(December 2014):5

¹³ C.N. Uba, "Religious Change Among the Igbo During the Colonial Period", *Journal of Religion in Africa* , vol.18, no.1.(Feb.1988).

¹⁴ E.A. Ayandele, "The Collapse of Pagandom in Igboland", *Journal of the*

attributed to one of those generalizations that assumed that Christianity triumphed over every traditional value, norm and conscience of the Igbo. Ayandele argues that through Western education, the Igbo submitted to the wave of cultural colonization of the missionaries. The popular aphorism that the 'Bible rolled through Igboland like a juggernaut, crushing gods to atoms' should be accepted but without criticisms. Although the Bible 'won' the 'gods' at the end of the day, it was a pyrrhic victory as the 'Igboman's spirit did not lie prostrate before the missionary invader', as Ayandele posits. The continuous clashes between the traditionalists and the Christians in matters of totemic ordinances and preservation of cultural relics and values indicate that not every Igbo was conquered mentally.

Valentine Nnolum traces the origin of Christian mission in Mgbowo to Eke, where the cordial relationship between Chief Onyeama of Eke and Chief Ezenta of Mgbowo warranted Fr. Grandidn of Eke mission into establishing St. John's mission in Mgbowo in 1919.¹⁵ The study explores the wave of Christianization and conversion of the people through education and medical missions. However, the impact of Christianization of the community were exalted as the emergence of Mgbowo renaissance while the

negative impact such as environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional values and norms are not explored.

Community-Based Environmental Conservation in Mgbowo Community

Like so many Igbo communities east and west of the Niger, Mgbowo had overtime built some level of environmental conservation which were embedded in the community's religion, belief, traditional medicine, festivities, philosophy, and socialization. Mgbowo had through kinship groupings, devised some measures of observances and deification of animals, forests, rivers, and other material cultures, thus totemic norms.

Sacred grooves of deities, spirit beings and family gods and godlings. The major sacred grooves which were central and communal to the Mgbowo were *Ebor Ahor* and *Ali Ihiriho*. Sited at Imeama village in the custody of Umualukwu-Ocha family, *Ebor Ahor* was a sacred groove where central decisions affecting the whole community were taken under the administration of *Ndi Ali* (Priests of the earth goddess). Apart from serving as the administrative and judicial headquarters of the community, a portion of the groove was carved out for cleansing and purification of widows after the traditional annual mourning passage of the departed husband. In this portion of *Ali Ahor*, the widow's shaved hairs and mourning clothes were burnt, an indication of purity, innocence and final detachment from the departed

Historical Society of Nigeria, vol.Vii,no.1(December:1973): 4

¹⁵ Valentine Nnolu, "Mgbowo and Christianity", in Gabriel Akachukwu (ed.), *Mgbowo Past and Present*, 20-35.

husband.¹⁶ Similarly, *Ali Ihiriho* groove was known within the community for its curative and medicinal potency. Sick people, especially the poisoned were healed through divination and curative leaves from the *Ali Ihiriho*.¹⁷ Furthermore, *Ebor Ahor* was the site for *Eja Umumghor*, a kind of sacrifice and ritual to separate the newly married ladies from the evil spirits and maternal deaths. The object of this sacrifice was a blind dog which would be killed at *Ebor Ahor* to effect the inoculation of the ladies from the attacks of the evil spirits.¹⁸

Furthermore, there was *Ebor Ngeleishi* (sacred groove) in Ezioha Mgbowo dedicated to *Ngeleishi* deity. The groove was adjudged sacred; therefore, hunting, poaching, trapping of animals were outlawed. People were traditionally restrained from fetching wire food or cultivating the groove. A visit to the groove would leave the visitor at awe, as one finds snakes, monkeys, bees, snails and rodents roaming unconcerned and unmolested in their natural habitat.¹⁹

Trees and animals also featured prominently in Mgbowo totemic ordinances. Suffice it to state that trees such as *Iroko*, *Ogbu*, *Ogirishi*, *Ohor* and *Anunuebe* command some recognitions and respect as sacred trees in Mgbowo

community. *Ogbu* tree in Mgbowo was traditionally known for boundary demarcation; therefore, it was an abomination to cut the tree without the consent of neighbours because such act would be termed covetousness and trespassing. Inter-communal boundaries between Mgbowo and her Mmaku, Awgu and Nenwe neighbours were marked with the *Ogbu* or *Ogirishi* trees to limit boundary conflict. The Ali-priests of the two boundary communities demarcate and plant the beacons after incantations, prayers and rituals.²⁰ The *Ofo* and *Ogirishi* trees were respected as sacred trees in Mgbowo. *Ofo* served as symbol of justice, uprightness and innocence. The eldest in the family could provide a branch of *Ofo* tree to any son of the family after prayers as a symbol of protection, guidance and peace. Visitors were also given *Ofo* as a piece of love and freewill. For this, the *ofo* tree was considered sacred and not used as local fuel (firewood) in the community. There was a revered silk tree at Ndiulo Ezioha Mgbowo known as *Akpu Onyima*. The tree provided some spiritual link between the community members and their forbears. As a sacred tree, *Akpu Onyima* was believed to have had some spirit forces that directed its affairs. Therefore, the fall of any of its branches was considered a bad omen and the whole community could rise up to sacrifices and divinations to

¹⁶ Chief Ude Azi c. 70, Farmer, interviewed at Ukpukepa Ezioha Village, Mgbowo, May 2020 (Indirect)

¹⁷ Chief Ude, interview cited.

¹⁸ Mr. Nwa Onyiba, c.67, Farmer/ Traditionalist, interviewed in Ndiulo Imeama Mgbowo on April 2020 (Indirect)

¹⁹ Mr. Anthony Onyekelu, c. 60, Farmer, interviewed at Mgbowo Azunkwo Ndeaboh, January 2020.

²⁰ William Ibe, c. 40, Traditionalist/Trader, interviewed at Imeama Mgbowo, May, 2020 (Indirect).

avert such impending danger.²¹ The Iroko tree (*Oji*) is revered as *okosis* (King of trees) in Igbo tradition and a tree with spiritual force. The *Ogirisi* tree is a sacred tree revered by *Ezeji* (king of yam) and used in surrounding yam barns of an *Ezeji* in Mbaise area of Imo State.

Apart from sacred trees, several Igbo communities maintained sacred groves either as the abode of the oracle or a dumping site for corpses of the degenerates in the society. The groove of *Ibini-Ukpabi* of Arochukwu before the Anglo-Aro War of 1901-1902 was described as a natural habitat which the Aro had conserved for centuries before the British invasion. Dike and Ekejiuba described the sacred groove of the oracle in the following lines:

The awe and mystery which surrounds the *Ibini-Ukpabi* oracle was largely inspired by the geographical location of its shrine. The shrine was located in sandstone cave from which a shallow but fast flowing stream emanates, flowing over a miniature waterfall. Although the stream is not visible from the surrounding ground, it can be heard rustling through the bushes. The banks of the stream are precipitous, and in parts, some seventy feet high from the bed of the stream. The stream can only be approached through a narrow gorge to one end. ... up till 1902, two altars were erected on an island in the middle of the stream. Beyond the two altars was a native

shed with dark blue ukara (*Ekpe*) cloth in front of it. Under the cloth trickled a small stream from a spring which eventually found its way into the main stream some 100 yards away.²²

The groove of *Ibini-Ukpabi* depicted a natural environment made up of fresh spring, caves, vegetation and perhaps habitat to several animals and plants. Such natural groove could have supplied the Aro and the non-Aro supplicants to the deity with some medicinal plants and herbs, since the *Ibini-Ukpabi* was also famous for its healing powers.²³

Animals also sufficed in the totemic ordinances and environmental conservation in Mgbowo community and almost every community in Igboland observed a form of ordinance with respect to animals. The Igbo of Nigeria are known for their sacred observance of cultures and traditions. Igbo ontology acknowledges the spirituality of animals and plants, as well as the impact of the duo in enhancing cordial relationship between the Igbo man, natural environment and God. African Traditional Religious taboos and ordinances control the socio-political and religious activities of most Igbo communities. The taboos involve a great deal of what could be called asceticism. Whole communities could

²¹ Mr. Boniface Iroka, c.60, Native Doctor, interviewed at Mgbowo Azunkwo Ndeaboh, December 2019.

²² Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-Eastern Nigeria, 1650-1980* (Ibadan: University Press Ltd; 1990), 141.

²³ Ndubuisi Agor, c. 78, Traditionalist, interviewed at Mgbowo Azunkwo Ndeaboh on May 2015

deprive themselves of palatable and nutritious foods in religion's name—among them, the sacred fish of the Imo River.²⁴ Animals and plants constitute human food but the Igbo have overtime reserved some animals and plants as sacred, thus building a kind of community-based environmental sustainability. The life of the Igbo is surrounded by myriads of totemic laws which not only preserve the social values of the community but serve as structural or symbolic representation of the gods. The gradual preservation of the flora and fauna have overtime recreated greener environment for living.

Igbo ontology has a strong belief that animals and plants have some spiritual and religious values, thus caution is taken when dealing with some animals and plants. One feature of Igbo environment is the belief that every natural creature has its *chi* (personal god) that regulates the life and destiny of the creature. An animal may become the *chi* of a man. Meek had earlier affirmed that the children of hunters are liable to have the *chi* of animals killed by their fathers if necessary penitential rights are not observed to pacify the haunt. In this way, animals revenge themselves on men.²⁵

Among the Mgbowo of Enugu State, some animals were considered totems, notable were the green snake

(*Agwo ocha*), Wild dog (*Edi*), Tiger (*Agu*), Vervet or green monkey (*Utobo*), and some others. Furthermore, there was a sacred fish pond in Ezioha Mgbowo known as *Oke-Mkpume* which was considered sacred and totemic, as the community made sacrifices, appeasements and requests to the aquatic animals that were believed to be the link between the community and the marine world. The fishes in *Oke-Mkpume* were considered the conveyors of appeals and requests to the spirits of the rivers in Mgbowo.²⁶ There was a replica of *Oke-Mkpume* among the Eha-Amufu of Nsukka area where *Ebe* (the spirit of the river) controls the fishes in the sacred river. The big fishes are the counterparts of the principal men of the village-group, while the fry are the counterparts of persons of no consequence or significance in the society. When a villager dies, a fish dies, and when a fish dies a villager dies. It is a taboo, therefore, to fish in that river.²⁷ The fish of the river is scared, likewise swimming, fishing, washing of clothes or bathing are sometimes avoided or regulated according to the traditional calendar. Sacrifices and rituals are sometimes performed in the river to ward off evil spirit, purify victims of evil attacks, or to attract the fortunes of the river goddess. While the green snake (*aka* or *agwo-ocha*) was totemic, other snakes were not communal totem but deified within kindred and family groups, an example is the Umudegbo family of Ezioha Mgbowo who had maintained

²⁴ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976), 26.

²⁵ C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe: A Study in Indirect Rule*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 252.

²⁶ Chief Ude, interview cited.

²⁷ Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, 55.

some totemic interactions with the black mamba snakes. This cordiality was linked to *Ngeleishi* Deity whose priests were chosen from Umudegbo. The deity utilized the black mamba, bees, green snakes as its agents and emissaries. The deification of snakes was a common culture among the communities in Idemili sub-culture zone of Anambra where the Boa constrictor (*eke-Idemili*) was almost part of the household, as it roams around unmolested but harmless. Olaudah Equiano, the ex-Igbo slave, made reference to his 18th century Igbo society as a community of totemic ordinances and observances. He recalled that:

We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. I remember two of those ominous snakes, each of which was as thick as the calf of a man's leg and in color resembling a dolphin in the water, crept at different times into my mother's night-house where I always lay with her, and coiled themselves into folds, and each time they crowed like a cock. I was desired by some of the wise men to touch these that I might be interested in the good omens, which I did, for they were quite harmless.²⁸

In attestation to the cordiality between the Igbo and animals, Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, made allusions to the royal pythons of Mbanta named 'our father' which were revered and

²⁸ Paul Edwards (ed.), *Equiano's Travels* (Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1967), 12.

allowed to roam around the compounds to the extent of people's beds.²⁹

The above extrapolation of several totemic observances, ordinances and ethics enshrined in Mgbowo culture, norms, festivals, folklores, medicine, and religion were indirect measures of environmental conservation and sustainability in Igbo communities prior to Christianization of the people. Suffice it to state that through totemic ordinances, the people had overtime developed age-long Community-Based Environmental Conservation which, to a large extent, shaped their worldviews and belief. It may be cogent if one argues that the totemic ordinances were more religious than environmental, the big fact remains that the people had through their worldviews largely enshrined in religious cultures and rites conserved the natural environment for the benefit of all. The several Igbo communities could be described as the unsung heroes of environmental campaigns. As oblivious as they seemed to be in environmental matters by western parameters, they contributed to global safety and healthy living in the wake of climate change and environmental disasters occasioned by the European industrialization of the 18th century.

The ravaging effects of environmental degradation as a result of deforestation, poaching, pollution of the water body were not hitherto initiated by the Igbo but largely the results of culture contacts between the

²⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1958), 126.

Igbo and the Europeans in the wake of the 20th century. Ikuenobe had debunked the Eurocentric assertions that Africans were environmental friendly, thus the deluge of environmental disasters in the continent.³⁰ He argued that the activities that have raised environmental concerns in Africa did not exist prior to colonialism because Africans had conservationist values, practices, and ways of life. African (Igbo) worldview, ontology, cosmology, medicine and healing, and religious practices supported environmental conservation and preservation of natural habitats. This assertion has, to a very large extent, exonerated Africans from the aspersions of the West on environmental degradation and eco-terrorism. The destruction of the natural ecosystem would largely be blamed on the imported cultures which have overtime relegated the symbiotic relationship between the African and his natural environment.

Christianity and Environmental Degradation in Mgbowo

If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith. You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian.³¹

³⁰Ikuenobe, 'Traditional African Environmental Ethics and Colonial Legacy', 2.

³¹ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Essex: Heinemann, 1964), 46.

(Adopted from Achebe's *Arrow of God*)

But on one occasion the missionaries had tried to overstep the bounds. Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines.³²

(Adopted from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*)

The above expositions from Chinua Achebe's literary works are clear demonstration of the level of environmental impact of Christianity in Igbo communities, a phenomenon that not only threatened the environment but inculcated some form of terrorism against the environment on the people's psyche.

The Christianization of the Igbo (east of the Niger River) was marked with the establishment of the first permanent mission in Onitsha in 1857 through Abboh.³³ Headed by Reverend John Christopher Taylor (a Sierra Leonean with Igbo parentage), Onitsha mission was the springboard for the spread of Christian gospel to some other Igbo communities.³⁴

The second half of the 19th century was saturated with 'competitions' among the Christian missionary groups to penetrate the Igbo heartland. The attempts to penetrate

³² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1958), 124.

³³ Ogbu Kalu, *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991* (Trento: African World Press Inc, 2003), 82.

³⁴ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo*, 160.

the Igbo hinterland were championed through three axes: The River Niger axis, the Opobo-Bonny axis and the Cross River axis.³⁵ While the likes of Presbyterian mission got to Uwana Igbo through Calabar in 1888,³⁶ other missionary societies such as C.M.S, the Holy Ghost Fathers of Catholic Mission, the Evangelicals, the Society for African Mission and some others intensified efforts towards the Christianization of the Igbo through the Niger axis.

Until the Aro Expedition of 1901-1902 which opened the highway to Igbo interior through the Cross River axis, there was a government ruling against missionaries and traders penetrating the Igbo interior because it was considered unsafe.³⁷ The triumph of the British administrators in Igbo interiors was marked with the defeat of the Aro in 1902. Subsequently, other communities in the heartland were either subjugated through the gun or by diplomacy. Military expeditions in several Igbo communities softened the ground for the propagation of Christian faith in the Igbo interior. E.

³⁵ Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 338.

³⁶ G.A. Mbey, *Origin of Ehugbo (Afikpo) in Retrospect* (Nigeria: Barcy Associates Press, 2004), 39.

³⁷ Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 339. For More on Christian Missionary activities in Education and Health sectors, see Udobata Onunwa's 'Christian Missionary Methods and their Influence on Eastern Nigeria', in Emefie Ikenga Metuh (ed.), *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religion*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Ltd.), 59-81.

A. Ayandele recalled that with the systematic destruction of the Long Juju by the British invaders between 1900 and 1902, the Bible rolled through Igboland like a juggernaut, crushing the gods to atoms, while the Igbo man's spirit lay prostrate before the missionary invader.³⁸ Ayandele's assertion could be described as a generalization as not every Igbo submitted to the socio-psychological tenets of Christianity. The degree of receptiveness and resistance to Christianity should be assessed on community basis to ascertain the exactness of the impact of Christianity on a people.

On Mgbowo and Christianity, the first British patrol team arrived Mgbowo community in 1909 with the intention of punitive expedition and forceful conquest of the community. However, the patrol team was received by Chief Ezenwa Umahi (a famous native doctor and later warrant chief) with pomp and pageantry to the amazement of the military team. The friendly reception granted to the invaders was attributed to Umahi's experiences as an itinerant native doctor who had witnessed the devastating effect of indigenous resistances to the British in the coastal communities.³⁹ More so, the scenario was unlikely in the neighboring Nenwe community where the British and the indigenous community

³⁸ E.A. Ayandele, 'The Collapse of 'Pagandom' in Igboland', *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 7., (December 1973): 125-7.

³⁹ Nnoluom, Mgbowo and Christianity, 20

clashed in the infamous Nenwe expedition of 1917.⁴⁰

The emergence of Christianity in Mgbowo in 1919 was not an initiative of the British administrators but Chief Ezenta (the Warrant Chief of Mgbowo) whose friendliness with Chief Onyeama of Eke granted the posting of the first teacher cum missionary, Mr. John Nwaeseh (from Onitsha) to Mgbowo under the authority of Rev. Fr. Grandin Catholic Mission in Eke. It was a combination of education and missionary activities that produced the first set of converts: Joseph Ogbu, Michael Ndu, Dominic Ula, Ignatius Akpa, Patrick Eze, Gabriel Eze, James Ezekata, Christopher Ede, John Okolomba and Louis Njoku who were baptized on the 15th of June 1922 by Fr. Grandin, administered the holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) in 1923 by Fr. Davey and afterwards confirmed by Bishop Shanahan on the 10th of March 1925 at Mmaku.⁴¹

From the little beginning of St. John's Catholic mission in Mgbowo in 1919, these early converts who became the Christian flag bearers in Mgbowo succeeded in building an intimidation mission Christian community, converting almost the entire populace to the new faith. The catholic mission enjoyed absolute monopoly until 1963 when the Mr. Linus Adum, through the aid of a South African missionary friend in Makurdi, J.G. Staine established the All Christ's Commands' Mission. Unfortunately,

⁴⁰ M.B. Chukwubike, *History of Nenwe Town* (Nenwe: Chris Printers and Publishers, 1984), 26.

⁴¹ Nnolum, 'Mgbowo and Christianity', 23.

the mission collapsed with the return of Staine to South Africa, as funding and correspondences between the church in Mgbowo and Staine in South Africa were censored, blocked and sometimes confiscated by the apartheid regime in South Africa.⁴²

The end of the Nigerian Civil War marked a proliferation of protestant churches in Mgbowo, famous among these were; the Christ Apostolic Church which came through Mr. Udeokpara in 1970. The Abosso Apostolic Faith Church came to Mgbowo in 1974 through Prophetess Christiana Agwu (Lewe-Alleluyah), while the Divine Order of Cherubim and Seraphim was introduced to the community in 1980 by Mrs. Roseline Dibio.⁴³ By the turn of the 20th century, the community had become a sort of religious centre and a meeting point of Christian faithful of different denominations such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Assemblies of God Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion, the Sabbath Church, the Grace of God Mission, the Living Faith Church, the Faith Tabernacle among others.

The proliferation of these churches in the hitherto traditional society had created some sort of culture clashes, assimilation and imposition of Christian ideologies and dogmas. Apart from the utter condemnation of deities, ancestral worship, traditional rites and rituals, divination and inoculation, traditional medications and pharmaceuticals as fetish and barbaric, a major area of conflict

⁴² Nnolum, 'Mgbowo and Christianity', 32.

⁴³ Nnolum, 'Mgbowo and Christianity', 33

between the new religion and the traditional system was the issue of environment and conservation as enshrined in the community's totemic ordinances.

On arrival in Mgbowo, the missionaries in alliance with the early converts began anti environmental campaigns against sacred grooves 'evil forests' and totemic animals. Sometimes, in connivance with the Warrant Chiefs, those grooves were given to the missionaries for building of schools and churches. Popularly known as *Ochuchu -Eja* or evil forests, these sites were either given away by the community leaders ignorantly or forcefully destroyed by the missionaries. Notable examples of such evangelical deforestation was in 1963 when the All Church Command Mission (South African Church) in Mgbowo negotiated for and were granted access to the Ogbaerushi-Oji forest in Eziobodo Mgbowo.⁴⁴ The adherents cleared the site, thus creating environmental vacuum in the community. This same scenario played out in Onitsha in 1885 when Obi Anazonwu was pressured to submit the evil forest opposite the 'Banques des Esclaves' at Nkissi to the Holy Ghost Fathers Congregation of the Catholic mission under the leadership of Rev. Fr. Joseph Luz.⁴⁵ The evil forest as expected was immediately converted to residential mission house. In the same light, Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, captured

⁴⁴ Nnolum, 'Mgbowo and Christianity', 32.

⁴⁵ Augustine Okwu, *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions: Conversion in Theory and Practice, 1857-1957* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2010), 125.

a certain Mbanta community that did not want Christian missionaries in the clan; their only option was to offer the invaders (missionaries) some portions of the evil forests to erect their church, thus: Mbanta

made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept. ... The next morning the crazy men (Missionaries) actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the missionaries survived the bad expectations of Mbanta, and afterwards 'won' the community for Christ. Mbanta and some other communities who compromised the traditional ordinances could be likened to Ayi kwei Armah's *Chichidodo* (The bird that feeds on maggots but hates excrement). How would one issue out such ancestral heritage as a buffer to missionary expansion. Some Warrant Chiefs, in lieu of pecuniary and political gains, relinquished some natural heritage to the religious and political colonizers. Notable Warrant Chiefs in Igboland in the likes of Onyeama of Eke, Chukwuani Nwangwu of Ozalla, Iweka of Obosi, Ezenwa Umahi of Mgbowo were pioneers of education and Christianity in their localities, and purveyors of these environmental harms. They chiefs were caught in the waves of two civilizations (Igbo and English) and most took to the later to sustain their

⁴⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Essex: Heinemann, 1958), 105-6.

political wills and economy. This was a great triumph of Christianity in an Igbo community and a major defeat to the age-long Community-Based Environmental Conservation of the Igbo.

Apart from conniving with the local authority, there were cases of violent destruction of environmental heritages and totemic animals by the missionaries in Igboland and Mgbowo. The destruction of *Ibini-Ukpabi* of Arochukwu in 1901-1902 has continued to live in infamy. Through the oracle, the community had created and nurtured some centuries of vegetations and fauna which served as medicinal plants, totemic animals and grooves for the popular *Ibini-Ukpabi*. The Aro expedition of 1901-1902 succeeded in destroying the natural environment, religious relics, figurines and statues but not the spirit being. Suffice it to state that after the military expedition of 1901-1902, the oracle still enjoyed a wide clientele, especially in former Awgu, Okigwe, Bende and Owerri divisions in the 1920s.⁴⁷ No doubt the Igbo continued their reverence to the deity after the expedition, but the natural environment was lost for good. The 'invaders' could have utilized the natural serenity of the shrine to create a kind of tourist zone, relaxation centre or at least convert the hitherto 'juju' forest to a Christian pilgrimage centre.

In Mgbowo community, the gradual deforestation, extinction of hitherto sacred groves and animals was attributed to Christian evangelism

⁴⁷ Dike and Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-Eastern Nigeria*, 150.

and westernization.⁴⁸ One major area of concern is the gradual neglect of the ancestral homestead called *Nkoro*. As the home of the eponymous founder of the kindred or family, meetings, family decisions and cases within the family level were settled in *Nkoro*. It was a kind of forest reserve within the neighborhood with traditional stools and relics preserved therein. *Nkoro* house (a small thatched roof) was constructed in the middle of the *Nkoro* to shade the family during the rain. Menstruating women, denigrates and other social misfits were not allowed entry to *Nkoro*. However, through Christian evangelism and westernization, some extremists among the Christians condemned *Nkoro*, thus marking the gradual erosion of such sacred and environmentally conserved ancestral spot. Nowadays, the tide has changed as most families hold their meetings in private houses of either the richest male member or the eldest with little recourse to the traditional norms and values which were hitherto embedded in *Nkoro*.⁴⁹ There have been cases of trespassing, encroachment, burning, and displacement and utter deforestation of the scared grooves in Mgbowo. These were either carried out by Christians collectively or by a fanatic. A notable conflict between the Christians and the traditionalists was in 1999 when both parties clashed

⁴⁸Mr. Nwa Onyiba, c.67, Farmer/Traditionalist, interviewed in Ndiulo Imeama Mgbowo on April 2020(Indirect).

⁴⁹ Madam V. Mbah. c.70, Farmer, interviewed in Mgbowo on May 2020(Indirect).

violently over the observation of the rites of *Eja Ahoo*, a traditional ceremony held on the sixth month of Mgbowo traditional calendar to ward off malevolent spirits in Mgbowo. The defilement of the tenets of the sacred day of *Eja Ahoo* such as (restriction of movement to the stream and farmlands on Eke market day) led to violent destruction of property and burning of some traditional sites.⁵⁰ Nwa Onyibahad noted that for the sake of Christianity, the popular *Ali-Ihiriho*, *Ali-Ahor* had been burnt. The sacred *Ohor -Ali* (the symbol of the earth goddess) in the custody of Mr. Onwude (the last priest of the *Ali*) was burnt by one of his nephews when the priest died.⁵¹ Another ugly scenario was in 2012 when a young man named Goddy Okoroakpagbu of Ezioha invaded the sacred groove of *Ngelesihi* with the intension of farming the virgin forest and afterwards hijacks the priesthood of the deity. The effect of such trespass was untimely death of the fellow.⁵² Madam observed that the community through Christian evangelism gradually abandoned the sacred deities and their grooves, leaving those spots to poachers, hunters and gatherers to exploit and plunder.⁵³ This trend is not peculiar to Mgbowo community but almost endemic in Igboland, where every traditional deity, oracle, totemic animal and grooves are considered threats to Christian growth and community development in Igboland. This ugly trend has either degenerated

⁵⁰ Chief Ude, interview cited.

⁵¹ Mr. Nwa Onyiba, interview cited.

⁵² William Ibe, interview cited.

⁵³ Madam Mbah, interview cited.

to communal conflict or have polarized communities along religious lines. It is a generational conflict whose origin is pointed to the mode of Christianization of the Igbo where the European missionaries inculcated radicalism and fanaticism on early converts, sparing nothing of traditional values, norms and belief. The attitude of Mazi Okorafor Uro of Amankuru and Mazi Nwafor Ogwuma who were early converts from Arochukwu was an example. The duo spearheaded the mission to Isu and Ututu, marching with some other radicals into these communities at the head of a musical band, with kerosene tins serving as instruments. A combination of preaching and iconoclastic destruction of sacred grooves and family patron gods won the day.⁵⁴

Totemic animals are gradually retreating from the neighborhood. The companionship, natural coloration and beauty the animals had given to Igbo communities are fast facing-off. This could be attributed to radical evangelism and deforestation. In Mgbowo, the *Oke Mkpume* (a sacred fish pond) located in Ezioha village is practically destroyed through fanaticism and Westernization. Some radical members of the community have resolved to plunder the natural pond as fishing hub overtime. The entrance of Pentecostal churches in Mgbowo after the Nigeria Civil War mounted pressure on totemic animals,

⁵⁴ Ogbu Kalu, 'The Battle of the Gods: Christianization of the Cross River Igboland', 1930-1950, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol.10, no1 (1979): 7.

as the church considered the animals irrelevant. Gradually, church campaigns have targeted totemic animals such as the green snake (*agwo ocha*), the deer (*Ene*), and others.⁵⁵ Achebe had earlier painted a picture of early missionary threats to totemic animals in two of his classics: *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of God*. In *Arrow of God*, the fanatical missionary in Umuaro named Mr. Goodcountry had admonished the new converts that:

If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith. You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian.⁵⁶

Similarly, *Things Fall Apart* presents a scenario of Enoch who was described as an overzealous convert and an outsider who wept more than the bereaved. Enoch's devotion to the new faith led him to killing the sacred python in the community.⁵⁷

The effect of this faith-based animal abuse is gradual extinction of some species of animals in the environment. Faith-based animal abuse is complimented by several other channels of abuses meted on animals in Africa and elsewhere. Suffice it to state that globally, animals have been subjected to untold exploitations by man. Advocates of

animal rights have frowned at the abuse of animals by the food industry, fashion and fur establishments, pharmaceutical and laboratory factories. Studies have revealed that approximately 4.5million animals were killed for fur in the Unites States in 2001.⁵⁸ Consider the millions of undocumented poaching, killing and trapping of animals in Africa. This was coming at the wake of severe climate disaster that has continued to displace animals from their natural habitats. Amidst these ill treatments was the faith-based exploitation of animals, especially with reference to Christian evangelism and activities in Igboland.

One may be curious to ask if the anti-environmental disposition of the missionaries was derived from the biblical injunction of Genesis Chapter 1 vs. 28 where God charged man to "subdue the earth, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over everything that move upon the earth."⁵⁹ The power to subdue every creature is contrary to environmental conservation and sustainability. This singular admonition strips every animal and trees their rights to exist and grow according to natural laws and justice. Some Christians focus on this spiritual directive to destroy grooves and animals considered antithetical to the Christian faith. Oftentimes, the overzealous Christians tend to forget that in the Christian

⁵⁵ Chief Udeh, interview cited.

⁵⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Essex: Heinemann, 1964), 46.

⁵⁷ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 148.

⁵⁸ Tom Regan, *Animal Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 13.

⁵⁹ The Holy Bible, King James Version. Refer to Genesis chapter 1 vs. 28.

creationist story of Genesis Chapter one, God was consistently pleased with each of his creation after each day. The Bible recorded that God saw that all his creations were good. The Biblical Garden of Eden ought to be a model for Christians, as nature took its course without human distortion of the eco-system, habitat or niches, even after the fall of man.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The study has argued that the introduction of Christianity to the hitherto traditionally religious Igbo communities at the dawn of the 20th century has overtime destroyed the Community-Based Environmental Conservation embedded in the people's religion, rituals, worldview, medicine and festivals. Using Mgbowo community in Enugu State as a focal point, the study posits that amidst the destruction of traditional shrines, grooves, totemic animals and relics by the missionaries lay a deluge of environmental hazards which have continued to haunt the community and Igboland generally. It is obvious that hardly could one find any centennial grove, forest or tree across Igbo communities as those monuments have been condemned as agents of darkness. The paper opined that missionaries would have spared some 'gods', grooves and animals not because of their religious relevance in the community but for their environmental impact in the society. Alternatively, the missionaries in Igboland could have converted such

⁶⁰ Read Genesis Chapters 1 & 2 for better understanding of the creationist history and the Garden of Eden.

natural habitats to tourist or pilgrimage centers. This would not only conserve the environment but will be a source of revenue to the government. The tourism potentials of the Igbo were lost to the reckless and anti-environmentalist dispositions of the missionaries and urban developers, thus leaving the Igbo environment bare and naked in the face of climate change. This is unlike the Yoruba nation where Christian missionaries compromised some of the Christian values by sparing many sacred grooves, flora and fauna which have made the Yoruba nation the hub of traditional medicine in Nigeria. The popular Osun-Oshogbo festival and its sacred groove, rivers and totemic animals has continued to attract tourists across the globe.

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