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Eco-Preservation through the Lens of Igbo Beliefs and Practices: A Re-Imagination

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Abstract: This research was carried out to investigate the various cultural practices of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria that were/are useful in saving the ecosystem from capricious human activities in traditional society. This is with the aim of finding how they could be adopted to checkmate the modern practices that degrade and violate the environment. The researchers adopted a qualitative approach for data collection. This is because the research is a social survey and addresses social issues. As such, data were collected using surveys and oral/personal communication. The study discovered that there is a nexus between indigenous cultural/cosmological knowledge and ecosystem preservation/sustainability and as such notes that the current earth devastation within modern Igbo society is a result of neglect of the indigenous knowledge system. The work observes that, if this knowledge system is incorporated into current ethics of eco-preservation, the present eco-risk would diminish. The work therefore recommends that cultural/indigenous environmental education, advocacy and ecosystem activism and locally managed ecotourism be incorporated into both formal and informal education of the modern Igbo knowledge system.

Keywords: Igbo; religion; culture; ecosystem; nature preservation



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1. Introduction

The Igbo cosmological matrix is pivotal to the understanding of their religio-cultural beliefs and practices that relate to the ecosystem and its preservation. In this manuscript, “Igbo cosmological matrix” refers to the way the Igbo people see the world around them. It is three-pronged and includes: a unified view of reality, community consciousness and preservation/enhancement of life (Madu 1996). In a nutshell, for the Igbo, the world comprises heaven, the earth and the underworld, with humans at the center. They (humans) control and coordinate activities in these spheres in order to maintain harmony/equilibrium. Disaster ensues when man, who is at the center, fails in this 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. Enhancement and preservation can only be achieved if man is in harmony with the environment through his actions. This is the most fundamental basis of the Igbo cosmological matrix, and, against this backdrop, the study takes its bearing.

Human activities have continually contributed in no small measure to different degrees of adverse changes in the environment. Such activities include deforestation (Nyirenda and Anderson 2015), affecting Zambia, for example, overexploitation of natural resources (Lampart 2019), overpopulation/overconsumption, technology, agriculture, overfishing and burning of fossil fuels, all resulting in environmental degradation and, sometimes, disasters. The states in the southeastern part of Nigeria have varying degrees of ecological problems, ranging from erosion to flooding. For example, there are terrible cases of landslides in Anambra state in areas such as Nanka and Awka, etc. (Igwe and

Una 2019; David 2019), just as there are cases of flooding in Ebonyi state, to mention a few. The researchers, who are resident in one of the southeastern states, have observed that there have always been irregular rainfalls and excessive hot weather conditions. Okafor (2016), while identifying some ecological issues in Igbo land, enunciates that retrieval of indigenous beliefs and practices from Igbo spirituality are relevant to sound environmental preservation. It would have been expected that the areas in southeastern Nigeria should not experience environmental problems, since they have these beliefs and practices linked to their spirituality, but such a far cry from expectation necessitates this research.

Carrington (2018) lends credence to the above when he said that humans are just a small percent of all life but have destroyed 83% of wild mammals. In a similar vein, the fourth assessment the working group 1 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007) holds that human activities contribute to climate change by causing changes in the earth's atmosphere in the amount of greenhouse gases, aerosols (small particles) and cloudiness contributed from burning fossil fuels, thereby releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The group explains that greenhouse gases and aerosols affect the climate by altering incoming solar radiation and outgoing infrared (thermal) radiation, which are part of the earth's energy balance. This change, they affirm, leads to warming or cooling of the climate system.

According to the World Watch Institute (2018), the latest global reef assessment estimates that 19 percent of the world's coral reefs are dead. They are of the view that Coral Reef Loss suggests global extinction events and predicts that one quarter of reefs may be extinct by 2050. Their major threats stem from warming sea surface temperature and expanding sea water acidification. This assessment notes that a quarter of all marine fish species reside in coral reefs and 500 million people depend on these "underwater forests" for their livelihood. The above picture of the state of the natural world today, largely impacted by humans, is seen by Nweke and Nwoye (2016) as resulting from industrialization owing to globalization. The duo recalled Igbo methods of preserving nature, such as roofing using thatch grasses, planting of trees in and around the compound, planting Achalla (Bamboo) and Ogirisi (*Newbouldialaavis*) trees around the areas that are prone to erosion, etc., and feared that these practices may no longer be relevant in today's globalized and modernized world. In the same vein, Onyemechalu and Ugwuanyi (2021) highlighted the concepts and practice of indigenous cultural heritage management in Igbo land, which may also be suffering globalization/modernization effects. In contribution towards addressing this fear, this present research redefines and re-imagines some of the Igbo religio-cultural practices that have the capacity for eco-sustainability in a way that has meaning for the contemporary Igbo world.

2. Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the Igbo people of Nigeria?
2. What are some of the religio-cultural practices of the Igbo that relate to ecosystem preservation?
3. How can some of the Igbo religio-cultural practices be deployed to enhance ecosystem preservation?

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research is a descriptive survey study and therefore employs the use of surveys and interviews to gather the data for the research.

3.2. Procedures for Data Collection

Data for this study were generated from a survey fielded using the Google online survey form administered to members of the Pan Igbo Cultural Group—NZUKO NDI IGBO. The group is made up of Igbo people of age 18 and above from different Igbo

states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, numbering about 7000 members. The respondents were randomly selected through a multistage sampling process that divided the group population into primary sampling units (PSUs), secondary sampling units (SSUs) and, finally, ultimate sampling units (USUs). At the last stage, 100 respondents were invited to complete the Google survey form recruited through e-mail and phone, and in the end, a total of 83 completions were received online, while seven responded via phone interview. The survey was in the field from March through May 2022. The survey questions were open-ended to elicit ideas about Igbo religio-cultural practices that relate to the preservation of nature (ecosystem), as well as the current level of practice and the way forward.

3.3. Method of Data Analysis

The method adopted was Qualitative Content Analysis and was carried out using MS Excel Spreadsheet. It was used to code and track themes in the qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the data, which were presented in tables as frequency and percentage, and represented in bar charts.

4. Results

Research Question One: What is the nature of the Igbo people of Nigeria?

Research Question Two: What are some of the religio-cultural practices of the Igbo people that relate to ecosystem preservation?

Research Question Three: In what ways can some of the Igbo religio-cultural practices be deployed to enhance ecosystem preservation?

5. Discussion of Findings

The results of research question one are presented in table one, showing the nature of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The question about their nature is actually seeking an insight into their worldview. The findings in the results affirm that the Igbo of Nigeria are highly religious people who conceive and perceive the world around them and interpret everything surrounding it from the standpoint of religion. Overall, 97.6 percent of the respondents mentioned that the Igbo people believe in the connectedness of the spiritual/invisible and visible world, which corroborates the positions of scholars such as [Madu \(1996\)](#). He explains that the Igbo conceive the world as divided into two, namely: the visible and invisible world, with the later further divided into two, which are heaven and the underworld. The visible world (*eluala*) is inhabited by an earth goddess, human beings and minor/nature deities; heaven is inhabited by the Supreme Being (Chukwu or Chineke), the Creator, with major divinities such as *Amadioha* (god of thunder) and *Anyanwu* (god of light); and the underworld is inhabited by the ancestors and myriads of other spirit forces, both benevolent and malevolent. The crux of the matter here does not address the question—‘which being inhabits where?’—but inherent in the Igbo worldview is the belief in the connectedness of the visible and invisible world, which informs the Igbo cultural norms: written and unwritten laws, morality, ethics and justice, which are practical guides to action. Summarizing the Igbo cosmology (worldview), [Ejizu, cited in Madu \(1996, p. 7\)](#), remarks that: “Traditional Igbo cosmology is a religious one, a cosmology in which holds unified view of reality. This is understandable under the backdrop that all the spheres of Igbo cosmic structure and their inhabitants are in continuous interaction”. Man is at the center of everything, but he is not alone; he exists for the community and the community exists for him. Preservation and enhancement of life are primary in order to maintain harmony.

Lending credence to the foregoing, [Nwala, cited in Onwu \(2002\)](#), explains that it is a fact that the sacred and the secular are held together in the Igbo worldview, meaning that the secular life of the Igbo is inseparable from their religious life. Further to this, [Leonard, cited in Onwu \(2002, p. 1\)](#), made the following remarks about the Igbo:

They are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and a deeply religious people, of whom it can be said that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bathe

religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these as I have all along endeavored to point out is their existence and their existence is their religion.

Their cosmology has a deep religious root, and their practical life and moral values are interwoven with their religion. A total of 95.2 percent of the survey respondents in table one corroborate Nwala’s position above. Items 3–7 of Table 1 (Figure 1), with percentage scores of 94.0, 90.4, 91.6, 90.4 and 90.4, respectively, support the argument that inherent in the Igbo worldview is the belief in the connectedness of the spiritual and physical world, which informs all the Igbo cultural norms. It is safe to argue that the Igbo belief in the visible world (*eluala*) as being inhabited by an earth goddess must have given rise to their designation of earth as “mother earth”. If this is correct, then it explains why they treat the earth as sacred and with respect, as confirmed by item 4, with a percentage score of 90.4. The relevance of the Igbo cosmology lies in the principles of a ‘unified view of reality’, ‘community consciousness’ and ‘preservation/enhancement of life’. This is understandable against the backdrop that all the spheres of the Igbo cosmic structure and their inhabitants are in continuous interaction, as seen in item 5, Table 1 (Figure 1). The deplorable condition of the ecosystem presently, without any exemption, is a result of man’s difficulty in accepting that he co-inhabits the earth with other biotic and abiotic components, that they are mutually interdependent and that they ought to be in continuous interaction and harmony, not competition.

Table 1. The Nature of the Igbo People of Nigeria.

Variables	n	%	Total
The Nature of the Igbo People of Nigeria			
Belief in an eternal communion and connectedness of the spiritual/invisible and visible world.	81	97.6	83
Practical life, moral/spiritual values, traditions and laws are interwoven with their religion.	79	95.2	83
See themselves as part of nature surrounded by natural phenomena.	78	94.0	83
Treat the sacred earth with respect.	75	90.4	83
Their cosmology is a religious one believed to hold all spheres of cosmic structure and their inhabitants in continuous interaction.	76	91.6	83
Some natural phenomena are believed to be inhabited by the deities and other spiritual agents.	75	90.4	83
Awareness of the interdependence of life in the cosmology.	75	90.4	83

The results of research question two are presented in Table 2 (Figure 2). This deals with some of the religio-cultural practices of the Igbo that relate to ecosystem preservation. The outcome shows that the Igbo deify some natural objects and build a totemic practice around objects that they have affinity with, such as animals, reptiles, plants/vegetables, stones, rivers and celestial bodies. They also institute taboos such as shooting and hunting surrounding heritage sites, thereby prohibiting exploitation of resources such as caves, hills and mountains. They have prohibitions on water uses such as laundering, swimming and fishing, and they organize communal labor to clear weeds and debris around water bodies. These are with the aim of maintaining water purity for preservation of aquatic life. Furthermore, they designate forests as sacred places and the abode of masquerades; they have farming practices such as fallow management, shift cultivation, mixed cropping and crop rotation to regulate soil exploitation. These are achieved through traditional laws.

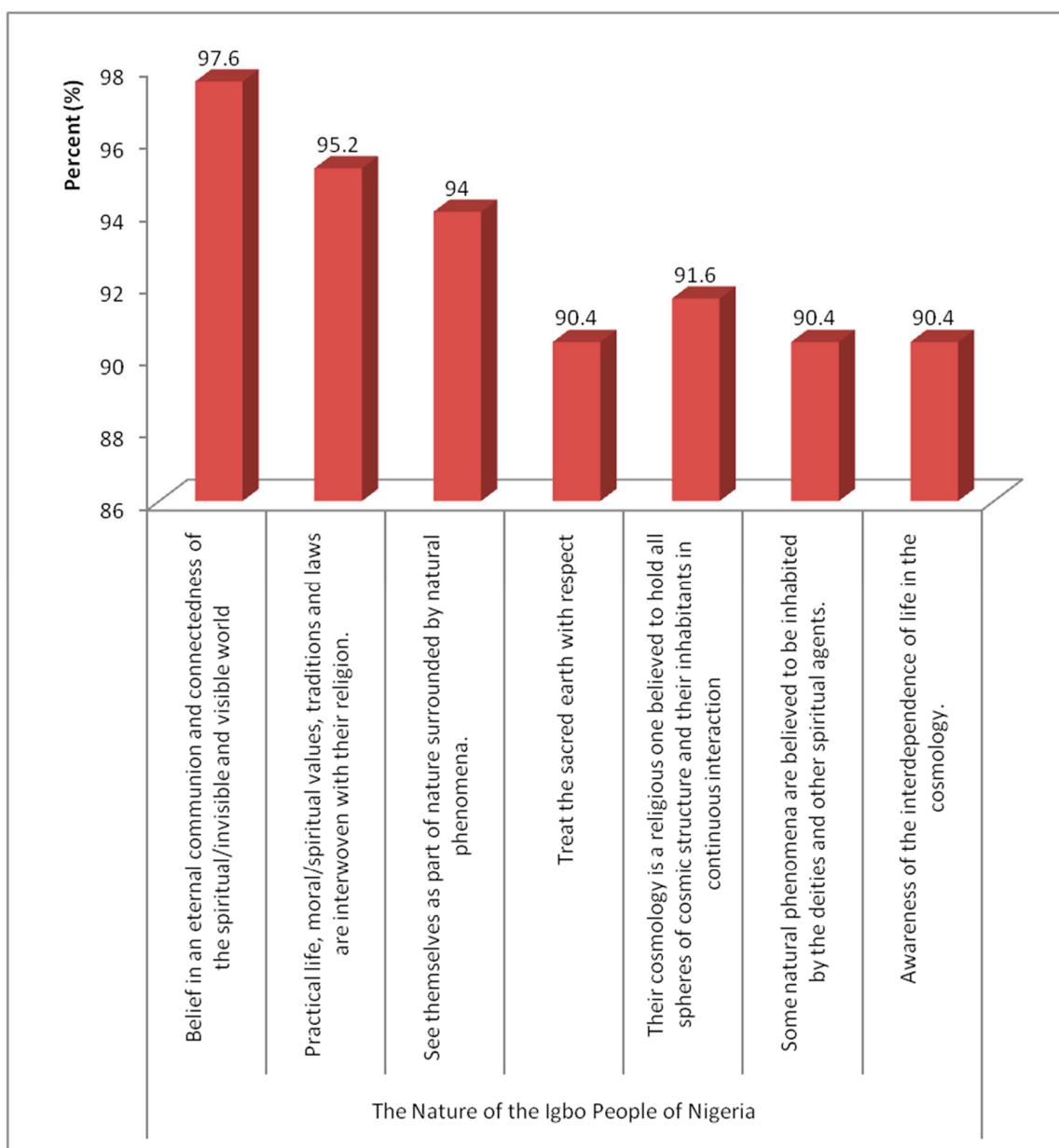


Figure 1. The Nature of the Igbo People of Nigeria.

Table 2. Some of the Religio-Cultural Practices of the Igbo that Relate to Ecosystem Preservation.

Variables	n	%	Total
Some of the Religio-Cultural Practices of the Igbo that Relate to Ecosystem Preservation			
Deification of some natural objects.	75	90.4	83
Totemic practice of having affinity with animals, reptile, plant/vegetable, stone, river, celestial body, etc.	70	84.3	83
Taboos such as shooting and hunting surrounding heritage sites, thereby prohibiting exploitation of resources such as caves, hills, mountains, etc.	67	80.7	83
Traditional prohibitions on water use such as laundering, swimming, fishing, etc., to maintain water purity for preservation of aquatic life	61	73.5	83
Designation of forests as sacred places of abode of masquerades.	65	78.3	83
Organization of communal labor to clear weeds and debris around water body.	77	92.8	83
Farming structures such as fallow management, shift cultivation, mixed cropping, crop rotation, to regulate soil exploitation and fashioned through traditional laws.	78	94.0	83

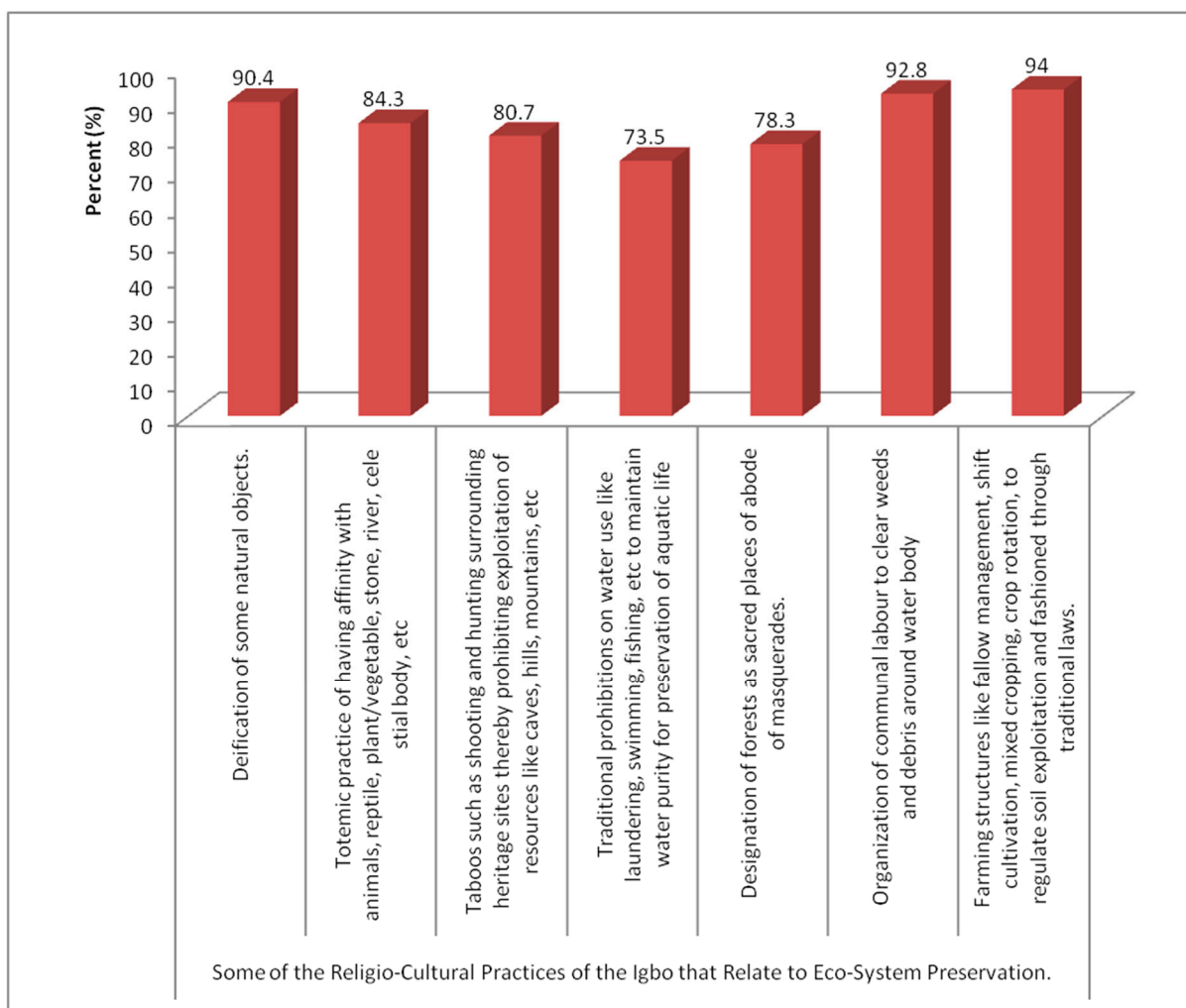


Figure 2. Some of the Religio-Cultural Practices of the Igbo that Relate to Ecosystem Preservation.

5.1. Do the Telephone Interviews Say the Same?

D. I. A., a Local Chief and village administrator cum University Lecturer (Personal Interview, 9 April 2022) sheds more light on the subject in relation to the totemic practice and taboos of some named communities in Anambra state. According to him, “agbondiekweli” is a sacred forest located at Ozubulu, Ekwusigo L.G.A, which is devoted to the deity Ndiekweli. The forest houses monkeys, even today. The monkeys are not to be killed within the forest area, as it is a taboo to do so. He said, however, that outside the forest, one can kill them. The forest is still intact, but no longer in its pristine form. Further to this, he explains that it is also a taboo to kill a monkey in Awka. For Awka people, the monkey is a totemic animal. At the moment, situated at “Eke Awka” market is a shrine with a giant tree housing monkeys in their number, and these animals remain unharmed to date. Still on totem, he explained further that the Nnewi people of Anambra state do not kill or harm “ewi” (wild rabbit) because it is their totem.

On taboos surrounding water use and purity, this interviewee explains that the Ozubulu community has a stream called “Ogwii”, as to date people do not fish or kill the crocodile inhabiting the stream. In the past, women and girls compulsorily cleaned the stream, an exercise known as “igwoiyi”; he lamented that the practice has long been abandoned as a result of urbanization, Christianity and demographic movement. He said that urban conurbation has greatly affected the practices, because non indigenes have settled in the area for commercial purposes. Consequently, the people’s traditions have been compromised and tampered with.

E. E., a Priest (Personal Interview, 24 May 2022), in the same vein, explained that at Umuezeala Nsu, Ehime Mbanjo, in Imo state, the Iroko tree (*Milicia Excelsa*) and “Uha” tree (*Pterocarpus* Spp.) are regarded as sacred trees to date. He further noted that, before now, the “ajuala” (viper) was their totem animal, but now people kill it for meat. According to him, with the coming of Christianity and civilization, some of the trees were cut for timber, while some were cut by the church because it was considered heathen. In the wake of Christianity, certain forests designated as “ajoochia” (evil forest) were given out to churches to build on, yet these “evil forests” were natural habitats for wildlife, he concluded. Still on the subject, E. O., a farmer and village leader (Personal Interview, 24 May 2022), recounted that, in Umuchieke Okwe, Onuimo in Okigwe, Imo state, the preservation of sacred trees such as the “akpu” (*Manihot Utilissima*), Iroko, “ogirishi” (*Newbouldia Laevis*) and “uha” were and still are taken seriously because the trees are regarded as ancestral trees and/or the abode of the spirits of the ancestors. For example, the “ogirishi” is associated with the spirit responsible for yam cultivation known as “ahiajoku”.

Still from Imo state, the “Ala Owerri” shrine located on Amaram Street houses the “ala owerri” deity; the site is bedecked with huge trees. The interviewee, I. O., an African Traditional Religion Expert (Personal Interview, 6 May 2022), explained further that “ugwu ekwema” (ekwema hill) at Egbu Road, Owerri, is the abode of the ancestral spirit of the founder of Owerri, who rested at this location while running away from his brother. To date, the people celebrate “oru Owerri” at the site and it has been developed for tourism. The respondent unveiled that “nkwo dirimo” in Ihite Uboma is a shrine inhabited by the goddess “dirimo” located in the market square and noted that, before now, the shrine was a thatched hut but now is re-built and a brick house with corrugated iron sheets. He further explained why the Igbo people have four market days, namely, “eke”, “orie”, “afor” and “nkwo”, against the western seven days in the week and why every market has a shrine.

According to him, the Igbo four market days are the four deities the creator *Chukwu Abiama* (Igbo name for God) sent to institutionalize industry and commerce in Igbo land. Therefore, it is in recognition of the deities that the Igbo people always have shrines in market squares with all kinds of trees that are hardly hewn down, since the deities are believed to inhabit them. This same informant explained further that the fish and alligator (nnako) in the “dimugo” stream are not killed or eaten because the people believe that they reincarnate from there. The deity “dimugo” goes to speak to the creator—*Chukwu Abiama*—to permit them to come back to life. In addition, Umuihi people in Ihite Uboma still do not eat a particular fish called “ihi” (a type of fish which has scales), because they believe it is sacred and has a link with their progenitor.

For Okue people of Isiagu in Ebonyi state, according to E. A. (Personal Interview, 30 May 2022), cutting down an Iroko tree is taboo; the tree is always located at the shrine and believed to be the abode of their ancestors. He confirmed that, in Akaeze and Okue communities, killing a green snake is taboo because it is their totem animal. The people of Amangwu Edda in Afikpo south Ebonyi state have “eke” (python) as their totem animal, while the “Udu” matrilineal family in Ekoli Edda Libolo village do not eat “enwe” (monkey) because it is sacred to them, according to another interviewee, A. O., a local Chief (Personal Interview, 24 May 2022).

B. N., a Titled man (Personal Interview, 20 May 2022). still on the subject, explained how it is applicable to Amauzu Umuamachaghiugwu, Osisioma Ngwa people of Abia state. Their sacred trees, in addition to Iroko tree, include “akwu” / “akpu” (*Manihot Utilissima*) and “ukpo”, while their sacred or totem animals include “ehi Igbo” (native cow) and “okwa” (bush bird), especially for Osokwa people. The name of the Ndiosookwa” community “is derived from their practice of regarding the “okwa” as a sacred animal and the taboo around killing the totem animal.

5.2. *Parallels of Igbo Preservation Models in Other Parts of Africa*

[Rim-Rukah et al. \(2013\)](#) enunciate that beliefs, totems, taboos and rituals play important roles in the management of natural resources in Africa. Their paper explores the salient aspects of conservation borne out of the taboo system in practices surrounding the sacred natural sites, principally the sacred forests. The Igbo Traditional Religion does not stand alone when compared with other traditional religions in Africa and the Diaspora. It shares the same characteristics found in the African traditional religions. Such characteristics include the belief in God, intermediaries (spirits, priests, medicine men, etc.) and mother earth; the connection between the living and the dead; establishment of moral laws in form of taboos; worship embedded in rituals, liberation and other festivals; its myths of origin transmitted from generation to generation; and totem sacredness of certain objects, days, animals and lands. [Mbiti \(2015\)](#) agrees with this position that the Igbo religion fully embodies all characteristics of world religion.

[Boaten \(1998\)](#) X-rays the various forms and methods through which the pre-colonial and traditional cultures in Ghana conserved the ecosystem. He recognizes that the Africans' relationship with, and attitude towards, nature and care of the environment are embedded in their religion. The Africans, according to him, regard the earth as the mother that sustains and gives life. Thus, Africans venerate the mother earth. They offer prayers to it before farming, organize festivals after harvest and develop moral laws (taboos) to enhance biodiversity. Some of the traditional methods Boaten highlights include, days of rest known as taboo days, the law of leaving a distance of about 30 m to the stream or river when clearing a land for planting, days of no fishing for those living in the coastal area, long periods of no fishing in the lagoons, the farming system (fallow system), farm implements and sacred groves. [Gbenda \(2006, p. 3\)](#) shares similar thoughts about the Igbo thus:

Land in many Igbo communities in Nigeria belongs to the clans and not the individuals. The individuals are holding the land in trust for the clan which consists of the living, living dead and the unborn members. This has enhanced the ideal of sharing and caring for nature. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, "ala" is the mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and custodian of public morality in association with the ancestors. Farmers take permission from her before they till the land.

Moreover, [Mawere \(2013\)](#) considers Zimbabwe in his study of traditional environment conservation strategies in pre-colonial Africa. Lamenting the inadequate attention paid to traditional strategies of environmental conservation, Mawere argues that the traditional strategies can complement the contemporary scientific conservative strategies adopted in Zimbabwe today. From his explanation, these strategies include, among many others, *zvierwa/zviera* (taboos), *unhu* (ubuntu), *ngano* (folktales), *mitupo* (totemism), as well as selling the idea that natural resources are common property.

5.3. *Other Examples from African Diaspora Religions*

[Beyer \(2021\)](#) mentions African Diaspora religions include "Santeria", also known as *Lacumi* or *Regla de Ocha*, developed primarily in Cuba. "Candomble", also known as *Macumba*, is similar to Santeria in origin but developed in Brazil. In Portuguese, *Umbanda* grew out of Candomble in the late-19th century, and *Vodou* developed primarily in Haiti and New Orleans.

Haitian Vodou, according to the author, is an African Diaspora religion, which was developed in Haiti between the 16th and 19th centuries by slaves of Central and West Africa shipped to the island of Hispaniola. It blended the African traditional religion with Christianity. [Desmangles \(1990\)](#) states that some of those who reject Vodou acknowledge its close associations with Haitian identity. This religion has not only spread beyond Haiti to places like Puerto Rico, Cuba and Dominican Republic but also to the U.S. and France.

Like its counterpart African Traditional Religion, the African Diaspora religion is very close to nature, just as Igbo traditional religion. It is nature-friendly, with conservation methods such as those of African and Igbo Traditional Religion, such as taboos on economic

trees, days of rest, a traditional bush fallow system, African folklores and sacred lands. For example, in the Vodou religion, trees are held sacred. They are not to be cut down. They are the abodes of the spirits, and it is a taboo to cut them. There are folklores that are passed from generation to generation to teach the younger generation the need to revere these trees. The trees, on the other hand, help to preserve the ecosystem. [Tarter \(2015\)](#) puts it this way:

Trees are important dwelling place for the spirits of the Vodou pantheon. I describe arboreal rituals dedicated to the veneration of tree-residing spirits, taboos against cutting sacred trees, conflicting taboos against planting certain trees and a ceremony for removing a spirit from one tree and placing it in another. After discussing common folk beliefs about particular tree species and examining associations between these species and individual spirits, I suggest that a rapid decrease of trees in Haiti mandated the ceremony for removing a spirit from a tree and placing it somewhere else.

[Weber \(2018\)](#) writes “that the historical adaptability and accommodation of Haitian Vodou practices may provide the basis for an eco-friendly approach to natural resource management and a renewed spiritualized view of nature.” Weber’s argument agrees with this work and that of other studies ([Godwin 2012](#); [Boaten 1998](#)). This is buttressed by [Boaten \(1998\)](#) when he writes that the African, through his relationship with nature (which is usually clothed in religion and in turn results in reverent attitudes towards nature), has developed a body of knowledge that has eventually made him the caretaker of his environment. The evidence from the oral personal communication confirms the position of the above author.

The researchers observe a pattern in the belief and practices of the Igbo people in relation to taboo and totem. The oral personal communications also give credence to the insinuations that Igbo beliefs in relation to ecosystem preservation have been greatly influenced and compromised as a result of Christianity, urban conurbation and modernity.

The results of research question three were presented in [Table 3 \(Figure 3\)](#), showing ways the religio-cultural practices can be deployed to enhance ecosystem preservation. According to E. E. (Personal Interview, 24 May 2022), Christian beliefs see the practices as heathen, thus discouraging its adherents from participating. Notably, urbanization witnesses the movement of people away from their rural villages to urban areas, and the effect is that they, to a large extent, unlearn their traditional beliefs, while, at the same time, do not strictly adhere to the existing beliefs of their new settlement. More so, the younger generation see the religio-cultural practices as backward, archaic and repugnant, which necessitates the question of what can be done differently without necessarily erasing or uprooting the people’s belief.

Table 3. Ways the Igbo Religio-Cultural Practices can be Deployed to Enhance Ecosystem Preservation.

Variables	n	%	Total
Ways the Igbo Religio-Cultural Practices can be Deployed to Enhance Ecosystem Preservation			
Informal cultural education	78	94.0	83
Ecosystem activism through social groups, example, age grade.	72	86.7	83
Advocacy by religious and non-governmental organizations.	69	83.1	83
Grassroots mobilization by traditional rulers as custodians of culture.	76	91.6	83
Introduction of relevant environmental cultural practices in schools’ curriculum.	75	90.4	83
Tourism development of heritage and cultural sites.	73	88.0	83

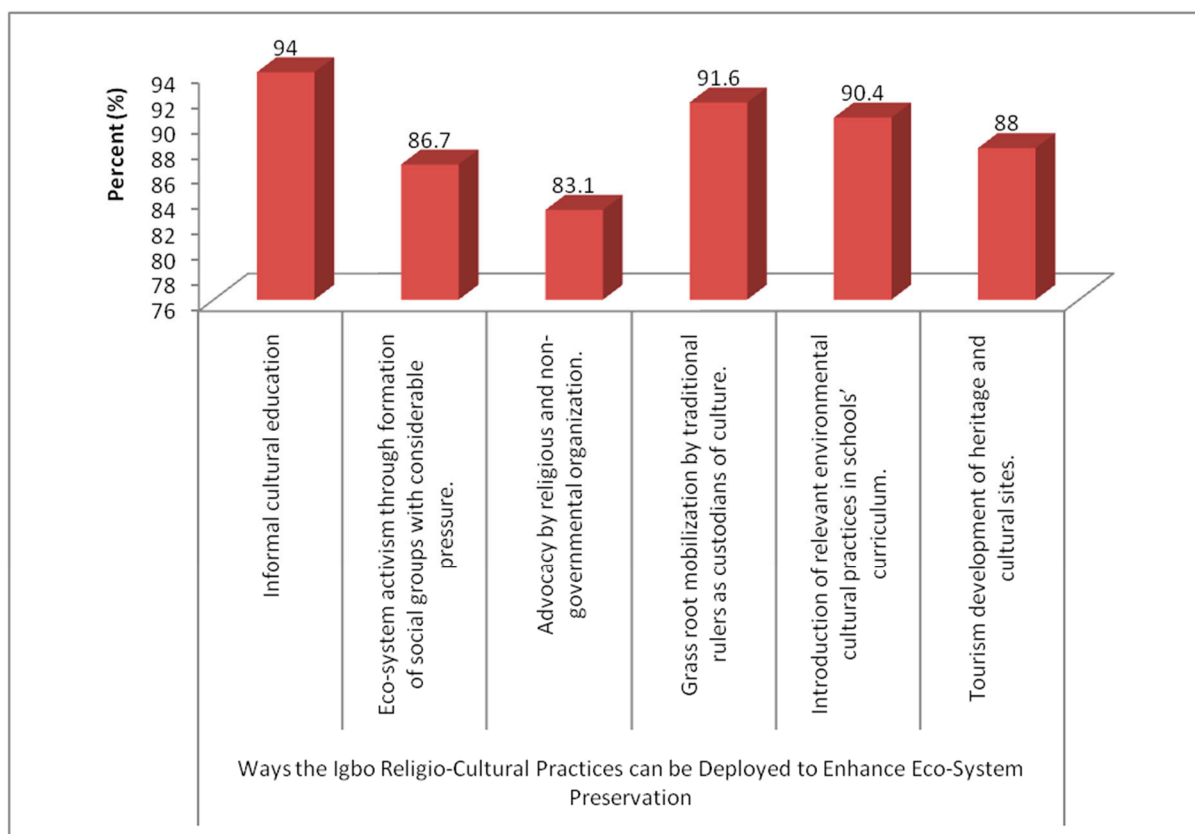


Figure 3. Ways the Igbo Religio-Cultural Practices can be Deployed to Enhance Ecosystem Preservation.

5.4. The Re-Imagination

The thrust of research question three is to examine how the Igbo beliefs could be deployed differently for possible better results. To achieve this, two basic facts are pivotal to the discussion. First, all humans equally face the consequences of environmental degradation, regardless of religious bias and any other bias. Second, the natural world, as interpreted and perceived in a peculiar way by the Igbo people, can be perceived and interpreted differently by others, but one potential factor towards sustainable ecosystem is being objective and openminded towards all perceptions.

5.5. Informal and Formal Environmental Cultural Education

Informal cultural education is the first item in table three and has the highest percentage score of 94.0. This is quite significant as it relates the idea that the younger generation need to understand and appreciate the world around them for sustainability. For a grasp of the religio-cultural practices of the Igbo people in relation to eco-preservation, massive, objective, value-based and bias-free informal cultural education or traditional ecological knowledge is very crucial. It helps in inculcating the value of mutual interdependence with the natural world.

Alaribe (2015) advocates culturally based indigenous environmental education, an environmental education pedagogy that draws from indigenous worldviews. This respects and honors epistemological traditions, which stream through experiential interaction with local ecologies. In a similar vein, item five in Table 3 is the introduction of relevant environmental cultural practices in schools' curriculum. It has a percentage score of 90.4; both items deal with cultural education in relation to the ecosystem. Informal and formal cultural environmental education of the younger generation is germane. It could be achieved through folklore, fireplace tales, tales by moonlight and the introduction of environmental, value-based themes drawn from our immediate culture into basic and high school curricula. Additionally, taking the target group around the cultural heritage sites

such as caves, hills, streams, sacred places, et cetera, would contribute immensely to the learning experience. [Matos et al. \(2022\)](#) support this view that direct contact with nature is crucial for deepening young people's interest in biodiversity. [Zeyer and Kelsey \(2013\)](#) are of a different view that environmental education can have emotional implications such as despair (or some kind of ecophobia) on children and young people when they are taught to appreciate the environmental crisis. They are of the opinion that such emotion can cause withdrawal, instead of seeking a solution to the problem. They propose a cultural approach, thus:

A cultural approach suggests that environmental education teaching should be understood as a form of "cultural brokering" in which the teacher attempts to understand the life world cultures of his or her students and to effect change by bridging, linking or mediating between those cultures and the dominant culture of environmental education inherent within the school curriculum. Students would not be assimilated to eco-scientific culture rather the teacher would abstain from teaching eco-scientism as a comprehensive doctrine of environmental education. Here we see a close link to other approaches like the fostering of informal reasoning on socio-scientific issues ([Sadler 2004](#)), which could enrich the talk about environmental protection with conversations about the nature of science, about complexity, and applied ethics.

[Marouli \(2002\)](#) proposes Multicultural Environmental Education, comprising of multifaceted concepts such as cultural diversity, culture and environment, amongst others, couched in several layered processes. In Russia, for example, part of the environmental education involves the integration of the activities of natural areas of preferential protection (NAPPs) into a federal target program of government ([Danilina 2006](#)). These areas of preferential protection are preserved by national laws which are similar to natural reserved areas in Igbo land protected by totems and taboos. The overall idea behind environmental awareness and education can be vividly grasped in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/United Nations Environmental Program (UNESCO-UNEP). Part of the focus areas are included to enhance citizens' appreciation of the environment, resulting in positive environmental behavioral change ([Bamberg and Moser 2007](#); [Walsh et al. 2014](#)). This can be achieved, as proposed by this study, via informal and formal environmental cultural education.

5.6. Grassroot Mobilization for Eco-Activism/Advocacy

Grassroot mobilization by traditional rulers as custodians of culture scored 91.6 percent, probably because the respondents believe so much in the capacity of these leaders to command the respect and loyalty of their subjects, which is natural in the Igbo setting. However, this has to be properly channeled, especially as it concerns the subject of our discussion, to the effect that they mobilize their subjects to directly harness and repackage some of their cultural practices in a manner that it is relevant to the modern man. Items 2 and 3 in Table 3, which are ecosystem activism and advocacy, scored 86.7 and 83.1, respectively. Both may be slightly different but greatly related; activism could simply be the practice of taking direct and militant action (within the ambits of law) to achieve a goal, such as political, social, religious demonstration/protest or strike in support of or in opposition to an issue in order to achieve a positive result. Advocacy, on the other hand, is active support of an idea or cause, especially the act of pleading or arguing for something. The only difference between the two lies in the intensity of action taken. Advocacy is mild, but both require tact and subtle skill to avoid hostility. Historically, systematic environmental movements started in the late 19th century, as a direct response against the pollution of industrialization. The foremost was the society formed in 1865, which championed rural preservation against the encroachments of industrialization; see Canon Hardwicke (archived). The likes of Canon Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley, in conjunction with John Ruskin and Octavia Hill, championed a successful campaign against the construction of a railway meant to carry slate from the quarries, which would have devastated the valleys of

Newlands and Ennerdale. Their activism saw the birth of the Lake District Defense Society, which later became the Friends of the Lake District. Such activism continued in America, India and other parts of the world and through the post-war experience to the 21st century and beyond.

Today, new forms of eco-activism include “tree sitting”, in which the protester sits in a tree in an attempt to stop its removal or to impede the demolition of an area. The longest and most famous tree sitter according to Henry (2006) is Julia Butterfly Hill, who spent 738 days in a California Redwood, saving a three-acre tract of forest. In Nigeria, there are eco-activism groups such as Friends of the Earth International (Nigeria group), Green Habitat Initiative and Environmental Rights Action.

5.7. Age Grade Involvement

The age grade system has strong bearing in Igbo culture as a social-engineering mechanism that has survived any form of religious sentiment, modernization, westernization and urbanization (Ohuabunwa 2017). The researchers believe that the system is a viable tool in eco-activism and advocacy because of the long-established discipline and organization associated with the system. The age grade system is just as its name—the grouping of persons of a given adult age bracket according to their age/experience (Nkama 2022) and identified by a name peculiar to them for the purpose of facilitating development in the community. They are commissioned at a certain age and they retire at a stipulated age. This may differ from one Igbo community to another, but the principle and practice are similar.

The age grades feature prominently and profitably in so many areas of community needs, such as in security, economic, political, religious, cultural and educational concerns. Practically, they build schools, markets, health care centers, bridges, and even lobby in corridors of power for issues of community interest. In most Igbo communities, they are often looked upon for solutions in sensitive issues. With these capabilities, the age grades can truly extend their action to eco-activism/advocacy. They can undertake massive tree planting projects and afforestation, sponsor debates and bills in state and national assemblies for environmentally friendly laws, and lead campaigns to stop any harmful industrialization effects or mining impacts on the environment, just as that led by Canon Hardwick. The professionals amongst them such as journalists, film makers, medical doctors, lawyers and others from different walks of life can bring their professional know-how to bear in eco-advocacy and activism.

5.8. Ecotourism

Tourism development of heritage and cultural sites is the 6th item in Table 3. It scored a percentage of 88.0, which is quite significant. Tourism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (3rd ed.), is travel for pleasure or business; it is also the theory and practice of touring and the business of attracting, accommodating and entertaining tourists, etc. The last meaning, to a large extent, reflects the researcher’s idea, especially in relation to ecotourism, though it has often been argued that tourism generally can change culture, and certain traditions may be put aside to accommodate tourists.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES 2015) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of the local people and involves interpretation and education”. The three current principles of ecotourism have been revised and they are that ecotourism:

- i. Is non-consumptive/non-extractive
- ii. Creates an ecological conscience
- iii. Holds eco-centric values and ethics in relation to nature.

The following principles of ecotourism according to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES 2015) should assuage the fears of self-interest/gain and change in host culture commonly expressed about ecotourism:

- It minimizes physical, social, behavioral and psychological impacts.
- Builds environmental and cultural awareness, and respect

- Provides positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Produces direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Generates financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Delivers memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climates.
- Designs, constructs and operates low-impact facilities
- Recognizes the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in the community and works in partnership with them to create empowerment.

5.9. Implications of Findings for Policy Makers and Stakeholders in Eco-Preservation

The researchers advocate that Igbo communities and policy makers on the Nigerian tourism Board explore the avenue of ecotourism development to preserve the natural environment; it has to be small-scale and locally run. It promises the following:

- i. Providing incentive for conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity, while also helping to protect the natural/cultural heritage.
- ii. Helping to fight poverty, which is a great enemy fighting sustainable rural development. This could be achieved by creating employment opportunities for the local people in the ecotourism sector, who would serve as interpreters, tour guards, facilities maintenance officers, hospitality experts and other roles.
- iii. Promoting greater understanding and appreciation for nature, local society and Igbo culture.

5.10. Suggestion for Further Research

Following from this study, it is suggested that further research be undertaken in ecotourism and the preservation of nature in Igbo land. Additionally, more research attention is needed on the influence of Igbo beliefs and practices on population growth and family size as major contributors to ecosystem degradation.

6. Conclusions

The paper, so far, has recalled and redefined the traditional Igbo religious beliefs and practices that can enhance eco-preservation. The analysis and discussion segments of this research gave attention to recalling and redefinition, respectively. It was identified that, to a great extent, these beliefs and practices had hitherto thrived on a religious cosmological tripod, including: a unified view of reality, community consciousness and preservation of human life. These were found to be expressed through totems, taboos and general prohibitions but are now being threatened by factors such as Christianity, westernization, urban conurbation and modernity. This paper identified that the driving force behind the Igbo religio-cultural practices for ecosystem preservation is the principle of mutual interdependence, connectedness and communion with the natural world inherent in their worldview. It is the position of this paper that, for a sustainable ecosystem to be achieved in the contemporary modern world, the younger generation should be integrated in the process through direct informal and formal cultural education. This is achievable in schools at various levels, through social media and family socialization processes. This owes largely to the fact that there is a nexus between indigenous cultural/cosmological knowledge and ecosystem preservation/sustainability. Proven evidence in the research shows that indigenous environmental/cultural knowledge, activism/advocacy and small-scale/ locally managed ecotourism projects are some viable ways to sustain nature in the 21st century.

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