

Religio-Cultural Conservation of Water Bodies in Igumale Sub-Culture of the Idoma in Nigeria

Solomon Ochepe Oduma-Aboh

Department Of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kaduna State University, Tafawa Balewa Way,
P.M.B 2339, Kaduna. Kaduna State- Nigeria

* Email of the corresponding author: solomonoduma@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the conservation of water bodies in the context of rivers in Idomaland and from the study area of Igumale sub-culture. Today, there is the problem of water contamination and its attendant health issues to mankind. The paper observes that water is fundamental to human and other forms of life in the universe. There is, therefore a fundamental connection between water and human health and life. Water is sacred to the traditional Africans in general and Idoma in particular. There is the problem of water contamination and its attendant effects to health. Worst still, is the problem of sustainability of the environment through water management practices. These have informed the study. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines water conservation beliefs and practices in the context of rivers in Igumale. The paper argues that trado-religious practices could assist in the management of water, or and water bodies especially rivers; something most needed in the environmental conservation. It analyzes certain religious issues that emanate from the presence of rivers in the area and how the host community has used them to conserve the environment as regards water bodies. In some cases these efforts manifest as *iho*-prohibitions or taboos; especially the prohibitions of any conduct that may deplete and degrade water bodies as important components of the environment. Such prohibitions are often imbued with religious sanctions and ritual colourations so as to instill fear and corresponding obedience to the dictates of such *iho*, taboos.

Keywords: Religio-Cultural, Conservation, Water bodies, Igumale Sub-culture, the Idoma

1. Introduction

It is important to note that *enyi*, water is what sustains all life forms on earth and the *okpa*, river, stream, pond and the like is one of the sources of water. This imperativeness is arguably attested to by Scientists as a natural resource that keeps alive all living organisms on earth, including man. This underscores its importance, without the exception of the Igumale sub-culture area of Idomaland. *Enyi*, water is a chemical substance with the chemical formula H_2O . A water molecule contains one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms connected by covalent bonds. Water is a liquid at ambient conditions, but it often coexists on earth with its solid state, ice and gaseous state, water vapour or steam. Water also exists in a liquid crystal state near hydrophilic surfaces (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water).

Water could be got from or found in the different places, such as rivers, streams, ponds and the likes. *Enyi*, could also be defined as liquid without colour, smell or taste that falls as rain, as found in lakes, rivers and seas and is used for drinking, washing and so on. It could be an area of water, especially a lake, river, sea or ocean (Hornby 2001). This paper is not just discussing water in its literary sense but in the sense of water as a stream, pond, and most importantly as river.

The concept of *okpa* (river) is closely linked with *enyi* because it could also be got from there. For the purpose of this study, the *okpa yi okpokwu* (River *Okpokwu*) is the focus of this study in terms of trado-religious techniques or practices in the conservation of the river as the main source of water. River is a natural flow of water that continues in a long line across land to the sea or ocean (Hornby 2001). A river is a natural watercourse, usually fresh water, flowing towards an ocean, a lake, a sea or another river. In few cases, a river simply flows into the ground or dries up completely before reaching another body of water. Small rivers may also be called by several other names including stream, creek, brook and the likes. There are no official definitions for generic terms, such as river, as applied to geographic features, although in some countries or communities a stream may be defined by its size. Many names for small rivers are specific to geographic location (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River).

From the above definitions of river, the *okpa yi okpokwu* (River *Okpokwu*) could pass for a river because the course is from Ogbadibo Local Government Area flowing through Okpokwu Local Government Area and then to Igumale in Ado Local Government Area; all in the South of Benue State. It flows from Igumale to Ijibam and then to Ekile districts and to the Cross River, which emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. The Igumale people have been living, according to oral sources for about seven hundred years at their present location by the bank of the River *Okpokwu*.

Furthermore, the River *Okpokwu*, is the major source of water for both domestic and agricultural uses, for purification and cleansing rites and other sundry uses among the Igumale people of Idoma society. But in

recent times, the world over the threat of water pollution or, and contamination is on the rise through unsustainable practices by human beings. *Ole o'gbo gbo* (conservation) involves the use of natural products and energy in a way that does not harm the environment (Hornby 2001). Therefore it could mean to maintain, support or endure. Sustainability is the capacity to endure. For humans, it is the long-term maintenance of responsibility, which has environment, economic and social dimensions and encompasses the concept of stewardship, the responsible management of resources (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability).

Conservation suggests the responsible use of resources and in this case, the River *Okpokwu* in a manner that it will not be harmed. This is because the river is part of the *Igbe gble* (environment). Environment could be defined as the natural world in which people live (Hornby 2001). The environment is the surrounding of an organism in the place where it lives. The term or concept embraces all those things external to an organism, which influence its life in the place where it lives (Fatubarin 2009). Water or, and river forms one of the component of the environment – the abiotia or physical components and they are non-living things.

Generally speaking, the Igumale people of Idoma land like most sub-cultures within the Idoma nation refers to the different categories of water bodies as *okpa*. Streams are referred to as *okpa ikpoyi* and rivers, oceans and seas and the likes are referred to as *okpa enesi*. There is no English language equivalent for the different categories of water bodies, but simply referred to as big or small water body. In essence, the River *Okpokwu* could be regarded as *okpa enesi* (big river).

Amongst the Igumale people there exists beliefs that regard the majority of water bodies as deities, notably among them being the *enyionobi*, evil water or river, and the *Okpokwu River*. No wonder, because of the sacredness attached to water in general and the river in particular, it was thus and is still the major instrument of oath-taking. It is a common saying in Idoma land in general and Igumale sub-culture area in particular, to hear *ko' lo' kpa gwa* meaning literally that the person in question should drink water ,oath-taking. The belief is that, water can cleanse or condemn an innocent and guilty person respectively. The concept of water or, and river cannot be over-emphasised in the sub-culture area under study. The importance of the concept to all living organisms on earth underscores the reason why people are named after such water bodies. For instance, in Igumale one could find individual bearing the name *Okpokwu*, after the River *Okpokwu*, according to Agbo Okpokwu, a respondent.

2. Igumale Sub-Culture

The Idoma is one of the ten largest ethnic groups in Nigeria dispersed in a number of states in the country. But the focus of this paper is on the Idoma people of Benue State. By the 1963 National Population Census numbered up to 684,880. Based on that figure, the Directorate of information, office of the Governor, Benue State of Nigeria indicates that Idoma people are the second largest ethnic group in Benue State. They live in an area of 13,015 kilometers, covering: Otukpo, Okpokwu, Oju, Ado and Apa Divisions, with Otukpo as their main town. Idoma land is bounded on the North by the Benue River, on the West by the Tiv, on the south by Nsukka and Abakaliki areas respectively. Also, on the East reside the Igala people of Kogi State. Most of the Idoma area is inland South of the Benue, 72 kilometers East of the confluence with the Niger River (qtd in Igboaka 2007).

According to R. G. Armstrong “the country is nearly all ‘Orchard bush though changing into the forest at the beginning of the rain, along the southern fringes of the territory”. It is very fertile and hence, there is an annual cycle of hoe farming during the rains and hunting and bush fire during the dry season. In the southern part of the region bordering Enugu and Cross River States stretches of thick forest with palm trees, and many other economic trees, which provide timber for commercial purposes (qtd in Igboaka 2007). But currently, the Idoma people are spread across nine big local government areas of Benue State comprising Ado, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Agatu, Apa, Otukpo, Ohimini, Obi and Oju.

The language of the Idoma people is known as Idoma as stated by Armstrong, belongs to the Kwa language groups. The Idoma language is very rich, with five main dialects, which are categorized into the following: The central or Otukpo dialect spoken in Otukpo, Adoka, Ugboju, Oglewu, and Onyangede districts; The Igumale dialect spoken in Igumale and Agila districts; The Agatu dialect spoken in Agatu and Ochekwu districts; The Okpoga dialect spoken in Okpoga district, (It is closer to the Igumale – Agila dialects, but not the same), and the western dialect spoken in Otukpa and other districts in Ogbadibo (qtd in Igboaka 2007).

The geographical spread of Idoma people is indeed very wide and diversified. The Afor in the Nasarawa, the Akweya-Yachi in both Akpa and Ogoja districts, as well as the Igede, all speak a language relatively close to that of the Idoma. Taking into account the fact that these groups are linguistically very near to each other, one can affirm that people speaking Idoma are spread from Keana, North of Benue River, to the region of Ogoja, and even further south to the bank of the Cross River, north of Ikom. The Etulo (*Utur*) also represent another isolated group near Katsina-Ala, in Tiv country. The Idoma people, as already mentioned are divided into numerous clans each with its particular history. Therefore, the Idoma unity is essentially a linguistic unity, and not a political one, as is the case with the Yoruba or the Igala, united into large kingdoms, whereas the Idoma language is essentially composed of many and varied dialects, as stated by Armstrong (qtd in Igboaka 2007).

Similarly, historically the Idoma people are said to have migrated from the Old Kwararafa Empire to their present location, though settling at Apa. Erim's study, enables us to follow step by step the settlement of each Idoma group at its present day location. This historical research calls for some observations. In the first place one can consider the pressure exercised by the Fulani of the north as being the deep underlying cause of the intermixing of these populations. This Muslim influence was particularly strong in the beginning of the 19th century. Secondly, these historical considerations explain the fact that today's Idoma society consists of a heterogeneous number of population, speaking the same language. Hence, we are able to comprehend more clearly, the symbolic and cultural world of the Idoma. The basic unit of the Idoma cultural structure was the compound. Armstrong shows that the compound comprises the man, his wife, their children and his sons. The family (*ole*) occupied a group of huts around an open space, one hut for each wife, one for the owner of the compound. There were various other huts consisting of club houses, granaries, grinding table and so on. These facilities were necessary to make the compound, *ole* a self-supporting unit. This setting is in line with what is obtainable in other african societies, the family does not consist of only parents and children, but rather, it includes the grand parents, uncles, aunts and others. These also include brothers and sisters who have their own children and other immediate relatives which anthropologists call the extended family (qtd in Igboaka 2007). The father or the head of the family exercised responsibility in the social, political, economic and religious life of the associates. Nzanuwa rightly points out with regard to the people of East of the Niger that:

The nuclear family is the smallest or lowest unit of political organization. The father or the elder male is the head politically, socially, economically and religiously. ...As the custodian of the family tradition and ancestral cult, the head acted as the intermediary, between the family's ancestors and the living members (qtd in Igboaka 2007).

Armstrong stated that Idoma land comprises twenty-two districts. Districts could be called true areas or regions whose lineages and clans feel they are related genetically and they are of the same people or belong together. This relationship is very strongly and formally expressed by the totemic animals associated with a district which the people involved are forbidden to eat (qtd in Igboaka 2007). Erim, maintains: "in pre-colonial Idoma land, there were variety of totems". The Idoma regard such an animal as *ihó*-forbiddances. The totems are bird or fish, which the people use as a symbol of their oneness or express their genetically relatedness. Such totemic animals include the civet cat (*anwu*) the leopard (*ejuh*), the black monkey (*eka*) the mud-fish (*egbe*), among others (1981). In the Idoma worldview, *Owoicho*, God is transcendental, all excelling, supreme. He is also looked upon as *Owo no fie owo dudu*, omniscient. But since He is too physically removed from the world, there must be an intermediary. It is the Oche who is therefore invested with god-like qualities and made the ruler of the community. Evidence indicates that the Oche was the priest-chief of nearly all the cults in the community. The Idoma religion consisted of three essential elements. The first was the *owoicho* (the Supreme God), the second *aje* (the outstanding earth), and the third *alekwu* (ancestral spirits). Although the *owoicho* was recognized as the creative supernatural force, yet because of the physical distance between the Idoma and God, the people thought it necessary to look for a substitute which acted as an intermediary between them and the Supreme Being. This intermediary was the *aje* through which God transmitted his force. In time, *aje* became sacred to the Idoma. In some Idoma traditions, *aje* is considered more important than God (Erim 1981).

Erim posits that so important was *aje* in the Idoma religious belief that each kindred group established an earth shrine within its *ojira* (kindred playground). The chief priest of the *aje* cult was the Oche. In this capacity he is referred to as the *adalekwu* (father of the dead). In Idoma belief, the dead members of the kindred group were paradoxically alive. In other words, death in the corporeal sense did not remove the dead from kindred membership as such. Rather, certain classes of the ancestors were considered vital and living members of the community. Consequently, they were endowed with certain rights and responsibilities. The Oche, in his priestly role, was considered a vital link between the *alekwu* and the living community (1981).

In a similar vein, Igumale is one of the twenty-two districts of Idomaland with her distinct sub-culture. The Igumale people originated from Kwararafa Kingdom and migrated through Ibi in the present day Taraba State as a result of the Fulani Jihadist wars. They settled at a place called *Olefu* somewhere in the present day Cross-River State but had to leave almost immediately as a result of the hostility by their host. They then moved to a place called *Itsikila* in the present day Ebonyi State. There, they were equally met with stiff hostility by their host. There was a war between the people of Agila and their Igbo neighbours and the people of Igumale supported the people of Agila resulting in the defeat of the Igbo people. Soon afterwards, the people of Agila revealed their success story to the Igbos who in turn connived with the people of Agila and engaged a war with the people of Igumale. This war lasted for only three days and the people of Igumale moved to their present settlement. The real meaning of Igumale is *Igwu*, Guinea Corn from *Ale*, *Ale* being the founder of the kingdom (oral interview with Otsapa Otsapa at Igumale).

The administrative structure of Igumale is similar to the Old Oyo Empire, where there are checks and balances. At the head of this structure the executive council is the *Otsapa* of Igumale who is the chairman of

Igumale Traditional Council. He is assisted by the Traditional Prime Minister – the *Achadu* of Igumale. Other members of the executive council are: The *Ogori*, the *Otumote*, the *Unoja* (Head of Masquerades), the *Odenebi*, the *Unogwu Olokwu*, and the *Otse-Ogbee* (oral interview with Otsapa Otsapa at Igumale).

Unlike the convention seven days that make one week, the people of Igumale have a peculiar week that is made up of five days but correspond with the conventional seven days. The first day is *Ogbozu* this is a day that is set aside for the performance of second burial ceremonies especially during the dry season when all farm produce have been harvested. The *Orogbozu* is the second day of the Igumale traditional week. The *Okonokpa* is the third day of the week and is the day set aside for the celebrations of various festivals by the people. It is a day for merry making while *Ulayi* is the fourth day of the traditional week. The *Egwu* is the last day of the week, The market day is for buying and selling, a day that is set aside as a rest day and a day for other forms of interactions. (oral interview with Otsapa Otsapa at Igumale).

Various festivals are celebrated by the people of Igumale each having its significations. The major festivals include: The *Egbidog Ono* - This is celebrated in the month of May to mark the end of harvest of farm products and to appease the earth goddess for a successful or bumper harvest; *Aje Opoopa* - celebrated in June to mark the beginning of the planting season and to appease the god of the soil for a successful farming season; *Akitakpa-Oroja* - The name *Akitakpa* refers to the spirits of slaves whose duty it is to cleanse the society of any ills celebrated in July. It is a kind of traditional sports where the *akitakpa* masquerades from the various clans compete in a race at the village central play ground; and *Ujo* Festival, this is celebrated in the month of September. It is the greatest crowd-pulling festival celebrated in Igumale. It commemorates past victories in wars fought by the people of Igumale in the course of their migrations until their settlement at their present settlement. It is the great gathering of the people where laws are promulgated or reviewed and handed over to the people (oral interview with Otsapa Otsapa at Igumale).

Igumale has one of the richest and most interesting history in Idoma land which makes it the toast of historians and researchers. Its proud Apa ancestry is given general expression in folklores, songs, dances as well as names and other semblances, which are indigenous to the Igala, Jukun, Etulo, Igbira and Allago all of the Middle-Belt. The exact location of Apa is a subject of lively scholarly controversy. The series of historical monuments to which the various ethnic groups that once formed the great Kwararafa Empire had destroyed some essential details to memory. Usually a place around the present Wukari area are forming the Jukun Kingdom on the Lower Benue Basin is assigned the location of Apa (oral interview with Otsapa Otsapa at Igumale).

3.Theoretical Framework

The African is said to be highly religious in the sense that everything he does is guided by the hopes and fears of not only the living but the departed, the gods or divinities and the Omnipotent Being. His everyday life is pervaded by thoughts that are directed by taboos and the sacred, all in keeping with the desire to be in line with the entire existence – ontological structure. The configuration of all entities in existence constitutes ontology. The African ontology on its part is one that consists of interconnections which result in a massive chain of inter-relationship. All existents are bound up into one by a pervading cord that maintains the balance and which keeps things in their proper places. For instance, all human beings, spirits and the entire cosmos are seen as being intricately interwoven in a mesh that is called reality (Ozumba 1995).

In addition, the concomitant of this view is that there are no disparate units – all entities are knitted together in a determinant manner. Any upsetting of the position of one entity immediately affects the positioning of other entities. The African innately realizes the eternal link that binds him and other existents. He is aware that there is a balance which he has to maintain. That is, that he has to obey the principle of ontological balance which holds that all things are in their right places, and that, any upsetting of the organic whole will require a compensation to redress the balance. In the African belief system, it is held that these compensations are often very devastating and this makes informed men to tread with care. It is against this backdrop that we are going to discuss the conservation of water bodies in Idoma Religio-cultural beliefs and practices.

4.Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Practices of Conservation of Water Bodies in Igumale of the Idoma

The earth is virtually covered with water. A total volume of some 325 million cubic miles (1.4 billion cubic kilometers) covers 71% of the earth's surface. About 97.5% of this volume is the salt water of the oceans and seas. The remaining 2.5% is fresh water – water with a salt content of less than 0.1%. This is the water upon which most terrestrial biota, ecosystems, and humans depend. Of the 2.5%, though, two thirds is bound up in the polar ice caps and glaciers. Thus, only 0.77% of all water is found in lakes, wet lands, rivers, ground water, biota, soil, and the atmosphere (Wright 2008).

In addition, streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, swamps, estuaries, groundwater, bays, oceans and the atmosphere all contain water, and they all represent ecosystem capital – goods and services vital to human interests. They provide drinking water, water for industries and water to irrigate crops. Water or river provides energy through hydroelectric power and control flooding by absorbing excess water. They provide transportation,

recreation, waste processing, and habitats for aquatic plants and animals. Fresh water is a vital resource for all land ecosystems, modulating the climate through evaporation and essential global warming (when fresh water is in the atmosphere as water vapour). During the last two centuries, many of these uses and some threats to them, have led us to construct a huge infrastructure designed to bring water under control.

In the developing world inclusive of the study area, the reverse is the case. By contrast, 1.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water, 2.6 billion do not have access to adequate sanitation services, and more than 1.7 million deaths each year are traceable to waterborne diseases, mostly in children under five years of age. In addition, because of the infrastructure that is used to control water, whole seas are being lost, rivers are running dry, millions of people have been displaced to make room for reservoirs, groundwater aquifers are being pumped down, and disputes over water have raised tensions from local to international levels. Fresh water is a limiting resource in many parts of the world including the study area and is certain to become even more as the twenty-first century unfolds (Wright 2008).

The connection of religion and water dates back to the beginning of human life. Water is first a significant element of the universal order. Wherever they are found, waters are often bound up with divine powers. Africans not only validate the intrinsic worth of water but also recognize water as a significant part to a whole design where the prevailing principle is interdependency as opposed to hierarchy and, of custodianship. Consequently, healing is an inherent value of water; this is especially true of waters that are attributed to gods and goddesses. Curative and preventive healing in addition to regeneration are the inherent properties of such waters. This essential quality of water informs its use for healing purposes (Oyewole 2010).

In addition, this African conception of human –nature-divine interconnectedness is reflected in their respect for every part of nature. Every aspect of earth is crucial to the whole design of earth community in the African worldview, including water or, and rivers amongst others. For the African people, the principle of intrinsic worth is inextricable from the principle of interconnectedness in the exploration of any ecosystem. From the religious perspective therefore, rivers and streams are avenues where ritual, and myth; migration stories and identity construction for individuals and communities are derived. Often times, rivers and streams are construed as being imbued with divine personalities and abilities. Rivers and streams often display mythical connections with the origin or migration stories of the host communities and may have profound influence on the people's identity construction and social relations. Paradigms for gender and power relations are usually derived from such oral narratives. Also shrines and monuments are situated at riversides and serve as a location for solidarity and the reinforcement of the close link between humans, nature and the divine (Oyewole 2010). Anyacho (2005) states that:

Africans view the universe as consisting of two major parts; the visible and the invisible parts. The visible part is inhabited by men, while the invisible part is the abode of spirits. The spirits are invisible beings which are capable of assuming different shape and forms when they want to reveal themselves to man. They are believed to be created by the Supreme Being and as such are subordinate to him. One of the classes of spirits is nature spirits. They are personification of some powers and are associated with those natural objects and forces of sky namely the sun, the moon, stars, rain, storm and wind. These natural objects are closely connected with weather and are believed to influence man through it.

In addition, the earth spirits which are a sub-group of nature spirits are associated with the things and forces of the universe. They are believed to be the nature spirits closest to man due to their location on the earth. They are closely connected with water and water bodies, such as rivers; and as such they play significant roles in the communities and are sources of livelihood. People speak of them as having human characteristics and being able to appear to man in human form. Some stories from people who claim to have encountered them always give the picture that they appear mostly as an old woman except the marine spirit (water spirit) whose dazzling beauty and charm have been reported by some fishermen.

The main duties of man include living in a manner that would maintain spiritual equilibrium between him and the unseen powers in the environment – be it water bodies and trees. It is also to maintain cordial relationship between him and his fellow men. Man is to obey all the rules that enhance and foster symbiotic relationship between him and other creatures which though lower but have powers capable of injuring him (Anyacho, Religion 2004). Giving credence to the above fact, Neiers (1965) comments that:

Man and ... (his) environment interpenetrate each other by a kind of osmosis, in an infinite fusion... cosmic unit, personality stretches itself out beyond bodily venture and echoes all that surrounds it, vibrating intensely in its contact with the world and with other personalities... the being and its milieu form a totality of which the break would leave the being rent and mutilated.

The subject-matter, as stated earlier on is been addressed from the Igumale sub-culture area of the Idoma society. According to Olaniran, the first manifestation of culture in environment management is the conservation and preservation of ecosystems due to religious considerations (2003). This assertion is very true of the Igumale sub-

culture area of Idoma society that view and treat water or, and river in this light. The *okpa* is treated as sacred by the people. The surrounding environment is protected in the belief that the river goddess and god lives in the forest around the *okpa*. As such logging, cultivation is forbidden thereby enhancing the conservation of the water bodies. A respondent, Philip Ogenyi says there is a taboo (*iho*) in Igumale that forbids the clearing of vegetation for farming right up to the edges of the *okpa*. Farmers are encouraged to leave a strip of land that is about thirty metres, which should not be cleared on both sides of the *Okpa yi Okpokwu* (River *Okpokwu*). The benefit of this conservation method is to checkmate excessive evaporation of the river *Okpokwu*, this has led to the conservation of the water body.

Furthermore, Frank Oduma, a respondent says menstruating women are not allowed to collect or fetch water from the *Okpa yi okpokwu*, because that particular water body provided the main source of drinking water and as such guide against polluting of the River *Okpokwu* from the menstrual flow. This practice is based on the belief that some water bodies are the abode of deities and the prevention of menstruating women guide against the defilement of river deities, gods or goddesses. It may be conjectured that women, who were considered to be the most frequent users of water, were prohibited from entering the vicinity of the River *Okpokwu* when they were menstruating to prevent degradation and conserve this vital human resource as the River *Okpokwu* provides the main source of drinking water.

Another religio-cultural practice is the worshiping of the River *Okpokwu*. The river is treated with reverence and as such there are taboos associated with the usage of the river. This traditional practice has been used to protect the headwaters of the River *Okpokwu* because it serves as portable water source for the Igumale community. A respondent Ozoko Aboh, says that washing and bathing activities are done at the downstream, while fetching of drinking water is done upstream. This is to prevent a situation whereby bathing and washing activities will contaminate the river for drinking purposes. This has been the traditional practice reinforced by taboos and norms.

The Igumale people are very environmentally conscious people in that there are taboos against urinating, defecating, dumping of refuse into the River *Okpokwu*. This is because the people revere and protect the River *Okpokwu* as the source of life and fertility. The repercussions of the *aklokpa* (the river goddess) of the River *Okpokwu*, are very disastrous. The goddess would not take it likely with those misusing or harming the river through very dangerous practices. The divine always encourage purity, which includes purity of the river. The Igumale people are very religious people, their traditional religion permeates every spheres of human endeavour and as such the issue or phenomenon or water conservation through religio-cultural beliefs and practices is not an exception. The aforementioned and discussed religio-cultural beliefs and practices reinforced by taboos are some of the ways that the River *Okpokwu* have been protected and conserved from pollution and over-use which have ensured the conservation of the water bodies by the Igumale people and by implication the Idoma society.

The Idoma Indigenous Religion, which the Igumale sub-culture is part and parcel of, is based purely on divine revelation of the Supreme Being's nature and attributes to humans and the response of humans to the revelations of the Supreme Being. Part of the Supreme Being's self-disclosure to humans is in nature. As Africans pondered on the mysteries of the universe – mountains, forests, animals, plants, and most importantly water, or, and rivers, they put questions before themselves as to the author of and the brain behind these mysteries. They searched for answers to these questions and came to the conclusion that a Super-Sensible Intelligent Being must be responsible for the smooth ordering of the universe. It is, therefore the responsibility of humans to maintain harmony with the cosmos and to create harmonious relationships with fellow beings, fauna, flora, spirits of ancestors, and water or, and rivers in order to sustain perfect harmony with the Supreme Being and his agents (Gbenda 2010).

Moreso, Africans believes that everything we have in this universe was created by the Supreme Being. That explains why everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has a strong spiritual meaning for humans. He created water bodies – rivers, streams, lakes and the likes. The traditional view is therefore, profoundly religious and it forms the basic attitudes that characterize most, if not all, spheres of life. Hence, there is no sharp distinction between the sacred and profane, material and immaterial. Many things on earth are held in great esteem for religious reasons (water or, and rivers), especially where they are thought of being sacred. The awareness of God as the Supreme Being in African societies is very much tied to the notion of god being the maker (creator) of everything that cannot be attributed to humans (Gbenda 2010).

Furthermore, the African's attitude to nature is deeply rooted in the belief that all things were created by the Supreme Being for a harmonious continuity as such; there must be a relationship of mutual obligations between all created things. In African religious thought and philosophy, man is a component of the environment. However, whatever lies outside of man is supporting his existence. Environment is therefore, the basis of human environment (Gbenda 2010). As a follow up of the above is the belief that the cosmos represents an organic unity and within this, the environment is seen as a nurturing mother, sensitive and alive and capable of responding to human action(s).

All natural resources are the provisions of god, made available for the benefit of mankind. Man's duty is to explore, develop and use with moderation all available natural resources including water bodies to enhance well-being. Apenda and Adegga pointed out, nature is created on the principle of balance and all the systems in nature must exist and function in harmony with their balance (2009).

5.The Importance of Water Bodies in Idoma Society

The importance of *enyi* (water) cannot be over-emphasized in the Igumale sub-culture area of Idoma society. *Enyi* (water) in this context have been discussed from the viewpoint of the *okpa yi okpokwu* - River *Okpokwu*. It is primarily the source of water supply for domestic and agricultural purposes. Inhabitants of Igumale depend solely on the River *Okpokwu* for their drinking water and other domestic uses. It is also used for agricultural sector, in the sense that water from the *okpa* (river) is used for irrigation farming and the watering of domestic animals.

Another importance of water is that, it has become an avenue for economic sustenance of the Igumale people. Fishes and their aquatic animals are caught and sold, thus providing a means of livelihood to a good number of persons within the area of study. Sand is also got from the river *okpokwu* to build houses. Those who collect sand from the river sell to those who need it for different building or construction purposes.

Politically, the River *Okpokwu* like most rivers in Idomaland and indeed Nigeria act as boundaries between communities. The River *Okpokwu* acts as a natural boundary demarcation between the study area and Utonkon district or community. Giving credence to this fact, Olademo says rivers have been at the centre of national and international tussles. For example, the river Niger was perceived during the colonial era as demarcating the Christian South and the Muslim North in Nigeria. Again, the Bakassi Peninsula controversy between Nigeria and Cameroon involves some marine boundaries. On the national scene, the various creeks and rivers in the Niger Delta region on which petroleum exploration occur continue to be cause for controversy and tension leading to political unrest in the nation. On such occasions, youths of the area have been known to disturb the multi-national oil companies from going about their normal daily schedule (2010).

Furthermore, the occupation and by implication, professional proficiency of the study area is home to fishermen and others water related professions. The diet of the Igumale people exhibit some level of water foods, for instance, *ebenyi* (fish), *okrika* (crab) and the like. These foods most often than not are found in host communities of rivers in different parts of the world.

There are religious rituals observed, for instance the *ajenu* (water spirits) cult and rituals, which is based on the belief that there are large and lavishing furnished palaces under the river where creatures that are half human and half fish dwell and interact. These creatures are perceived as strong and powerful individuals who may influence the conduct and abode of humans positively or negatively. Another instance of this point of importance is the *evura* cult. This cult draws its membership from respected and influential men in Igumale, and their meetings are believed to take place under or inside the River *Okpokwu*. One physical sign of the meeting is the hearing of drumming and conversation from under the River *Okpokwu*. Members of this cult are believed by an informant to possess extra-ordinary powers and members have to sacrifice a child in turns as and when due, in order to continually make their powers very potent.

In addition, the influence of such rituals and cults also manifest in the arts, crafts and culture of the Igumale people. Some of these rituals and cults are closely linked with the belief and practice of sustaining the environment. In some cases these efforts manifest as *iho* or prohibitions (taboos), as earlier mentioned, especially the prohibitions of any conduct that may deplete the environment in general and water heritage in particular. Water is used for purification rites and cleansing because water stands or symbolizes purity.

6.The Impact of Change on the Religio-Cultural Conservation of Water Bodies in Igumale of the Idoma

The impact of the agents of change on the concept and practice of the subject-matter cannot be over-emphasized. Our colonial and post-colonial experiences, scientific and technological breakthroughs, modernity, westernization, Christianity, Islam have impacted negatively on the worldview of the Igumale people, which is primarily religious in outlook based on the traditional or indigenous religion and cultural practices (Oduma 2010). These agents of change have altered the perceptions and interpretations of phenomena in the Idoma society; the very basis of the belief systems and practices of the people has been threatened and challenged in all spheres of human endeavour. Most of the beliefs and religio-cultural practices discussed are no exceptions.

For Mbiti (1991), change is what is bound to come on any phenomenon whether slowly or rapidly. But the changes that are taking place as regards the subject-matter of the use of religio-cultural beliefs and practices for the conservation of the use of our water bodies are evidently rapid because of the various water pollutions taking place. These various agents of change have altered the religio-cultural worldview of the Igumale people, such that they have been replaced or missed with the worldviews from the above mentioned agents of change. This situation produces what we call cross cultural lag – we are neither here nor there in the way we perceive and do things.

The result of the above fact is that, the environmentally-friendly cultural practices based on our religio-cultural beliefs and experiences have been gradually discarded in favour of those offered by westernization, modernity, science and technology and the likes in our contemporary society. Those who venture to research and advocate for imbibing these good parts of our religious and cultural heritage as regards the conservation of water as a resource are given very derogatory names like heathen, fetish, archaic, and the like. Despite the negative impact of change, this is a wake-up call by the researcher to the government, society, and individuals to imbibe and instill these cultural and religious beliefs and practices that are environmentally friendly and inculcate them into the younger generation, and generations yet unborn.

7. Conclusion

The paper observed negative environmental practices in Igumale that more often than not result in health hazards and the lack of conservation of resources, especially water resources. The paper examined the menace caused by the pollution of water bodies like rivers, streams and the like in our contemporary society. These pollutions range from dumping refuse, chemical and other chemical or toxic wastes into these water bodies; to other harmful practices that threatens the conservation of such water bodies. As a result, the researcher proffers solutions in terms of using religio-cultural beliefs and practices or techniques to address the subject-matter of water pollution, from the standpoint of the Igumale sub-culture area of Idoma society.

Some of the practices includes; the belief and practice of treating water or, and *Okpokwu* river as god or goddesses, thereby ensuring compliance in best practices in the handling of these phenomena. Water, or, and the river are believed to be the source of life for the people. Hence, there is a saying that “water has no enemy. Menstruating women are not allowed to go to the River *Okpokwu* because of the defilement of the river. This trado-religious belief and practice goes a long way in conserving the river, in that it prevents menstrual flow from women from polluting the water or river. All the various trado-religious techniques or practices are reinforced by taboos and the dictates of the divine, and as such people are afraid of contravening these divine dictates that comes with disastrous consequences. From the practices enumerated above, when propagated could serve as a reference point or basis for formulating environmental policies and laws in order to be well-grounded and used in Idomaland in particular and the world in general; to make our water bodies to be used in such a manner that guarantees conservation of one of the most important component of the environment.

References

- Anyacho, E.O. (2005). *Essential Themes in the Study of Religion*, Obudu: Niger Link Printing and Publishing, 274.
- Anyacho, E.O. (2004). *Religion in Society: An Introduction to Eco-Theology and Justice*. Ikom: Ibiyam Printing Press and Computer Services, 167.
- Apenda, A. Z. and A. P. Adegba. (2009). “Tiv Cultural and Environmental conservation in the 21st Century” in Olayemi Akinwumi et al (eds). *Technology, Knowledge and Environment in Africa: A Perspective from Nigeria*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Ltd, 387.
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River. Retrieved 14/4/2012 11:00 Am.
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability. Retrieved on 19/4/2012. 10:45 Am
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water. Retrieved on 19/04/2012.10:30am
- Erim, O.E. (1981). *Idoma Nationality 1600-1900: Problems in Studying the Origins and Development of Ethnicity*. Ibadan: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 98-101,141.
- Fatubarin, A. (2009). *Nigerians and the Environment*. Ilesha: Keynotes Publishers Ltd, 1.
- Fatubarin, A. (2009). *Nigerians and Environmental Conservation*. Ilesha: Keynotes Publishers Ltd.
- Gbenda, J.S. (2010). *Religion and Ecology: A Comparative Study*. Makurdi: Obeta Printing and Publishing Company, 43-47.
- Hornby, A. S. (2001). *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*. 6th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 389, 561, 1018, 1346.
- Igboaka, O. (2007). *The Alekwu Cult and its challenge to the Catholic Church Thrust Towards Inculturation in Idomaland*. Enugu: SNAAP Press Limited, 12-16.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1991). *Introduction to African Religion*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers,159.
- Neiers, Marie de Paul. (1965). *The People of the Jos Plateau of Nigeria, their Philosophy, Manner and Customs*. Frankfurt: Peter D Lang, 117.
- Njoku, F.O.C. (2002). *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought and Theology*. Nekede: Claretian Institute of Philosophy.
- Oduma, S.O. (2010). “Colour Symbolism in African Religion: The Idoma Example” in Shishima, S. D. (Ed.) *Ate: Journal of African Religion and Culture*. Vol.1 December,. Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi, 89.
- Olademo, O. (2010). “Water Heritage and the Sustainability of the Environment: The Nigerian Experience”. In:

- Oyewole, S.O.(ed.). *Science in the Perspective of African Religion (AFREL), Islam and Christianity*. Ilorin: Local Society Initiative and NASTRENS, 539.
- Olaniran, O. J. (2003). "Environmental Management from the Perspective of Culture" in P. Ade Dopamu (ed). *African Culture, Modern Science and Religious Thought*. Ilorin: Decency Printers, 582.
- Oyewole, S. O. (2010). *Science in the Perspective of African Religion (Afrel), Islam and Christianity*. Ilorin: Local Society Initiative and NASTRENS, 541-542.
- Ozumba, G. O. (1995). "African Ethics" in A. F. Udiugwomen (ed). *Footmarks on African Philosophy*. Lagos: Obaph and Ogbanaka Publishers Ltd, 25, 52.
- Wotogbe-Weneka, W. O. (2003). "Religio-cultural Significance of Onumini (Aquatic Spirits) songs Among the Ikwerre of Upper Niger Delta" in P. Ade Dopamu (ed.) *African Culture, Modern Science and Religious Thought*. Ilorin: Decency Printers.
- Wright, R.T. (2008). *Environmental Science: toward A Sustainable Future*. (10th ed.) New Jersey: Prentice – Hall Inc., 170.

Appendix A

List of Respondents

S/No.	Name	Age	Occupation	Place of Interview	Date
1.	Mr. Samuel Oduma	65	Retired Civil Servant	Igumale	25/01/2012
2.	Mr. Jonathan Ogenyi	75	Retired Police Officer/Farmer	Igumale	03/03/2012
3.	Mr. John Agbo	55	Local Government Worker	Makurdi	19/02/2012
4.	Mr. Ogenyi Unogwu	80	Retired Civil Servant	Makurdi	14/01/2012
5.	Mr. Moses Attah	75	Retired Railway Worker	Otukpo	04/03/2012
6.	Mr. Otse Otsai	80	Farmer	Igumale	03/03/2012
7.	Chief Okibe Aboh	85	Farmer/Traditional Ruler	Igumale	03/03/2012
8.	Mr. Richard Ochepea	57	Local Government Worker	Igumale	03/03/2012
9.	Mr. Attah Ogbu	56	Civil Servant	Makurdi	5/02/2012
10.	Mrs. Oyanma Ogenyi	70	Trader	Makurdi	22/01/2012
11.	Mr. Agbo Okpokwu	48	Politician	Igumale	04/03/2012
12.	Mr. Emmanuel Ogenyi	42	Local Government Worker	Igumale	04/03/2012
13.	Mr. Anthony Agbaji	65	Retired Railway Worker	Makurdi	20/04/2012
14.	Mr. Onazi Agbo	87	Farmer	Igumale	04/03/2012
15.	Mr. Stephen Adoyi	37	Civil Servant	Markudi	01/01/2012
16.	Philip Ogenyi	40	Civil Servant	Makurdi	02/02/2012
17.	Frank Oduma	40	Civil Servant	Makurid	03/03/2012
18.	Ozoko Aboh	65	Retired Civil Servant	Igumale	08/04/2012
19.	Emmanuel Achadu	45	Local Government Worker	Igumale	05/04/2012
20.	Ozoko Itodo	65	Retired Railway Worker	Makurdi	12/04/2012

Appendix B

Intreview Questions

1. What is the concept of water bodies in Igumale of the Idoma society?
2. Where did the River Okpokwu had it source, what are the different areas it passed through before getting to Igumale and where did it pass through from Igumale?
3. What are the religio-cultural beliefs and practices found in Igumale that are used for the conservation of water bodies?
4. What is the importance of water bodies in Igumale of the Idoma society?
5. What are the agents of change that has impacted the various religio-cultural beliefs and practices of conservatio n of water bodies?

The author was born in Makurdi, Benue State of Nigeria and his educational pursuits started in 1986 and culminated in bagging his Ph.D in Religious Studies, with specialization in african traditional religion in 2013 from the Benue State University Makurdi, Benue State-Nigeria. He is a member of the following professional bodies: the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) 2008, Nigerian Philosophical Association (NPA) 2010, The Forum on Religion and Ecology 2010, National Association for Science, Humanities and Education Research (NASHER) 2008, and the Institute of Development Administration of Nigeria 2007.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

