

The Dynamics of Land Ownership by Deities in Anambra State Nigeria.

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Abstract:

Anambra State is one of the five Igbo-speaking States that make up South Eastern Nigeria. Among the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, land is believed to be owned by both natural and supernatural persons (deities). Ownership of land by the deities in Igboland is as old as the communities themselves. These lands owned by deities include 'Ajo-ofias' meaning 'evil forests', 'okwu muo', or 'sacred groves', 'ana nso' or sacred land. People who died of dreaded illnesses or who committed grievous 'offences' or 'nso ani' were deposited in the evil forests. Ownership of an evil forest by any deity arose where someone who committed an offence against the deity died from retribution and the corpse deposited on the deity land thereby converting the land into an Ajo Ofia or an Evil forest. Okwu Muo or Sacred Groves are the earthly abode of the guarding spirits in Igbo land while Ana Nso or Sacred land are such lands where mystical and miraculous events took place in the past. Most Igbo villages had Deity lands. A critical look at the villages in recent times revealed that most of these lands owned by deities are disappearing at an alarming rate while some still remaining exhibit serious human incursions. This paper therefore explored the dynamics of land ownership by deities in Anambra State of Nigeria and concludes that, at the rate the deity lands are disappearing, in the next few decades, all such lands would have disappeared with serious implications on land ownership by deities.

Keywords: Dynamics, Land Ownership, Deities, South Eastern Nigeria.

1.0 Introduction

Among the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, land is believed to be owned by both natural and supernatural beings (deities). The supernatural beings are the numerous deities, ancestral spirits, masquerades, oracles, and sacred cults. These supernatural beings are accorded legal personality and vested with powers to acquire, enjoy and transfer property rights and interests as freely and fully as natural beings. They however act through human agents known as Eze Muo (chief priests) but the fact that they act through human agents does not limit their legal personality (Umeh, 1973). According to Bruce et al (2001), traditional spiritual values influenced human behaviours affecting deity lands and played a role in protecting them until some decades ago. The relationship between people and land was spiritual and sacred groves and sacred lands play a role in many African traditional religions. Despite modernisation, urbanisation, and Christianisation, some Igbos are still enmeshed in their traditional and cultural beliefs. The fear instilled by deity lands on people is an effective check on moral aberration. With the disappearance of these lands, that element of fear is completely removed. The effect of the erosion of these deity lands is already evident in the observed moral decadence evident in modern Igbo society. The sense of abomination in the Igbo people is currently seriously eroded. Various indigenous communities lived in harmony with nature (Ashish et al, 2006).

Ownership of land by deities in Igbo land is as old as the communities themselves. Up to the late 1960s when Nigeria attained its independence, lands dedicated and owned by the deities were in abundance. These lands include 'ajo-ofia' or 'evil forest', 'okwu muo' or 'sacred grove', and 'ana nso' or 'sacred land'. Ownership of an evil forest by any deity arose where someone who committed an offence against a deity died from retribution and the corpse deposited on the deity land thereby converting the land into an 'ajo-ofia'. People who died of dreaded illnesses or who committed 'nso-ani' or sacrilege were also deposited in the evil forests and their existence instilled fear in anyone that passed near them. Rarely do people enter the forests for any purpose, including farming. Even the existence of edible wild fruits in the forests would not entice anyone to venture into them. 'Okwu muo' or 'Sacred Groves' are the earthly abode of the guarding spirits in Igbo land while 'Ana-Nso' or 'Sacred Lands' are such lands where mystical and miraculous events took place in the past. The 'Okwu Muo' and 'Ana Nso' were very dear to the Igbos and they carry out their traditional religious activities on them. These lands owned by various Deities in Igbo land existed for centuries without human disturbance and up to the late 1960s, the year Nigeria attained its Independence, depicted stands of massive, towering trees with jumbles of large decaying tree trunks, deep shade pierced by shafts of sunlight, and dense patches of herbs, and shrubs.

Most Igbo villages had these deity lands. In some instances one may find privately owned sacred groves where the owners worshipped, through their gods, in the traditional Igbo manner. The 'okwu muo' owned by each of the communities were protected by the local people for centuries for their cultural beliefs that deities reside in them and protect the villagers from different calamities. Like many communities throughout Igboland, Anambra State has a long history of nature worship in sacred groves. These sacred groves, which are dedicated to local deities or ancestral spirits, are protected by local communities through social traditions and taboos that incorporate spiritual and ecological values. Every deity land carries its own legend, lore, and myths. However, presently, a critical look at the towns in Anambra State of Nigeria revealed that most of the deities' lands have almost completely disappeared while some still remaining in few places exhibit serious human incursions.

The Land Use Act 1978, now L5 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2007 vested all land in Nigeria in the governors of the various states, thus de jure, removing proprietary rights of ownership on land from all land owners. However, de facto, people and deities, especially in the non urban areas, still regard themselves as having proprietary interests on land. The Act introduced statutory and customary rights of occupancy on land depending on the location of the land and the authority that allocated them. There is also the deemed right of occupancy accorded to natural beings in occupation of their developed land before the enactment of the Act. Natural beings who owned lands in the rural areas before the Act were accorded deemed rights of occupancy and allowed to continue with their occupation and use of the land. Even where such lands were compulsorily acquired by governments, compensations were paid to the owners, albeit for un-exhausted improvements, where alternative land was not given. The Land Use Act 1978, however, made no provisions for lands owned by Deities before the enactment of the Act. One expected that the same deemed rights of occupancy granted the natural beings would be extended to the supernatural beings. Since no deemed right of occupancy was accorded to deities who owned land before the Act, the pertinent question is: with the high rate of disappearance and encroachments on deity lands, and without fresh additions to them, what would be the position of the supernatural beings as regards ownership of land in Anambra state few decades from now? This paper, therefore, explores the dynamics of land ownership by deities in Anambra State Nigeria, with a view to determining their status in the contemporary Igbo societies and in the future.

1.1 Origin of Ownership of Land by Deities in Igboland

The existence of deity lands has been traced to the primitive stage of human society. In the pre-colonial period, the elders acted as mere trustees of community land in their various communities on behalf of the families or communities. One of the administrative duties of the elders was the allocation of lands in their various communities or villages among village heads, who in turn distributed them among their respective family members while holding surplus land on behalf of the community till further need arose. It is believed that over the centuries, the Igbos wandered and settled in what is today the South Eastern Nigeria. As they wandered, they carried with them their alusi (god) and any land on which the alusi was placed became dedicated to and owned by the respective god. Some of the alusis in the area under study include: Ndiekwuli, Ulasi, Ubu, Ogwugwu akpu, Akuku, Ololo, Odidechukwu, Edo, and a host of others.

With time, owners of land adjoining evil forests kept long distances away thereby enlarging the evil forests while in addition, lands of those killed by various deities in retribution were surrendered to the respective deity by family members of the deceased persons thereby increasing further the size of lands in their ownership and control. Furthermore, the sizes of the Okwu Muo and the Ana Nso were increased from donations of land made by people to the deities as a gesture of appreciation when they believed that the deities had granted them favours.

The Igbos revered the okwu muo and ana nso. The traditional worship practices showed the symbiotic relationship of human beings and land or nature.

Gadgil and Vartak (1975) traced the historical link of deity land to the pre- agricultural, hunting and gathering stages of societies. In many countries throughout the world, such as India, the existence of sacred groves dates back to an ancient pre-agrarian hunter-gathering era, and their presence has been documented since the early 1800s (Kailash et al, www.activeremedy.org.uk downloaded 25/4/13).

These sacred groves, which are dedicated to local deities or ancestral spirits, are protected by local communities through social traditions and taboos that incorporated spiritual and ecological values. Wherever such land existed, the indigenous traditional societies, which had spiritual relationships with their physical environment, sustained them.

Ownership of land by deities and subsequent incursions into them by natural beings and governments is not peculiar to Anambra State or Nigeria as a nation. According to Iok-sin (2011), as many as 2,300 plots of land totalling more than 200 hectares owned by deities in Taipei Taiwan were mapped out for allocation to natural beings by government policy.

In India, the rapid march of modernization over the past century has depleted India's sacred groves and altered

the traditional social systems that protected them. In South India, 59% of the area of Sacred Groves has been lost during the 1990s (Chandrakanet et al 2004). In Bihar, northern India, many of the ancient sacred groves established around 2400 B.C. have recently been degraded (Ramakrishna, 1996). According to Khumbongmayun et al (2004), most sacred groves around Manipur were threatened. Loss of sacred groves also occur in Kenya, (Bagine, 1998), Zanzibar Island in Tanzania (Madeway et al 2004). Sacred groves in many parts of India have been destroyed over the past century to make way for development projects such as railroads, highways and dams. In many places the government has ignored local communities' customary management rights and allowed the development of commercial forestry operations or encroachment by people migrating from outside the community who do not respect traditional practice (Kailash et al, www.activeremedy.org.uk downloaded 25/4/13).

Christian leaders destroyed any grove held sacred by Pagan indigenous people in an effort to forcefully eradicate Pagan traditions, religions and ideologies. Today many of the old growth forests in the world are also under attack by developers and farmers. Information indicates that such groves existed throughout Europe and the Near East thousands of years before Christianity (Gary, 2005).

With the depletion of land owned by deities in the area of study, and without fresh allocations to them by either the various state governors to whom the proprietary rights in land were vested, or the individuals; what then becomes the position of the deities as regards land ownership in Anambra State of Nigeria in the next few decades?

1.1.1 Methodology

Data was sourced through personal interviews, questionnaires, literature reviews, group discussions, and site visitations. The study was conducted in all the three Senatorial Districts of Anambra State. One Local Government Area was purposively selected from each Senatorial District and two towns were selected from each of the selected Local Government Areas giving a total of 6(six) towns.

1.1.2 Selection of Towns

The towns were purposively selected as, in the past, every town in the study area had preponderance of deity lands. Reconnaissance survey was carried out by the researchers in the selected towns for on the spot appreciation of the current situation. 12(twelve) persons were interviewed in each town and 72 persons in all the selected towns.

1.1.3 Method of Data Collection

In order to obtain information that cuts across age boundary, one male and one female within each of the following age ranges: 21-30, 31- 40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, and 71-80, were selected for the interview in each town. This gave rise to a total of 12 persons interviewed in each town and 72 persons in all the towns. Information sought bothered on:

1. No of Deity Lands
2. Names of the Deity Lands
3. The origin of the Deity Lands
4. No of Deity Lands presently existing
5. Present state of the existing Deity Lands
6. Reasons for the depletion in the number of Deity Lands
7. Current use of the sites of non-existing Deity Lands
8. Any recent addition to Deity Lands

1.1.4 Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistic and presented in percentages and frequencies.

1.1.5 Results: See table 1

Table 2 shows that 18 or 56.2% of the 32 Deity lands in the area studied do no longer exist, 7 or 21.9% have serious incursions, and 7 or 21.9% still exist. Considering the extent of the incursions on the lands, the probability that they would all disappear, in no distant future, is very high unless concrete action is taken by relevant authorities to forestall it from happening.

1.1.6 Causes of Disappearances/Incursions on Deity Lands

As gathered from interviews conducted and questionnaire administered, the disappearance of the Deity lands was as a result of the following, in varying degrees: Christian religious reforms, Social reforms, Population increase, and Economic forces.

Shift in beliefs systems has led to the disappearance of deity lands. In most cases, the local traditions are being challenged by westernized culture, which results in the loss of deity lands and their cultural importance for future generations of local people. Diminishing traditional beliefs due to modernization is another factor which effects their conservation.

Beliefs and taboos are the constructive tools for conserving deity lands and erosion of beliefs and

taboos has led to their diminutions. Religious beliefs and taboos that were central to the protection of deity lands in the past are being eroded over the years, thus the present status of deity lands is rather precarious. Various pressures due to developmental activities, urbanization, exploitation of resources and increase in human population have threatened many deity lands in the country. Economic forces are influencing the traditional communities to discard the community-oriented protection to these lands and they are now being exploited. Conversion of deity lands into churches was observed as the major threat to conservation of the lands in the area under study.

It is observed from table 3 that Christian religious reforms constitute the major factors to the disappearance of deity lands in the study areas, while the economic forces are the least factors.

1.1.7 Discussions

The primary motive behind the constitution of Deity land in Anambra State, like in every other State in the South Eastern Nigeria, is basically spiritual. Although the disappearance of the deity lands for social and religious reasons started with British colonization of the country, the disappearance of these lands was more prominent after Nigeria's Independence in 1960 as a result of surge in Pentecostalism and social developmental activities. This was orchestrated by social reforms and Christian reforms pioneered by the youths and religious leaders in the areas respectively, due to their beliefs that such lands harbour demonic and evil spirits which are capable of causing diverse misfortunes such as accidents, untimely death, obstruction and/or retardation of progress, failure in business, disunity, among others. This was in utter disregard to sacred groves and sacred lands being earthly abodes of guarding spirits that are believed, in Igbo traditional religion, to be protecting the people from dangers and calamities in the same way the Guardian Angels in some Christian doctrines like Catholic Church. Some believe that it is retrogressive to worship God in the Igbo traditional manner. Their present stand was informed by the Christian religious teachings and social reforms/decisions that were not unconnected with doing away with 'little/inferior gods', which were perceived to be used in perpetrating evil. Since the retention of deity lands is linked or associated with the traditional religion which is being overwhelmed by Christianity, and with the high aversion to traditional religion exhibited by the Christian adherents, attempts to preserve deity lands in the study area are being opposed by the Christians.

Fig. 1 is the Ndiekwuli land owned by Ndiekwuli Deity experiencing serious incursion by the Roman Catholic Church in the town. At the rear of fig. 1.b is the church premises with its access road as shown in the picture. Both the premises and the road are on Ndiekwuli land. Fig. 2 is the Agboubu in Ihembosi on the verge of clearance by a new road under construction. In these two cases, the consents of the Deities who owned the lands were not sought by the church or the government, and compensations were not paid to them. Also, as a result of increase in population resulting to insufficiency in available land for the use of individual families in the study area, portions of Deity lands were taken by them, however, with the consent of the deities who tell them, through the chief Priests, what to sacrifice to them in exchange.

If nothing decisive is done by relevant authorities to checkmate the activities of these Christians, it would not be long before the few remaining deity lands were completely taken over by these churches with serious implications on ownership of land by Deities.

1.1.8 Recommendations:

In other to conserve the remaining Deity lands and prevent them from total extinction, the following recommendations are proffered:

- It is essential to protect the deity lands in order to preserve the history, heritage, culture, and tradition of the people for a people without culture, heritage and tradition is doomed to anthropological and psychological crises.
- It is essential to preserve and protect the deity land's historical values and environmental implications.
- The Deity lands should be protected as the disappearance and/or degradation of them not only symbolize the loss of the rich relic of flora and fauna but also the rich culture associated with them.
- Since the management of the few remaining Deity lands through the traditional local system is now being challenged by a number of economic and social issues, there is need for government interventions in collaboration with the local people.
- Laws declaring Deity Lands protected areas should be enacted to protect the remaining lands from total extinction. This would ensure their proper conservation.
- Ecological services rendered by Deity lands need to be highlighted and people should be made to realize that the conservation of these lands is crucial for their existence

1.1.9 Conclusion:

Sacred lands which once adorned the environments in the study area have virtually disappeared. Social reforms, population increase, economic forces, and Christian reforms arising from the belief that the lands harbour demonic spirits capable of causing or being used to cause various misfortunes, are chiefly responsible for the

disappearances. Since any attempts to reconstitute the lands in the study area are likely to meet stiff oppositions from Christian adherents who are in the majority, laws should be enacted by relevant authorities to stop further depletions of the lands.

With the disappearance of these lands, the deities are disenfranchised of their ownership status. Without any additions to the few remaining ones from whatever source, and with the high rates of incursions and encroachments from various groups, it may not be long before all the deity lands disappear with attendant loss of ownership rights of the deities. This is because the myths and beliefs associated with the Deity lands which used to be followed strictly in earlier days, have been eroded during the last few decades and the lands no longer enjoy the same status and privilege as they used to.

The diminution of land owned by deities in Anambra State Nigeria would continue to maintain a downward trend as a result of religious, social, economic and population explosion factors unless laws are enacted by relevant government authorities to stop further incursions in them. The time for the all important Laws is now.

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Table 1: Names and Current Status of Deity Lands.

Name of Deity Land	Current Status	Present Use
Anambra South Senatorial District		
Local Government Area: Ekwusigo		
Ozubulu Town		
Iyiegbuoma	Existing	Deity land
Ogwugwu Inyaba	Not Existing	Arable farm
Ogwui	Not Existing	Market
Agbo Ndiekwuli	Serious Incursion	Church, Road, Farm
Ihembosi Town		
Ololo	Not Existing	Health Centre, Hall
Agbo Ulasi	Serious Incursions	Arable Farm
Ogwugwu mmili	Serious Incursions	Church/Arable farm
Ofia Ubu	Serious Incursions	Arable farm
Anambra North Senatorial District		
Oyi Local Government		
Nteje Town		
Ugwumazu	Not Existing	Church
Ofia Nengo	Serious Incursions	Arable Farm
Ofia Iyiokwa	Serious Incursions	Arable Farm
Udo Okpo	Serious Incursions	Arable Farm
Ofia Ojukwuagu	Existing	Deity land
Nwampo	Existing	Deity land
Ogbunike Town		
Ofia Udo	Not Existing	Arable Farm & Residence
Ofia Nweke	Not Existing	Arable Farm & Residence
Ofia Ogwugwu	Existing	Deity land
Ofia Ogba	Existing	Deity land
Ofia Okwu Oye	Existing	Deity land
Ofia Nkisi	Existing	Deity land
Anambra Central Senatorial District		
Idemmili South Local Government		
Awka-Etiti Town		
Udo Nkolofia	Not Existing	School
Udo Akwuolu	Not Existing	Church
Udo Ezekaka	Not Existing	Health Centre
Udo Okwu Eke	Not Existing	Market
Akpugbo	Not Existing	Arable Farm
Ogwugwu Ideani	Not Existing	Church/School
Ude Ezeolu	Not Existing	Church
Ojoto Town		
Eke Ajo-ofia	Not Existing	Village hall, Police station
Okwu Okpabo-Otu	Not Existing	Arable farm
Okwu- eke ofia	Not Existing	Church, School
Iyi- Osu	Not Existing	Arable Farm
Koronko-Ofia	Not Existing	Arable Farm

Table 2: Summary of Deity Lands in the Studied Towns of Senatorial Districts

	Anambra South	Anambra North	Anambra Central	Total	%
No of Deity Land	8	12	12	32	-
No Not Existing	3	3	12	18	56.2
No with Incursions	4	3	-	7	21.9
Existing	<u>1</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>21.9</u>

Table 3: Respondents Reasons for Disappearance/Incursions on Deity Lands

Reason	No	%
Christian Religious Reforms	38	52.8
Social Reforms	15	20.8
Population Increase	12	16.7
Economic Forces	7	9.7
Total	72	100.00

AGBONDIEKWULI OZUBULU



Fig.1a & b Source: Author's Field Survey, 2012

AGBOUBU IHEMBOSI

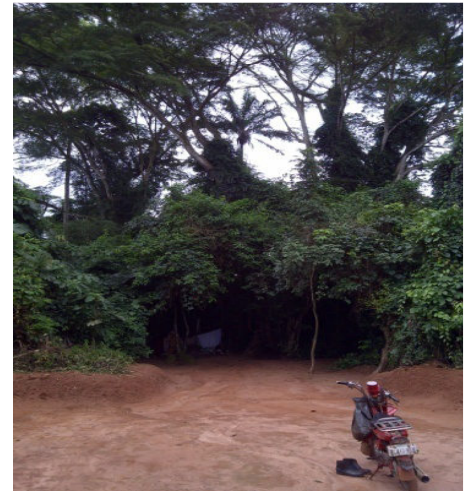


Fig.2 Source: Author's Field Survey, 2012

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