

CONSERVATION PRACTICES OF CULTURAL RESOURCES IN OLULU IMOKA SACRED GROVE, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The corporate existence of Imoka Sacred Grove in Awka, Anambra State is threatened by the activities of land grabbers, iconoclasm and acculturation due to the imbibing of Western life values. The aim of this paper is therefore to carry out a study of Imoka Sacred Grove with emphasis on identifying cultural resources and the conservation practices of cultural resources within the groove. The study uses ethnographic research methods involving in-depth structured interview, field observation and photographic documentation to elicit information from respondents and data collected were analyzed descriptively. Within the groove, there are several divinities represented as sacred trees that perform specific function. These divinities are the spiritual servants and messengers of Imoka deity. It was observed that the sacred grove has been conserved through indigenous method with customary taboos and sanctions. In recent times, a modern approach involving building of perimeter fence, installation of iron gate, annual repainting of the physical structures and the provision of bore hole in the groove are used to compliment the traditional method. The paper therefore argues that the current conservation practices associated with the groove should be sustained through awareness creation, active stakeholder participation and compliance to the laws to achieve cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Conservation, Practices, Cultural Resources, Olulu Imoka, Awka

Introduction

Sacred groves can be defined as segments of the landscape, containing trees and other forms of life and geographical features, that are delimited and protected by human societies (Hughes and Chandran, 1998). They are peculiar forest sites believed to have powers beyond those of human. Thus, they are often sites where people can communicate with their ancestors. In Nigeria, there are several sacred groves such as Osun Oshogbo, Ohia Ohuhu Umuahia, Ohe groove Nsukka among others. These groves are representation of biodiversity and cultural identities of the host

communities. For instances, the Olulu Imoka Sacred Grove is the largest protected space with cluster of tropical plant species in Awka today. The grove is principally used for the celebration of Egwu Imoka Festival in honour of the Imoka deity regarded as “Akete Iyi Odo”. The female goddess (Imoka) is the greatest deity in Awka that commands the respect, reverence and loyalty of the people. The grove, used to cover a very large expanse of land in Amaenyi village, Awka stretching to Agu Awka (including the permanent site of Nnamdi Azikwe University) has witnessed drastic reduction in size due to anthropogenic factors such as deforestation for road/building construction and other infrastructural developments around the Awka capital city. Features like Obu-Ikolo Imoka and Obu-Imoka which hitherto were inside the grove have been demarcated by a road.

To be optimally useful, groves are conserved to prolong the life span of the entity. Therefore, community involvement is essential in the conservation of sacred grove. The essence of conservation of groves are essentially to sustain the bio-diversities, cultural, economic and social values. There are a number of factors threatening the existence of groves in Nigeria. Khaln et. al, (2008) and Eneji et al. (2012) outlined some of the factors threatening the conservation of sacred groves to include people’s changing attitudes, erosion of traditional beliefs, infiltration of foreign religion like Islam and Christianity. Some of the threat to groves in Nigeria are in the form of land encroachment, illegal felling of trees and poaching of rear animals. These have resulted into environmental degradation and loss of culture heritage. The Imoka Sacred Grove in Awka, Anambra State, is not an exception because it has been threatened by the activities of land grabbers, iconoclasm and acculturation due to the imbibing of Western life values among others. Particularly, some cultural artifacts, flora and fauna resources within the grove have come under threat of destruction. The thrust of this paper is therefore to identifying these cultural resources and the conservation practices used for their sustenance. The paper therefore avers that the current conservation practices involving the strict compliance with the customary taboos and the application of modern techniques providing perimeter fence and iron gate to the grove should be sustained through awareness creation, active stakeholder participation and compliance with the existing taboos associated with grove.

Research Method

Ethnographic research method was employed in the study. In-depth interview provided the primary data for the work. This was to enable those who are knowledgeable about the history and culture of the area to talk freely and give all the information they had on the subject matter. Based on this, the researchers selected the key informants to include the Chief Priest of the Imoka deity and other custodians and keepers of the deity/grove. Data

collected were analyzed descriptively. The researchers also referred to the secondary sources where both published and unpublished materials were used. Photographs were also taken for pictorial representation of the features in the grove and the Global Positioning System (GPS) was also used to elicit information on the geographical location of the case study and other geo-references/mapping of features in the grove.

The Study Area

Awka the capital of Anambra state of Nigeria is situated 72 kilometers South-west of Enugu. It is located at about 35 kilometers North East of Onitsha, the commercial center of Southeast Nigeria. Awka is roughly enclosed by longitudes 7° 01' 4" and 7° 8' 8" East and latitudes 6° 0' 10' 4" North (Ezenagu, 2005). Awka town is bounded on the north by Amansea, on the west by Okpuno, on the southeast by Nibo and the south by Nawfia. Awka is sited in a fertile tropical valley but most of the original rain forest has been lost due to clearing for farming and human settlement thus now derived savannah.

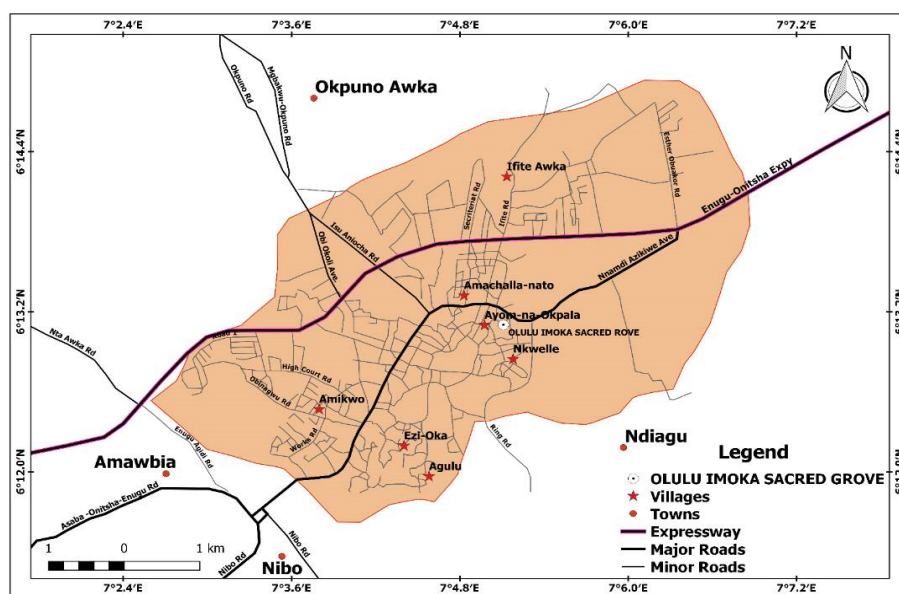


Fig. 1: Map of Awka showing Olulu Imoka Sacred Grove.

Source: Google Earth and Author's Field work 2017

Findings

There are divinities represented as sacred trees within the grove that possess mystic powers and perform specific function. These divinities are the spiritual servants and messengers of Imoka deity. The trunks of these hallowed trees are adorned with white lien signifying sanctity and purity.

Equally, there are cultural artifact like Obu Imoka and Ikolo Imoka which are central to the tradition of the people. The deities, the artifacts and the entire grove is conserved traditionally by observing some customary taboos, sanctions in addition with the application of modern approaches like perimeter fencing, repainting of the houses and the provision of bore hole. Some of the sub-deities include:

Agwu Imoka: Agwu Imoka divinity is charged with the powers of medicine and divination. It is the spirit of avarice, rascality, discomposure, confusion, and forgetfulness (mmuo nkpasa uche). Agwu scatters the mind, hence he is called Mmuo eli eli, eke eke, or Akaose (Spirit of Confusion). According to the late chief priest Nze Chukurah Ikegbunem (per.com. 2017) the Agwu Imoka deity affects any person who is tormented with misfortunes, deterioration of crops, and financial breakdown hence, such person must present himself for cleansing. He also noted that in recent years the number of people who consult the deity for spiritual cleansing have reduced due to the influence of Christianity and modern lifestyle.

Agbala Imoka (*Commelina nodiflorum*): Agbala Imoka is a goddess and a priestess of Ala-the goddess of the land. The people believed that the deity spells out punishments against individuals who commit acts of immorality and similar crimes believed to be transgressions against the earth goddess and Awka people such as murder, witchcraft, perjury, rape and incest.



Plate 1: Aroh Imoka

Aroh Imoka (Ogrishi; *Newbouldia laevis*): Aroh deity is a special deity within Imoka sacred grove. It is an age-long mound of clay pots and fragment of pots disposed by women annually as a sacrifice, thanksgiving, prayer for the progress of sons and daughters of Awka. According to the chief priest Onyebuchi Ikegbuem (per.com. 2020), this ancient rite is specifically performed on Eke and Afor market days every May.

Umuada Akete (Ebenebe; *Cola gigantean*): The Umuada Akete literally is daughters of the Imoka deity. It is scared and performs the roles similar to Umuada sect in Igboland. This deity is regarded as agent of reconciliation, justice and fairness. Upon consultation to supreme spirit (Imoka) by the chief priest, matters concerning management and domestic violence brought before it is usually directed to be settled through the the Umuada Akete deity.



Plate 2: Umuada Akete

Akwali Imoka (Utú; *Icacina senegalensis*): Akwali Imoka is a divine spirit and goddess present in Olulu Imoka Sacred Grove. The divinity represents fertility and procreation. This divinity is famed for solving procreation issues for couples within and outside in the town late (Nze Chukurah Ikegbunem per.com. 2017).

Uno-Uzu (blacksmith workshop): The blacksmith house; Uno-Uzu is located at 283°N in the sacred grove. It is symbolic in the grove as well as in the lives of Awka people. Its essence, is to showcase the technology with which the Awka people are renowned. It is a sacred hut used by blacksmiths to forge iron tools during the Egwu Imoka Festival. This singular practice according to John Najidi (per. Com 2017) has ensured the conservation and preservation of this great cultural heritage of Awka people. All sanctions and taboos associated with the blacksmithing in Awka is observed in the hut. Masquerades groups pay homage to the blacksmiths during the festival. The Uno-Uzu is a very important cultural feature in the grove because it accommodates traditional blacksmithing tool kit. In recent times blacksmithing in Awka has declined due to a number of factors including its tedious nature, un-lucrative nature and negative social stigma. In addition, a larger fraction of these artisans has as well tilted to full-time welding employing the use of modern machines.



Plate 3: *Uno-Uzu* (The blacksmith's workshop)

Obu-Ikolo Imoka: The Obu-Ikolo Imoka situated 26⁰ NE outside the grove. It was formerly a mud hut with thatch roof that houses the ancient “Ikolo Imoka”. Recently, the hut was rehabilitated to a blockhouse with corrugated roof sheets (John Najidi and Kenneth Ofili per.com 2017). The hut is designed with images depicting some socio-cultural aspects of Awka people.

Ikolo Imoka (slit drum): Ikolo Imoka is a wooden musical drum of the gods and a very important cultural resource in Awka. Ikolo Imoka is believed to be the one used to alert the people of the appearance of the monkeys at a time of impending danger. Currently, Ikolo Imoka is used to announce the commencement of Egwu-Imoka. The beating of the Ikolo starts with incantations aimed at invoking the great powers of the Imoka deity. Afterward, it changes over to calling the town, naming villages after which it switches over to calling the heroes (warriors and hunters) best wrestlers as well as orators. According to the Nze Obunanolue (per.com. 2017) the sound of the Ikolo especially in times of emergency is believed to be the voice of the gods and that is why every bit of its message respected. Furthermore, the Ikolo is also beaten during the death of Eze-Imoka (chief priest) or the *Eze-Uzu*. Initially, the beating of the Ikolo was restricted to the elders, however, in a bid to transfer this skill to the younger generations, some youths have been made to understudy the elders on the art of beating the sacred wooden gong.



Plate 4: Ikolo Imoka

Obu Imoka: The Obu Imoka is located at the Amachalla village 370 NE of the Olulu Imoka sacred grove. Obu Imoka is the chapel of the Imoka deity, a sacred chamber, sanctuary which houses the figurine deity (Akete) and numerous figurines and sculptors of other lesser deities. Prayers and divinations are performed in the Obu. According to Nze Jacob Muo (per.comm, 2018), the Obu Imoka just like the Obu Ikolo Imoka was formerly a thatched hut but was renovated into a modern block house with corrugated roof. It houses the Imoka figurine and an altar. There are divinities within and outside this chamber, it includes but not limited to; "*Ovfi* Imoka", "*Ngene* Imoka", "*Ndi mmiri* Imoka", "*Ani* Imoka" and "*Ofive* Imoka", The inner and outer walls are repainted every year in preparation for the Imoka festival with images depicting various aspects of the Awka culture.

The paintings replaced the ancient acrylic paintings (Uli) done on the original hut. There are taboos associated with the Obu which guides visitors and Awka people to ensure its continued purity and holiness. The chief priest consults the oracles as visitors are allowed into the Obu in alternate days. The figurine of the Imoka deity (Akete) is usually taken from the Obu on Opueke day, to the Olulu Imoka sacred grove during the Egwu Imoka festival by Eze Imoka while dancing in a mystical manner (Nze Afamefune Ogbonnia Per.com. 2017). The priest is accompanied by "Ndi Ezenwayi" (Priestesses) cheering and showering praises to the deity in esoteric voices. The figurine is returned to the Obu after the visit of Awka's greatest dreaded masquerade "Agunabo" from Umuzocha village and this brings the festival to a climax. It is only at this period (Egwu Imoka Festival) of every year that the Imoka figurine is made public amidst cheers and jubilations from adherents and onlookers as they march towards the Olulu Imoka sacred grove where it would be kept till the end of the festival. Awka people passing through the path leading to the grove often showered

praises to it saying “Akete iyi odo, Okporimilili”, “Okpo odumodu”, “Omuta onezuo anya”.

Conservation Practices: Olulu Imoka Sacred Grove has been protected through generations with customary taboos, and sanctions. As is a pilgrimage center and holy ground to Awka Indigenes, Olulu Imoka receives visitors who pay homage during the Imoka festival. According to chief Nze Obunaanolue (per. com. 2017) apart from the festive period, all religious visits to the deity take place outside the grove, specifically at Obu Imoka (the court of the deity and dwelling of the Imoka figurine) except on special cases where certain rituals are to be performed at the grove on the direction of the deity. This has helped to reduce human traffic while ensuring the conservation of fauna and flora species in the grove.

The depletion of the vegetative cover of the grove by human activities prompted late Nze Chukurah Ikegbunem the late chief priest, to raise funds through donation by some cultural enthusiasts and well-meaning indigenes of Awka community (Nze Jacob Muo per. com. 2017). The fund was used to construct part of perimeter fence and iron gate to salvage the ancient sacred space. The project was facilitated by Professor Mrs. Anagbogbu and sponsored by World Health Organization. The project included the sinking of a borehole between the grove and Nkwo Amenyi market (owned by the Imoka deity). The borehole serves the domestic needs of the grove, the market, and residents within the environs of the grove. These modern conservation strategies coupled with the extant customary laws has assisted to a great extent the depletion of the grove with particular reference to encroachment into the forests of the grove by developers for infrastructural developments. Also, the annual repainting of the walls and huts inside the grove in preparation of Imoka festival is a measure of sustaining the aesthetic value of these edifices as well as part of its conservation practice.



Plate 5: A section of the perimeter fence

The deity in the grove is believed to inflict those who offend any of its regulations with various types of sickness, accident, paralysis, death and any other form of punishment it considers suitable. The taboos and sanctions are made known to the visitors by the chief priest at admittance into the grove. According to an Imoka devotee (Nze Okwuchukwu Dilibe per.com. 2017), the fear of the enormous mystical powers and authority which the deity commands, instils discipline in the minds of indigenes, visitors, tourists, researchers, and students. The following taboos, laws and sanctions have helped in the conservation of the grove up till the present. Some of the customary taboos and sanctions as enunciated by the chief priest (Onyebuchi Ikegbuem per. com. 2020) are as follows:

- Giving false witness inside the grove is abhorred,
 - It is a taboo to ask the deity to kill someone
 - Everyone must chew alligator pepper seeds placed at the entrance of the *Obu* before entrance.
 - Raffia wine (*Ngwo*) must not be brought into the chambers by people seeking the face of the deity.
 - Taking photographs of cultural materials and antiques inside *Obu* is not allowed.
 - Felling of trees, extraction of planks and firewood in the grove is not allowed. Collection of roots and herbs for medicinal purposes other than by “*Ndi Dibia Mkprogwu*’ (Herbalists) is disallowed.
 - Looting, stealing of sacred artifacts within the grove is prohibited.
 - Hunting of animals and insects of any type is not allowed in the grove. Monkeys found within and outside the forests of the grove must not be harmed, killed as well as be consumed as meat. Monkeys are totemic and anyone who contravenes this order is regarded to have desecrated the land and is expected to perform full burial/funeral rites for the primate. Failure to do so will result in attacks from the people and the deity.
 - Women are not allowed near certain spots in the grove such as the *Uno-Uzu* (blacksmith workshop)
 - Visitors to the grove must move round in the company of Eze Imoka or Shrine attendants
 - Pasturing/Sauntering is highly prohibited
 - ladies in their menstrual cycle are barred from entering the grove
 - Anyone visiting the grove to seek its protection and blessings must be pure as he/she must not have sexual intercourse with the opposite sex before visiting the grove.
 - Shedding of blood in and around the grove is highly prohibited.
- No form of entertainment/leisure activities like wrestling and other associated games takes place in the grove except the Imoka Festival

- Anyone who attends a funeral, pays condolence visits to bereaved friends must not enter the grove the same day.
- Anyone still in the period of mourning the death of a loved one must not come close to the grove.

Discussion

As a community, Awka people have set of customary taboos and sanctions which have helped in the conservation of the cultural artifacts in Olulu Imoka Sacred Grove. It is an indigenous conservation practices used for the continued sustenance of Imoka grove. These regulations are akin to the Indian Harihali Devi and Tungnath sacred groves example where Singh et al (2017) note that these cultural entities are conserved by the people's reaffirmation of their commitment to the laws and taboos during local festivals. Similarly, Gadgil and Vartak, (1975) averred that customary belief, folklores and taboos are imperative for the conservation of sacred groves in India. In Imoka sacred grove the taboos and sanctions are made known to Awka indigenes through internal socialization while visitors to the grove are furnished with the laws by the chief priest at the point of entrance. Over the years, these regulations have become sacrosanct with the people as the grove is held sacred, hence, the last spot any Awka man would ever imagine befouling in any manner. Contravention of any of these regulations is believed to attract the pique of the deity of the grove. In such cases, Imoka deity must be appeased to assuage its wrath on the defaulters and their families. Instances of reported cases of violation and abuses of some of these regulations are often retold by some of the adherents of the deity to remind people of the consequences therein.

Encroachment and illegal land grabbing within the precinct of the grove is a threat to the conservation of the grove. Awka, being the capital of Anambra State has brought lots of infrastructural development. The demand for land for infrastructural development has increased over the years to the extent that areas hitherto regarded as sacred have now witnessed unprecedented encroachment. According to the chief priest (Mr. Onyebuchi Ikegbuem per.com. 2020), at one point, a businessman from Awka illegally claimed some part of the grove to set up a hospitality outfit. His actions were thwarted by the late Eze-Imoka, Nze Chukwurah Ikegbunam who ordered that the house foundation, dwarf fence and gates already laid by the developer be pulled down. Similarly, the chief priest averred that some Christian groups had planned to set the grove on fire but for the prompt intervention of the Eze-Imoka and some youths. Human activities like loud noise emanating from vehicles and loud music have distorted the natural peace around the grove to the extent that some sacred monkeys have left the grove. The same way some birds and other animal species have moved out of the grove. The traditional authorities and other stakeholders should

continue to check illegal encroachment into the grove as is obtained in Osun Oshogbo grove where the Museum and Traditional authorities assist by preventing the construction of houses in the areas close to the fence of the grove (Okonkwo and Eyisi, 2020).

An active participation and involvement of local community, corporate organization and government support is required in the conservation of the grove. This will create a healthy atmosphere for the stakeholders to accept responsibilities and their contributions seen to be appreciated (Srinivas, 2020 and Khumbongmayum *et. al.* 2004). Presently, the government and corporate bodies support in the conservation of the grove is minimal. This has impacted negatively in the organization and hosting of Imoka festival as it is largely funded by indigenes who make donations in cash and gifts. Also, devotees of the deity show appreciation to the deity for an answered request by presentation of food items like cattle, goats, rams, yams and assorted drinks during the festival.

Paucity of fund has hindered the completion of the perimeter fencing of the grove, the same way it affects the annual painting and beautification of the block fence and cultural houses in the groove in preparation of Egwu-Imoka. A conservation plan for the grove is therefore necessary because it will bring stakeholders together. Stakeholders like the custodian of the grove, Awka traditional institution, Awka Development Union and Anambra State Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Diaspora Affairs should collaborate to package the Egwu Imoka festival for domestic and international tourist consumption with the support of local and international corporate donors. This is will be a major booster to the tourism development of the state. Similarly, Awka North Local Government Area can enact a byelaw through community consent which will form the basis of a state edict and subsequently a national law for the protection of the grove as a national monument. This will boost its chances of being enlisted by UNESCO in the world heritage sites.

General enlightenment and creation of awareness about the values and essence of the grove should be pursued vigorously by the stakeholders as a tool to make the people appreciate the heritage. Informal socialization and learning of traditional values of the groves within the families, villages, and town union must be strengthened and sustained. As was observed by Singh et al (2017) the surrounding communities need to be educated and guided for sustaining the sanctity of existing groves and strengthening them. Therefore, awareness creation is through mass media and formal government agencies like schools, markets, bill boards, posters, media jingles and online platforms should be explored as they will help to infuse the cultural values of this heritage in the mind of the people at an early age. The restricted movement of people inside the grove has helped to conserve its biodiversity and cultural artefacts. Though this has not fully prevented

illegal poaching of animals and felling of timber, however, it has moderated the unwarranted encroachment into the grove.

Conclusion

Olulu Imoka sacred grove is a repository of cultural identity of Awka people. Inside the grove, there are several deities which performs specific functions and are represented as sacred trees. They are venerated according to the belief of the people. These deities include Agwu Imoka, Agbala Imoka, Aro Imoka, Umuada Imoka and Akwali Imoka. Also, cultural artifacts like Ikolo Imoka, Uno-Uzu and Obu Imoka are other artifact that symbolises the heritage of the people because they play vital roles during the celebration of Imoka cultural festival. Therefore, the grove is conserved by the observance of certain indigenous traditions in form of customary taboos and sanctions. Also, modern techniques have been employed to conserve the grove by building block perimeter fence, installation of iron gate and the provision of water bore hole for the use of those who resides around the grove.

However, in recent times, these conservation practices appear to be ineffective due to human activities especially with the influx of people into Awka as capital city of Anambra State. The pressure for accommodation within Awka has made people to encroach into parts of the grove. Also, activities of some Christian groups have threatened the sanctity of the grove. Therefore, the re-weakening of these conservation practices must be addressed through awareness creation, stakeholder engagement, adherence to the customary laws and the use of modern conservation technique. This will play important role in the sustenance of the sacred grove by providing a number of vital cultural and ecological services to the people.

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