**Nso Ala, Igbo Land Metaphors and Peace**

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**Introduction**

The culture of a people are pointers to the ways they see and treat living and non living things. From the Igbo worldview, the interconnectedness of everything and everyone are presented in the culture, traditions, proverbs, metaphors, myths, legends, folktales and many other forms of oral tradition. The universe according to the Igbo worldview is made up of *uwa ndi mmuo* and *uwa ndi di ndu* (the physical and the spiritual). They two mingle as most of the time the spiritual impinge on the life of the living. The living thread carefully so as not to upset the spirit world and cause imbalance in the order of things in the land of the living.

The Igbo world is made up of three parts: the sky (elu), the earth (ala) which is made up of water and dry land and the ancestral world. An ancestor is a previous member of a society through whom the present generation came from. They are dead family members especially men who lived successful and heroic lives while they were with the living and because of their good works are believed to have powers in the spirit world to protect their offsprings. Odigbo Ikechukwu explains that ancestors are the living spirit of the dead recognized by the living, admitted into the circle of dead men from where they cast their influence and favours on the living. They are called the living dead according to him because of their dual responsibility among the living and the dead.

The sky is the dwelling place of the Supreme Being (Ulo Chukwu). He lives there with other powerful divinities and primordial beings like Anyanwu (the sun god), Amadioha (the god of thunder), and Igwe (the sky god). The earth is then believed to be the abode of the earth deity (Ani/Ala goddess), minor divinities, personified nature forces and the living. The earth being the abode of not just one group makes it imperative for her to be treated with utmost care in Igbo land. The living connects to the dead through the environment and this makes the environment an active and full member of the Igbo society.

Before the coming of the whiteman and subsequently, the Christian religion, the Igbo nation worshipped different *chis* according to the ways of their forefathers. The Supreme Being still retained his position as the all knowing and the highest in the Igbo pantheon of gods. The gods were giving honour based on their hierarchical level. Governance was not a fixed affair in Igboland. It was conventional and as such decisions were made based on the input of every member of the society even though the highest decision-making body were titled men who after due consultation with the gods presents the final decision to the whole community. One of the most important gods in the pantheon is the earth goddess, *Ala or Ani.* She was regarded as a female, a mother. *Ala* is the goddess of morality and as such involved in judging the actions of her worshippers. It was *Ala*’s stamp of authority that made many customs and traditions valid. Actions that ran contrary to these traditions and customs were regarded as desecration of her dwelling place. Some of these negative actions were called *nso ala or nso ani.*

***Nso Ala***

*Ala*, the earth deity is the pillar of all that is good. Ogbukagu writes that Ana/Ala is the most important deity after the Supreme Being. She allows living and non-living things to thrive on her. In his words, he further explains:

The *Ana* is *ipso facto*, the earth-divinity of the Igbo speaking peoples. It is the great mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and the queen of the under-world. It is generally believed to be the most powerful of all divinities who is also the custodian of public morality, assisted by the ancestors. (385)

Any crime that will infuriate Ala is always avoided at all cost. All codes of morality are outlined and sanctioned by Ala, the earth goddess and communicated to the living by dead ancestors. The importance of *Ala* is highlighted in the customs and tradition of the Igbo people which is called *omenala*. *Nso ala* is the behavior that runs contrary to the precepts of Ala deity. Ilogu defines *Nso Ala* as “two words that are used when speaking of contraventions against approved social and religious norms.” (22) *Nso ala* are those acts that serve as impediments against the customs and traditions (omenala) of the people. *Nso ala* on a deeper level means taboo. Taboos according to Odigbo “are clear actions forbidden for a group of persons or for all which cannot be broken without affecting the stability or peace of the land.(450) Taboos when committed have grave repercussions on the land and on everyone living in it. Taboos are *ihe ala na aso nso,* what the land hates. When one breaks a taboo, it is an *aru,* abomination. The Igbos call it *iru ala/aru ala*, which literally means to desecrate the land. Anyone who commits a taboo has desecrated the land which is seen in the Igbo world view as being holy. Odigbo explains further:

There is a relationship between the child and the goddess of the land. In fact, children were bonded to the land during some rituals and ceremonies. It is for this reason that such a child would be warned not to swear any false oath with the land or commit the stated taboos or all such things. Under such environments too, lands are worshipped as goddess of fruitfulness. Such goddesses make conception possible even for crops to grow to maturity to provide food for its inhabitants…it is almost as if there is a covenant between every child of the community and the goddess of the land. This relationship is spiritual and eternal. Therefore, whenever anything affects this relationship by means of grievous sin or crime then, it is considered an abomination. (451)

The following are examples of nso ala in various parts of Igbo land:

1. **Suicide:** In Igbo land, life of the living and non living is seen as sacred and they must die natural death. Committing suicide is an unnatural way to die and is viewed as a taboo in Igboland. The bodies of those that took their lives are cast off into the evil forest and thrown outside their hometowns to prevent the curse of the gods. The gods also must be appeased to prevent further evil befalling the communities of such people.
2. **Incest:** When two people who are related by blood have sexual relations, it is considered as incest. It is a grave sin that brings about curses to the perpetrators, their families and even the whole community. The consequences range from deafness, blindness, paralysis, extreme poverty to death.
3. **Stealing:** Stealing of food crops like yams is considered a taboo in some parts of Igbo land. Also, stealing of sacrifices is visited by the ire of the goddess if nothing is done to appease her.
4. **Murder:** Spilling of blood, especially innocent blood is considered a grave sin. Families of persons who committed such sin either knowingly or unknowingly are banished from their communities and sent on compulsory exile.
5. **Fornication:** It is forbidden in some parts of Igbo land for a woman to live with a man who is yet to get her people’s approval and conduct the proper marriage rites. A respectable man is expected to pay the bride-price of a maiden of his choice before starting to live together with her. The woman and man will lose respect in the community and may face serious consequences which include poverty, retrogression, sickness and death among others.
6. **Destroying Sacred Nature:** There are streams, rivers and forests which are considered sacred by the land and must be treated as such. There are also specified way of treating these sacred nature which must be strictly adhered to. In some parts of Igbo land, it is a taboo to fish in sacred rivers.
7. **Killing/eating of eke (python):** It is against the law in some parts of Igbo land to kill or eat a python. The python is a sacred animal because they are believed to the spirit of dead ancestors. Pythons are considered as the children of the earth goddess, killing it will draw the wrath of the goddess. If by mistake one kills a python, certain sacrifices must be carried out and the python must be mourned and buried. Other animals which are sacred include: tortoise, quails, snails, dogs, and many others.

There many other taboos of the Igbo people which carry heavy weight of eternal damnation for anyone involved in committing them. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart,* Okonkwo is punished because he beat his wife during the week of peace which was *Nso Ala* in Umuofia*.*  To avoid the wrath of *Ala*, he was asked to appease the goddess. Land in Igbo land is heavily embedded in the custom of the people. It is in metaphors, in proverbs, in legends, folktales and myths.

**Igbo Land Metaphors**

**The Land as the Good Fruit Bearer**

The land here is seen as a responsive part of the Igbo world. Its responsiveness stems from it treatment. This metaphor can be explained by the biblical *the measure you give is the measure you will receive* verse. The good you give the land shall return back to you in many folds. Great farmers are aware of this, so they take their time nurturing their farmlands in order to get bountiful harvest. Achebe explained in *Things Fall Apart* through the dialogue between *Ala* priestess, Chika known as *Agbala,* and Unoka. Unoka has wondered why the seeds he planted were not yielding good fruits and Agbala replies,

“…You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their ax to cut down virgin forest, you sow your yams on exhausted farms…”

To avoid reaping bad fruits and the wrath of *Ala,* the land will not be exploited or maltreated in any form. The Igbo proverb *nku onye kpara n’okochi ka o ga anya n’udu mmiri* (The firewood one gathers during the dry season is what one will use in raining season), explains this metaphor. If you want good fruit, you must work hard for it.

**The Land as its own Fighter**

The land is seen as a powerful entity in this metaphor. This metaphor enjoins people not to fight or struggle for land (*anaghi azo ala azo)* because the land can fight its own battles. It further advices people against ill-treating the land for she trembles and breathes fire when she has been pushed. The land here is seen not as the calm unresponsive non-living thing rather as a fiery mother who fights and wins all her battles.

**The Land as a Nurturer**

This metaphor explains the land as a loving mother who cares for her children, protects them from violence, dangers and ill health. The land does not kill its own and under her tender care, her children blossoms.

**The Land as a Giver**

The land here is seen as one that gives wealth, children, long life, peace and many good things of life. *Ala*, the earth goddess played this role in the days of old. She gives these things to her children who have kept the customs and traditions of their people.

Other metaphors include: the land as good, the land as one, the land as holy and many others.

**The Peace Connection**

Keeping the land sacred is a prerequisite for peaceful existence. Behind these taboos and metaphors lies the true meaning of the relationship between the Igbo nation and their environment. Even though land which is a part of the environment is seen as the solid part of the earth’s surface, it is yet treated with dignity and respect that it deserves for it is the abode of the living and the dead. Many communities have what is termed as community land. These lands can never be sold or encroached on because they are owned by all. Land and its treatment is religious based in Igbo land so is agriculture. The earth goddess was respected and feared. Planting season cannot start without her approval and there were specified ways of treating the land. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, this respect and ritual involving planting season is shown. Umuofia village through the precepts of *Ala*, observe a week of peace in which no harsh words or violent acts were exchanged by anyone. This was to honour the goddess of the earth so that crops planted will grow. This practice served both the people and their environment because if they wanted good harvest, they had to work hard for it through the maintenance of peace with their neighbours. It was an *nso ala* for anyone to destroy the peace. To go against this custom was to destroy both the land and its inhabitants.

Till this day many Igbo villages have their forests lands and farming lands presented first on entering the village, others are found within the homes while others are situated at the rear end of the village. Farming land had its own special treatment, forest lands were treated as such. Land was an entire entity. It was the abode of deities and the living. Land was highly revered and through this reverence the land as a deity and the land as a physical entity meet. The process of pouring libation is a testament to the truth of the position of land in Igboland. It is a common practice till date that the land gets the first kola, the first drink during visitation, ceremonies and festivals. When friends, brothers and relatives meet in merriment; they offer the land the first taste of their drink chanting *ala nuru mmanya”* (land take drink). The land in this case is no longer seen as an ordinary physical thing but as a powerful deity. She receives this honour from her inhabitants in praise of her protection and sustenance. The land in Igboland protects when treated right. The land is a strong witness to good and bad, the drink offering is another way of calling on the land to bear witness to ones hospitality, goodwill, love and acceptance of one another. The land by being witness to this good gives the doer peace, longevity and good fruit. The relationship between goodness, peace, long life and prosperity is established through this. A person who has goodwill for his relatives and neighbours, works hard, obeys the laws of the land is always prosperous. This was portrayed by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo worked hard, he kept the laws of the land most of the time but he soiled his hands by killing a boy who called him father. By so doing he removed himself from the wings and protection of the land and peace deserted him. He lost his sleep, became more violent and finally took his own life.

In an interview with a native of Umuozu in Isiala Mbano LGA of Imo State*,* Mrs. Grace O. Njoku, an Igbo ancient custom which is still being practice till this day was unearthed. Mrs. Njoku explained that it was customary for every family in Umuozu to give new brides a land for which to plant on. On the day which the land is to be shown to the new wife, her age mates and friends will be invited and they all will troop to the location and the farms will be pointed out to the new wife. This practice was termed, *alaishiobi*. The land from that moment will be in the safe keep of the new wife and no one will ever take it from her. This practice was used to show acceptance and love of the new bride and also hope for fertility for as the land she was shown will bear good fruits under her care, so she is expected to bear great fruits for her new husband. Even though this practice is gradually dying due to urbanization, *Alaishiobi* is still a unifying factor and any new bride who was not shown a land was never at peace with her husband’s people.

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