



Traditional tools for environmental management: Lessons from the Annang Nation

Details



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Bio

Dominic Umoh is a Catholic clergyman from Akwa Ibom State in Southern Nigeria. In academia, he is an erudite, Belgium-trained scholar. He is Associate Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Religious Ethics in Akwa Ibom State University. Dominic has been a lecturer of Environmental Ethics for about two decades.

Further reading

Umoh, D, (2023) [Land ethics among](#)

[the traditional Annangs of Southern Nigeria: Traditional environmental ethics, challenging contemporary hostilities towards our planet](#). In: Tosam, MJ, Masitera, E, (eds) African Agrarian Philosophy. The International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics, vol 35. Springer, Cham.

Umoh, D, (2014) *The Beautiful Ugly Masquerade: "Ekpo Ikpa-Isong Annang" in Nigeria*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing. ISBN: 9783659669774

Traditional tools for environmental management

Lessons from the Annang Nation

- Humanity faces an existential crisis: climate change and the wanton destruction of nature.
- Sustainable environmental management requires re-thinking modern interactions with nature.
- Professor Dominic Umoh of Akwa Ibom State University argues that lessons can be learned from the Annang Nation of Nigeria, for whom the natural environment is a living entity on equal footing with its human brethren.
- Practical tools for sustainable action can be seen through a prism of deeply religious customs and practices.

As the Cold War fades from memory, humankind faces a new existential crisis: the wanton destruction of nature. Proposals to address climate change and environmental degradation are abundant, espoused by governments, interest groups, academics, and others. While some proposed solutions aim to address root causes (eg, reductions in industrial emissions and waste), many more are focused on mitigating damage (eg, carbon capture and storage) and/or adapting to it (eg, coastal protection). Only a niche sub-set are based on nature-based solutions.

This crisis largely reflects modernity and a Western paradigm that sees economic growth as king, and the environment as a sphere that can be controlled and exploited. This viewpoint sees humans working to affect dominance over the environment, irrespective of pollution/environmental degradation. However, there are other approaches; in particular, many Indigenous communities around the world share symbiotic entanglements with the natural world, in which the master (human)-slave (environment) dynamic is replaced by one of collaborative respect.

One such community is the Annang Nation of Nigeria, one of five tribes in the southern coastal region of Akwa Ibom State. At Akwa Ibom State University, professor and clergyman Dominic Umoh is documenting the deep connection between the Annang Nation and environment from the perspectives of

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ethics, a branch of philosophy focused on the morality of human conduct. He advocates for the re-adoption of traditional ethics in approaches to the climate/environment crisis. In his view, while Nigeria's forefathers lacked the wealth and technological advantages of today, they were nonetheless happier and enjoyed greater stability, living as they were in harmony with nature.

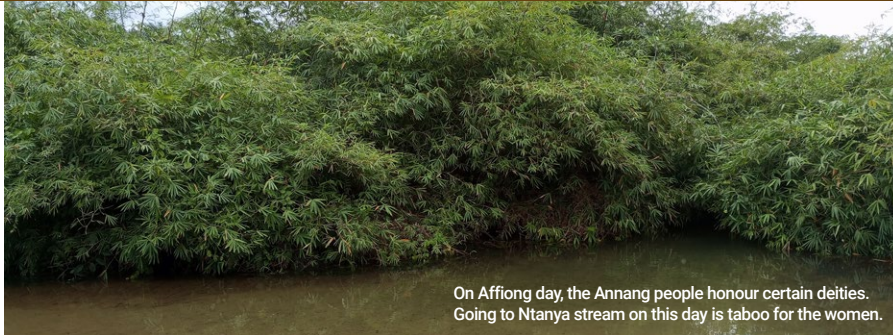
Annang Nation

The life philosophy of the Annang Nation can be summarised in one word: *relationship*. This *Weltanschauung* and the customs, traditions, and beliefs that it has given rise to largely reflect two fundamental realities of the Annang experience: (1) deep religious devotion, to the extent that religion is the lens through which all of life is experienced and understood; and (2) agrarian tradition; Annang citizens were farmers, with individual, family, and community wealth and wellbeing entirely linked to the land.

In melding agrarian tradition with religious beliefs, the Annang people see the natural world from a spiritual perspective. Offerings and sacrifices are required before the planting or harvesting of fields. One such example is the Nkwa Uwia tree, the wood of which is used only

to make ancestral masks. Before this can be done, permission is sought by means of sacrifices performed by traditional priests. Then, once the wood is harvested, it is left to sit for two weeks, giving ample time for the spirits to find a new home.

Viewed from another perspective, this is a practical system of accountability; humans cannot take from the environment without first giving back to it. Under Annang tradition, a cordial relationship with one's neighbours is important. An Annang person does not exist simply as an individual but is also a symbol of their community. Within this framework, the environment is considered to be human's closest neighbour, a living entity on equal footing with its human brethren. As such,



On Affiong day, the Annang people honour certain deities. Going to Ntanya stream on this day is taboo for the women.

Modern global players must strive to become a global community with a moral compass that sees the natural world as a collaborative partner with whom we share a cordial relationship.

the Annang person is inseparable from his environment. Even more, the Annang person will defend the environment as they would their family and is willing to die in order to protect the Annang homeland. Such defence is traditionally enforced using a matchet, which is both a means of defense and the tool by which resources are exploited.

Spiritual realms

The Annang world can be split into three realms. First, 'Ikpa-anyoñ' relates to the heavens, home to an all-powerful Sky God. In contrast to Judeo-Christian traditions, the Sky God is not in direct communion with his subjects; there are no shrines to the Sky God. Instead, his powers are delegated to subordinate deities, spirits, and ancestors, who preside over life within the second realm, 'Ikpa-isofñ', the terrestrial world.

In most religions, the devolution of powers is along physical lines – for example, Prometheus (god of fire) and Apam Napat (god of fresh water) in the Greek and Hindu traditions, respectively – or relates to specific groups of people – St. Raymond Nonnatus (patron saint of expectant mothers and midwives) or St. Andrew the Apostle (patron saint of fisherman) in the Catholic tradition. Such deities also exist in the Annang tradition – for example, Awasi utoy (god of justice and fair play) and Eka Awasi (god of maternity and procreation). However, in keeping with the Annang worldview, many of the devolved deities are specifically entrusted with the management of *relationships* – including Awasi ukod (relationships between in-laws), Awasi ajejen (relationships between grandparents and grandchildren), and Ekpo-nka-agwo (infidelity in marital vows).

In this sense, the relationship between Annang peoples and their gods are both spiritual and eminently practical. The third realm is 'Awio-Ekpo', or the underworld. Unlike Judeo-Christianity, where the afterlife is lived in the heavens, under Annang traditions, Ikpa-anyoñ is reserved for the Sky God. On death, mortal beings are returned to Mother Earth and this realm beneath the ground.

In Annang tradition, where the environment shares the same rights, privileges, and legitimacy as human beings, crimes against nature evoke the wrath of the deities, spirits, and ancestors inhabiting these realms. To prevent this, customs have evolved to appease the spiritual world. From a modern perspective, these customs can also be seen through a highly practical lens. Agricultural practices that honour the first harvest, agricultural cycle, and responsible bush burning can be seen as tools to ensure sustainable use of natural resources.

Towards a sustainable future

Umoh does not advocate for a wholesale return to the past, recognising the value in modern scientific and technological advances. However, he does suggest the adoption of certain principles in the pursuit of 'ecological humanism' and care for posterity. The Annang people take from the environment, but they are also accountable to it. In respecting the environment, the natural world bestows bountiful resources. Modern global players, from superpowers to multinational companies, must strive to become a global community with a moral compass that sees the natural world as a collaborative partner with whom we share a cordial relationship.

Personal response

What relationship do the modern Annang people have with nature? Is there still widespread acceptance that we are inseparable from the environment?

It all depends on the age groups. Poverty-driven modern youths have their eyes on the West as their mentors. Whatever is proposed as pragmatic, poverty-alleviating, and money-generating, or presented as economic amelioration on social media is good and therefore 'swallowed unfiltered'. That is, accepted uncritically without due deliberation and with no regards for tradition. Another experience that frustrates the ecological cordial relationship in our age is the nonchalant attitude of some superpowers towards environmental degradation. When such first-world nations veto embargos put in place for the protection of environment for mere economic reasons, third-world countries feel victimised, if asked to refrain from over-exploitation of nature's resources, for example. Hence, acceptance that we are inseparable from nature can only be found among the aged of earlier generation.

The most worrisome degradation of environment these days seems to come from foreign oil companies located in our region. They are many. The pollution of land, water, and air by these foreigners, with the tacit approval and collaboration of the government, whose eyes are only on the economic benefits, is alarming. In some areas, the lands are no longer cultivatable as they no longer produce yields. Frequent

accidental oil spillage destroys in no little manner the aquatic life of the region. The result is terrifying: wealthy region with impoverished infrastructures. There are no roads, no potable water, no electricity, and, worse still, no more farming lands. Unemployment is another point in view. After their studies, but with no employment, the energetic youths have abandoned their homelands in search of means of livelihood. By doing so, they have abandoned the tradition of their forebears. On their return home, they are strangers to their Motherland. Some children begotten in strange lands where their parents are in search of greener pastures, are alien to Annang culture. They do not even speak their language. Some do not even know the way to their villages. This phenomenon has added enormously to contemporary ecological crises.

Are there any countries that are already attempting to forge a more harmonious relationship with nature?

To the best of my knowledge, no.

From a practical perspective, what steps could a government or large corporation take to start redefining humankind's relationship with nature?

Sensitisation campaigns, conscientisation, fairness in the area of distributive justice for the masses and imposition of tough penalties against violators.



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