

Research Article

Enugwu Nnem: Valorizing The Environment Of Enugwu-Ukwu As Mother In A Patrilineal Community

ABSTRACT

Just like most other African communities, Enugwu-ukwu is strongly patriarchal. However, members of the community from time immemorial, sentimentally refer to her as mother. *Enugwu nnem!* (Enugwu my mother) is regularly expressed by members of Enugwu-ukwu community. This paradox which is significant to the female gender influences the value system of Enugwu-ukwu people and how they relate with their environment. Unfortunately, because of urban migration and gradual loss of language vis-à-vis culture, this value is however fast eroding. This ethnographic study therefore appreciates the rationale behind referring to a strong patrilineal community as mother and how this worldview affects their relationship with flora and fauna. Insight is basically drawn from participant observation, oral histories and buttressed with extant literature. Data is analyzed with the instrumentality of qualitative content analysis and the research method is descriptive. The thought of Enugwu-ukwu as mother impacts the people's traditional religion, where most of the deities in the community also have female counterparts that wield equal powers. More so, since motherhood is revered, the land is revered and nurtured as one would one's mother. Certain parts of the environment are also sacred and not to be tampered with at all as certain parts of one's mother's body is sacrosanct. The effect of this thought pattern on their religion, culture and the environment is phenomenal. In order to nip the erosion of this cultural value of Enugwu-ukwu as mother that must be protected, nurtured and revered in the bud, it is recommended among others, that oral histories and values should be revived for gender sensitivity/inclusivity as well as environmental protection and sustainability in Enugwu-ukwu in modern times.

Keywords: Enugwu-ukwu, Motherism, Stiwanism, Environment, Patrilineal Community

INTRODUCTION

The practice of addressing the earth, nations and communities using gender specific nouns, pronouns and verbs like her, mother, and so on is a well-known one. One hears of mother-earth, mother-land, mother-Africa, barren land, virgin land, fertile land and so on.² The reason is perhaps, hinged on the ability to reproduce. One is however at a loss, when one thinks of the fact that in Africa which is strongly patriarchal, some people would rather address their community for instance, in a masculine way. The concept of fatherland is not alien to Africans. The third line in Nigeria's national anthem which has not been amended for about seven decades reads "To serve our fatherland". Thus, Western education,

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² Sarah Milner-Barry, "The Term 'Mother Nature' Reinforces the Idea that Both Women and Nature Should Be Subjugated," accessed July 14, 2019, <https://qz.com/562833/the-term-mother-nature-reinforces-the-idea-that-both-women-and-nature-should-be-subjugated/amp/>; United Nations, "International Mother Earth Day 22 April," accessed July 14, 2019, <https://www.un.org/en/events/motherearthday/background.shtml>.

influence and the African notion of the earth as feminine may not have undermined the androcentric thought patterns and values of some Nigerians. The Igbo of Nigeria in particular, are obstinately patriarchal. For instance, *be anyi* (our place) or *be nnam*, (my father's place) both represent one's community in Anambra State because genealogy is traced to the father.

It is, however, surprising that the people of Enugwu-Ukwu, Anambra State – Nigeria who are of the Igbo extraction boldly use the appellation – mother for their community. The sentimental name *Enugwu nnem* is used regularly, especially among middle-aged and elderly indigenes. It is even more baffling because the people of Enugwu-ukwu, unlike many other Igbo communities do not consider the earth deity – *Ana* (*Ali*, *Ala* or *Ani* in other Igbo communities) a female deity (earth goddess). *Ana* Enugwu is a male deity that oversees the affairs of all Enugwu-ukwu indigenes, even though it has a female consort, *Ogwugwu Ana* Enugwu. There is however, no rationale, religiously speaking, for referring to Enugwu-ukwu as mother since the land deity is male. The fact that *Ana* (the land/earth deity) in Enugwu-ukwu is a male deity does not eclipse the reality that the people of Enugwu-Ukwu consider her a mother and she (her environment) is honoured for that reason. Mother among the Igbo is supreme.³ One therefore wonders if the controversial assertion that “men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world”⁴ is germane in a sense in Enugwu-ukwu. Apparently, the community is patriarchal but at the same time, is maternalistic. This has great implications for women in Enugwu-ukwu and gender studies in Africa generally. A lot has however changed, and this tradition is gradually fading away because of the alarming high rate of rural-urban migration and loss of culture as Igbo language generally, is gradually losing its grip on the up-coming generation of Igbo people. Femininity in Enugwu-ukwu has lost a lot of grounds in recent times. The current ironical powerlessness inflicted on women against what it used to be in the traditional pre-colonial era is appalling.⁵ The system in which knowledge is transferred from one generation to the next generation in Enugwu-ukwu is now defunct leading to a dearth of the knowledge of traditional practices among the younger generation.⁶

The cultural sentiments of *Enugwu nnem* positively robs off on the environment. Female deities, who are also regarded as mothers, in charge of certain aspects of the environments - rivers, forests, trees wielded as much power as their male counterparts. Those sacred spaces are revered, maintained and preserved. Some aspects of their environment are so sacrosanct that they are revered the way any reasonable child who is of age would revere certain intimate parts of the child's mother's body. This of course, translates to environmental protection and preservation.

Wave four feminism, which is the current wave of feminism after the first three waves apparently served out their purposes or became unpopular and fizzled out is more inclusive than the first three. This wave of feminism, which is a product of the new millennium, “has also included an engagement with and reverence for the earth and its inhabitants.”⁷ By implication, the interplay between feminism and the environment in scholarship is relatively new. “New conditions of possibilities, such as environmental degradation and robust environmental movements, ... have a way of ensuring that new [feminist] discourses emerge, the outcome of which have yet to be conjectured.”⁸ This research will therefore tow this line, to conjecture ‘feminism’ and environmental question in Enugwu-ukwu.

The task of this paper is to thoroughly interrogate why and how a staunchly patriarchal society is referred to as mother and the relationship of such conviction with the environment. The implication for gender studies and feminism then becomes apt. To tease out this problematic situation, this ethnographic study will draw insight from participant observation, oral histories and buttress them with extant literature. Descriptive method of research is adopted for this study and analysis will be done using the qualitative content analysis. More so, relevant afro-centric feminist theories will be used as basis for this investigation. Basic information about Enugwu-ukwu will be given, followed by a discussion on the interplay between Enugwu-ukwu as mother and the environment and then recommendations will be made.

Enugwu-ukwu Community

Enugwu-ukwu is one of the Igbo towns located within the capital territory of Anambra State, Nigeria. It has boundaries with Nise in the East, Abagana and Ukpo in the West, Nawfia and Enugu-agidi in the North and Nri, Agulu and Nimo in the South. She is situated on a hill and has rivulets, lakes and springs which have some religious tincture. It was the

³ Chinweizu, *Anatomy of female power* (Lagos: Pero Press, 1990); Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, “Nneka: Is Mother Still Supreme in Igboland? Reflections on the Biography of Eze Mmiri, Madume Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo, Oguta, 1934-2007.” *In Against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria*, edited by Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korieh, 201-224. Owerri: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2011.

⁴ Chinweizu, *Anatomy*, 12.

⁵ Akachi Ezeigbo, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (Lagos: Vista Books, 1996), quoted in Chinyelu Ojukwu, “Gender Complementarity in the Anti-colonial Struggle: Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s ‘The Last of the Strong Ones,’” *Journal of Gender Studies*, 6, no. 1. (2014).

⁶ Dilim Okafor-Omali, *My Culture Blackmailed* (Onitsha: Noble Resources Ltd, 2013).

⁷ Darlene Juschka, “Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion,” accessed July 14, 2019, http://www.academia.edu/9658186/Feminist_approaches_to_the_study_of_religion.

⁸ Juschka, “Feminist Approaches.”

topography of Enugwu-ukwu that fetched it its name which literally means ‘top of a very high hill’. The geographical coordinates of Enugwu-ukwu are 60 10’ 0” North, 70 0’ 0” East.⁹ She is made up of eighteen villages namely; Awovu, Uruekwo, Avomimi, Urukpeleke, Orji, Osili, Uruokwe, Uruogbo, Urunnebo, Urualor, Orofia, Umuokpalaeri, Umuakwu, Enuagu, Akiyi, Umuatulu, Ire and Umuatuorah. Enugwu-ukwu has a population of 68,785.¹⁰

The people of Enugwu-ukwu are traced to a legend, a superhuman named Nri who is believed to be created by Chukwu (God Almighty). This myth is generally accepted by Umunri clan. They hold that Nri mysteriously descended upon the earth from the sky and lived at the region known as Enugwu-ukwu today. Nri had five sons and a daughter. The first son of Nri, Okpala Kanu is said to be the ancestral father of Enugwu-ukwu. By virtue of his position as the first son, Enugwu-ukwu is *Okpala Nri* (paternal head of Nri) and the ancestral home of Umunri clan to which the vast majority of Igbo clan groups trace their ancestry.¹¹ However, this claim of paternal head has been rejected by some historians and scholars. That argument is however outside the concern of this study. The people are quite enterprising. Traditionally, they are farmers with a good number of traders and civil servants.

The people of Enugwu-ukwu are pronouncedly theistic. They recognize the existence of the Supreme Being – *Chukwu* and other male and female deities that are mediums to Chukwu. They also believe in ancestor veneration, necromancy, totemism, reincarnation, priesthood and soothsaying.¹² This demonstrates the assertion that Africans are, in everything, religious.¹³ Presently, a good number of the indigenes are professedly Christians with some syncretic elements in their practice of Christianity. The traditional authority of Enugwu-ukwu, is usually referred to as *Eze Enugwu-ukwu na Igwe Umunri*, meaning traditional ruler of Enugwu-Ukwu and King of Nri clan. Worthy of note, is the fact that there is a significant urban drift among the people. Hence, some of her cultural practices are at risk of extinction as a bulk of the younger generations to whom culture should be handed down have moved to urban cities while the old are passing away.

Theoretical framework

Given the fact that this research is on Africa and the major concern of the study is gender inclined, two appropriate afro-centric feminist theories, stiwanism and motherism, will be explained and applied as a framework for this paper. These theories are chosen because they are built on the indigenous and diametrically opposed to Western feminist theories that have been judged unAfrican in every sense of it. Stiwanism is a form of feminist theory derived from the acronym STIWA which stands for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. This is put forward by Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie in 1994 in her book titled *Recreating ourselves: African women and critical transformations*. She avers that African women, unlike mainstream feminists do not see men as their principal enemy, even though she does not consider them totally innocent. She decries the fact that women are oppressed all over the world. “They have been owned, used and worked as horses.”¹⁴ She seeks to replace feminism with stiwanism which she thinks will be acceptable to African men and women that are disenchanted with white women’s feminism. In expounding stiwanism, she submits that:

“STIWA” allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women ... “STIWA” is about the inclusion of women in contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. ... Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation.¹⁵

The clamour for social transformation to include women in the scheme of things and to recognize their contributions to societal growth and development in the contemporary cannot be over-emphasized. This transformation should necessarily recognize and include women in the scheme of things. Their peculiar cultural roles and contributions to the well-being and smooth flow of the society need to be harnessed. Women in Africa should be given the opportunity to effectively complement men in transforming Africa socially and otherwise. Ogundipe’s stiwanism has been used by different scholars for different studies.¹⁶ “Stiwanism is a conceptual nod to the complexities of understanding the transformation of the society and of women as significant part of that society.”¹⁷ This theory is relevant to this research

⁹ Maplandia.com, “Enugu Ukwu Map – Satellite Images of Enugu Ukwu,” accessed July 12, 2019, <http://www.maplandia.com/nigeria/anambra/njikoka/enugu-ukwu/>.

¹⁰ World Atlas, “Where is Enugu-Ukwu, Nigeria?” accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.worldatlas.com/af/ng/an/where-is-enugu-ukwu.html>.

¹¹ Osita Agwuna, *Igu Aro*. Address presented at Obu Ofo Nri palace Enugwu-ukwu on January 5, 2004.

¹² Agwuna, *Igu Aro*.

¹³ Boniface A.C. Obiefuna, *The Youth on Fire* (Nimo: Rex Charles and Patrick, 2004).

¹⁴ Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 27.

¹⁵ Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves*, 229-230.

¹⁶ Tunji Olaopa, “Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie: Between the Literary, the Feminine and the Cultural,” *Premium Times*, accessed December 16, 2019, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/entertainment/artbooks/217933-omolara-ogundipe-leslie-literary-feminine-cultural.html>; Sotunsa M. Egunoluwa, “Feminism: The Quest for an African Variant,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 1. 227-234, accessed December 12, 2019, <http://www.jpanafrican.org/docs/vol3no1/3.1%20Feminism.pdf>; Yemisi Akinbobola, “Neoliberal Feminism in Africa,” accessed July 15, 2019, <https://www.eurozine.com/neoliberal-feminism-Africa/>.

¹⁷ Olaopa, “Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie.”

because the paper is basically an attempt to bare the relationship between motherhood/women and environmental preservation in Enugwu-ukwu and to advocate for the recognition and inclusion of women in the hall of fame of transformation in Enugwu-ukwu culture. The aim is to enhance the social being of women and also bring about transformation in the community with women as active players. The theory will serve as a basis to emphasize the place of women as co-partners with the men in the community.

The second theory is Motherism. Catherine Acholonu propounds motherism as an alternative to feminism. She makes a case for the use of an Africa-conceived theory to explain women's function and condition in Africa. She utilizes popular gender roles and expectations in Nigeria's patriarchal society in forming her theory. For her, "the rural woman is our link with mother earth and with her rests our last hope for unification with the indispensable mother essence."¹⁸ With this statement, Acholonu apparently sees as coterminous, the African woman as mother and the mother earth. Hence, "the main thrust of Acholonu's work is to "empower African women as mothers."¹⁹ Motherism is "a maternal form of feminism that sees rural women as performing the necessary task of nurturing society."²⁰

This theory has been flawed because of its exclusion of the urban women who actually champion the struggle for gender inclusiveness.²¹ It however valorizes motherhood in line with cultural feminism. It is also ecocentric in nature and sees a clear relationship between motherhood and the earth. This informs this paper's interest on the theory. Stiwanism and Motherism are indigenous theories that derive impetus from cultural feminism which "extols the positive aspects of what is seen as 'the female character' or 'feminine personality'."²² Furthermore, "cultural feminism has wide popular appeal because it suggests that women's ways of being and knowing may be a healthier template for producing a just society than those of an androcentric culture."²³ In other words, cultural feminism suggests that femininity may have the propensity to produce a fair society.

Therefore, the phenomenon under study will be looked at from the viewpoint of stiwanism and motherism. This research paper will attempt to build new knowledge by substantiating the theoretical propositions/assumptions of stiwanism and motherism in a typical African society. This will deal with one of the limitations of these theories which is the problem of generalization. There is hardly uniformity of values, thoughts and lifestyle of all African nations, so these 'afro-centric' feminist theories need to be validated in particular African communities.

Enugwu nnem

Enugwu is the short form for Enugwu-ukwu community, while *nnem* in Igbo language literally means 'my mother'. *Enugwu nnem* literally means 'Enugwu-ukwu my mother.' It could also be used to express brotherly affiliation, affection or identity between or among indigenes, presumably because of their shared maternity.²⁴ *Enugwu nnem* is often used as a metaphor. It is deeper than a mere statement and evokes emotions among Enugwu-ukwu people. *Enugwu nnem!* is usually exclaimed by indigenes when excited about the presence of another indigene, when there is a positive development in the community or pitifully at the sight of a mishap on the community or any of its members. It is also used in times of need to stimulate the compassion of Enugwu-ukwu indigenes at home and in the Diaspora to bail out their own community. Furthermore, *Enugwu nnem* is cheerfully exclaimed when an indigene of Enugwu-ukwu meets another indigene in a far away land. That of course, endears them to each other.

The kind of emotion the expression *Enugwu nnem* generates, is the kind that a child would have for her or his mother or 'mother's children' in varying situations. It has been underscored earlier in this paper that in Igbo culture particularly and in some other cultures, mother is supreme and many 'children', male and female are more attached to their mothers than their fathers. Most mothers are usually given more attention, care and receive the virtue of love more than fathers in many African societies. "The child felt his first obligation [in Enugwu-ukwu] was to give attention to his mother."²⁵ The reason may not be unconnected to the fact that women are associated with caring and nurturing. Those are the "archetypal qualities of the mother."²⁶ This phenomenon is accentuated because of one of the powers of women which is called the power of the cradle. The power of the cradle is the benign power that mothers exercise on their children during nurturing them.²⁷ Perhaps, this gives room for them to transmit the qualities and mien they would want to see in their children when they are grown. During nurturing, they also socialize the children to love their mothers

¹⁸ Catherine O. Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Abuja: Afa Publications, 1995), 118.

¹⁹ Akachi T. Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model* (Lagos: Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos monograph series 17, 2012), 22.

²⁰ Maria-Louisa Wang'ondu, "What is African Feminism? An Introduction," International Youth Coalition, accessed June 21, 2019, <http://iycoalition.org/what-is-african-feminism-an-introduction/>.

²¹ Ezeibo, *Snail Sense*.

²² George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, *Sociological theory, 9th ed* (USA: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 448.

²³ Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Sociological Theory*, 448.

²⁴ Nkwocha, Emmanuel. Interview with the author. Personal Interview. Umuakwueze, Enugwu-ukwu, April 18, 2019; Okoye, Ngozi. Interview with the author. Personal Interview. Urunnebo, Enugwu-ukwu, April 29, 2019.

²⁵ Okafor-Omali, *My Culture*, 63.

²⁶ Harriet Bradley, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 109.

²⁷ Chinweizu, *Anatomy*,

affectionately. Consequently, children's predilection for their mothers over their fathers lasts till adulthood.

The maxim *Enugwu nnem* among others, strengthens brotherliness among Enugwu-Ukwu people in the community and those living elsewhere. It strengthens their sense of community as injury to one becomes injury to all because of shared maternity. It also prods the patriotic sentiments of well-to-do Enugwu-ukwu indigenes within and in diaspora to engage in developmental activities/projects in the community. Patriots of Enugwu-ukwu Town (PET), a group of Enugwu-ukwu indigenes home and abroad that correspond basically via social media have carried out a plethora of such developmental activities because of the love for and attachment to motherhood - Enugwu nnem. "Motherhood was a treasured status in the village [Enugwu-ukwu]." ²⁸ In Igbo traditional religion, it is believed that fecundity (*omumu*) has a link with mother earth. Little wonder the sentiments behind *Enugwu nnem* influence the way the people handle Mother Nature, motherhood, and feminine traits associated with motherhood in the community.

In as much as women, without necessarily being mothers have intrinsic values in Enugwu-ukwu community, motherhood is definitely one of the major strengths of women in the community. After all, the community itself is taken and treated as mother. It is unfortunate that in this regard, the efficacy and essence of motherhood has been watered down because of a breach in culture transmission and modernization. Admittedly, Igbo women have and could offer much more than motherly roles. Nevertheless, motherly roles advertently or inadvertently affect most other areas of the community's life and wellbeing like environmental preservation, good brotherliness and development. The Igbo of Nigeria "is ironically and disappointingly plagued by the old prejudice that the end to which the creator has ordained womanhood is maternity."²⁹ As a result, "women, unfortunately, have accepted the idea that their "wholeness" depends exclusively on motherhood."³⁰ This is judging from African pejorative conception of women as "passive mothers and wives."³¹

Enugwu-ukwu as mother and the environment

Enugwu-ukwu, though stalwartly patriarchal is confessedly and practically mother. This reflects in the sentimental relationship the people hold for Enugwu-ukwu as mother and the environment. The environment constitutes the plants, animals, water bodies and every other thing found within human surroundings. There is a strong connection between motherhood and the environment in Enugwu-ukwu. Biological and functional mother figures in Enugwu-ukwu, be it in form of deities, trees or animals as an extension of the community, play phenomenal protective roles on the environment. Streams, springs, certain animals and trees are either overseen by a female deity who is considered a mother or are metaphorized as mothers. Every shrine inhabited by male spirit/deity (*Ngene*) in Enugwu-ukwu has a female consort (*Ogwugwu*).³² *Ogwugwu* is responsible for protecting and nurturing her children, the people of Enugwu-ukwu and the environment. Aside the responsibility of nurturing and protecting her children, *Ogwugwu* takes care of women's affairs exclusively. This validates the assertion that "the participation of women in African religion is adequate."³³

Pythons (*eke*), which are the totem of the people of Enugwu-ukwu is revered and preserved. It is an abomination to kill them as they are believed to belong to the deities. As a matter of fact, those ones found on the streams are called after such streams. For instance, there are *eke nemkpa*, *eke ovolo*, *eke ngene ocha* and so on. Those pythons that live around these streams are possessed by mermaids, popularly known as *mamiwater* (female water spirit). That is the reason why *mamiwater* is depicted in drawing or sculpture as a python with a female face and long braids.³⁴

More so, streams in Enugwu-ukwu, namely – *nemkpa*, *nwangene*, *ogwugwu ana*, *ngene nnevoaka*, *ngene ocha*, *ovolo*, and so on are all deities – male and female. These streams are revered and properly preserved. They are not desecrated because these deities represent Enugwu-ukwu which is symbolically, the mother of the people. Defecating anywhere around the stream or even abandoning cloths (usually used to cushion the head while carrying water) in the river are all considered taboos against the community. In fact, only leaves can be taken to the river as head-cushion so as to avoid littering the streams with cloths. Here, the environment is protected because of the essence of motherhood.

More so, trees such as '*ojih*' (African teak/Iroko tree/*Milicia excelsa*) and '*akpu*' (Cotton tree/*Ceiba Pentandra*) trees are sacred and cannot be felled indiscriminately because they are believed to be inhabited by spirits. Aside that, '*ojih*' tree is regarded as a totem for some persons in Enugwu-ukwu. "There are persons that come from *ojih* tree. If the tree is felled, they will die."³⁵ In other words, *ojih* tree is likened to a mother and for that reason, it is handled with utmost reverence. On the other hand, *udalla* (wild cherry) tree is believed to harbor some mystical powers that give the

²⁸ Okafor-Omali, My Culture, 63.

²⁹ Patrick E. Nmah, "Traditional Rights of Igbo Women in the Society," Arts and Humanities Quarterly 2, no. 1 (2007): 39.

³⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 20.

³¹ Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Sociological Theory*, 441.

³² Nwuzor, Beatrice. Interview with the author. Personal Interview. Uruakor, Enugwu-ukwu, April 14, 2019.

³³ Oduyoye, *Women and Ritual*, 10.

³⁴ Nkwocha, Emmanuel. Interview with the author. Personal Interview. Umuakwueze, Enugwu-ukwu, April 18, 2019.

³⁵ Okoye, Udegbonam. Interview with the author. Urunnebo, Enugwu-ukwu. April 27, 2019.

fortune of fertility to infertile women. For that reason, the fruit must be allowed to get ripe and fall on its own accord and the fruit is not to be sold in the market in Enugwu-ukwu, just like children are allowed to get to term and be born naturally and are not sold in the market. More so, the vicinity of male and female shrines in Enugwu-ukwu is sacred and must not be tampered with. In Enugwu-ukwu, “the people feared the Alusi [Shrine inhabited by spirit(s)] and all the land of its location was held sacred.”³⁶ The trees are not felled indiscriminately and humans tread with caution, making efforts not to pollute or desecrate the environment.

Just as Enugwu-ukwu is mother of all her indigenes, her environment symbolizes the female body; and so it must be guarded jealously.³⁷ It is worthy to note at this point that, even though the earth deity and the deity that oversees activities in all the 18 villages in Enugwu-ukwu is male - Anaenugwu (its ilk in most other parts of Igboland is female-*Ala, Ali, Ani, Ana* (earth goddess)), the earth in Enugwu-ukwu has feminine and motherly attributes. Elsewhere, where *Ala* is considered a goddess (the earth mother), it is associated with life, fertility, creativity, food, laws and taboos of the land and so on. The same sentiments are shared by Enugwu-ukwu people for the environment as mother, but for the fact that *Ana* in Enugwu-ukwu is a male deity. Motherhood and environmental protection work hand-in-glove in Enugwu-ukwu. This is in line with Acholonu’s motherism which “places motherhood, nature, nurture and respect for the environment at the center of its theorizing.”³⁸

It has been earlier alluded that children valorize their mothers and hold them in very high esteem, so do Enugwu-ukwu indigenes valorize their community which is their source or womb (mother). Therefore, they consciously strive assiduously to observe cultural taboos/laws that protect the environment. Acholonu’s motherism comes to bear here. There is a connect between motherhood and the earth or environment. Protection of mother in the case of Enugwu-ukwu translates to protection of the environment because Enugwu-ukwu is considered *nne* (mother) and this ideation makes them to relate with the environment in ways that nurture her and protect her from pollution. On the other hand, oppression of women all over the world has also been linked to oppression of the environment by scholars.³⁹

The noble role of motherhood in Enugwu-ukwu is of tremendous importance to the preservation of the environment in the community. For instance, in *Enugwu-ukwu* culture and religion, women and men are recognized and play complementary roles for the wellbeing of society. This recognition is not one of equality but offers a lot to the welfare, growth and preservation of the community and the environment. This “complementary role of men and women for the holistic traditional culture and religion of Africa is neglected and treated with contempt, especially at the altar of gender discourse.”⁴⁰ Since in Enugwu-ukwu environment is revered as motherhood and preserved, there is need for a revival of the aphorism – Enugwu *nmem* that valorizes motherhood in contemporary times. This will strengthen gender inclusion and equity which is yet to be fully achieved in the community. The revival of this aphorism will deal a death blow to the unfounded sentiment that “everything feminine has been turned upside down into a demeaning metaphor for weakness and inferiority. And all these despite the unassailable achievements of womanhood all across the globe and throughout all history.”⁴¹

Admittedly, the question of equality between men and women in an African setting is somewhat cumbersome. Equity is the current watchword and it elicits recognition of valuable contributions too. “It has been suggested that equality as a concept cannot apply to African culture, since role differentiations in Africa are clear and are not meant to be valued hierarchically.”⁴²

In all, men and women alike work together, perhaps equally, in different ways, for the survival of the community. The problem is that women hardly or scarcely get credit. During the course of this research for instance, one of the interviewees tried unsuccessfully to disparage women. Having said a few laudable things about motherhood and femininity in Enugwu-ukwu, he concluded by saying that such achievements do not count much because women only live for and serve men.⁴³ The community’s feminine quality of motherhood has protective value on the environment, religion and culture of the people. The inference drawn from the Adaka’s view suggests that women are still perceived

³⁶ Okafor-Omali, *My Culture*, 110.

³⁷ Nwogor, Florence. Interview with the author. Urunnebo, Enugwu-ukwu. April 27, 2019.

³⁸ Encyclopedia.com, “African Feminisms,” Updated November 4, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-feminisms>

³⁹ Gulia Nicolini, “The Environment is a Feminist Issue,” accessed July 17, 2019, www.fcome.org/portfolio-view/the-environment-is-a-feminist-issue/; Maysar Sarieddine, “Oppression and Violence Against Women: An Ecopsychological Perspective.” *Clinical and Experimental Psychology* 4, no. 1. Accessed April 21, 2019, <http://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/oppression-and-violence-against-women-an-ecopsychological-perspective-2471-2701-1000S2-001-98547.html>. Doi: 10.4172/2471-2701.1000189; Sarah Milner-Barry, “The Term ‘Mother Nature’ reinforces the idea that both women and nature should be subjugated,” accessed July 14, 2019, <https://qz.com/562833/the-term-mother-nature-reinforces-the-idea-that-both-women-and-nature-should-be-subjugated-amp/>.

⁴⁰ Ngozi N. Iheanacho, “The Fundamental Religious Values of Women in Etche Traditional Society,” in *Religion and the Bounds of Culture: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Christopher Ifeanyichukwu Ejizu*, ed. by Frank A.O. Ugiomoh, Kingsley I. Owete and Jones U. Odili (Port Harcourt: Rock publishers, 2017), 495.

⁴¹ Olaopa, *Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie*, 3.

⁴² Oduyoye, *Women and Ritual*, 10.

⁴³ Anene, Nathanel, Interview with the author. Umuatulu, Enugwu-ukwu. April 29, 2019

as subordinates and marginal elements in the community. Such stance does not correspond with what they stand for in the community and may not be to the best interest of the community. Going by the afro-centric theory - Stiwanism, it is high time the people started borrowing from indigenous culture to incorporate women in transforming the community socially, politically, and environmentally. That is the bottom line of this paper.

Recommendations

As a response to the findings of this study and considering the fact that oral histories and values appear to be going extinct as a result of urban drift and gradual culture loss in Enugwu-ukwu, the following recommendations are made to ameliorate budding marginalization and vilification of women.

1. Researches carried out in gender studies show that “in almost all cultures, women are more disadvantaged than men. Oppressive and unjust laws and negative attitudes are arrayed against women in patriarchal societies”⁴⁴ However, referring to a patrilineal society as mother implies that motherhood is valued by Enugwu-ukwu people. Therefore, women (mothers) should be given a pride of place in the community by community members. It can be achieved through conscious efforts on the part of community members to resuscitate their dying cultural values and language that valorizes motherhood and all that it represents.

2. “Achebe [a renowned Nigerian novelist] has clearly linked the decline of his culture to ignorance of one of its core values, namely respect for the female side of the universe.”⁴⁵ In Enugwu-ukwu, inert roles are assigned to women. This impedes on their potentials. The *Igwe* and his cabinet should come up with customary laws that will ensure that women are properly integrated and mainstreamed in contemporary Enugwu-ukwu, so as to be able to give more to the community. If in the subservient status of women that was exacerbated during the colonial rule and endured till present times, women are positively affecting the community, they will deliver more when they are sufficiently integrated into the scheme of things in the community. For instance, Enugwu-ukwu women should be given deprived rights in the community like right to inheritance and membership of the decision-making body of the community. This will heal their wounded psyche and empower them to contribute more to the community’s preservation and progress.

3. Oral histories and tradition that encapsulate cultural and religious values should be given their rightful place and not be allowed to fizzle out. The religious tradition that recognizes and reveres female deities alongside male deities should be treasured and consciously laid down to upcoming generations. More so, language which is the vehicle that transmits culture should not be allowed to fizzle out. The ongoing operation *suba kwa Igbo* (speak Igbo) championed by Prof Pete Ejiofor, the former Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Anambra State is a right step in the right direction. This can be brought down to grassroot level by the *Igwe* of Enugwu-ukwu by emphasizing it in his speech during major annual ceremonies like *Igu aro* (reading of the traditional calendar of a new year) and *onwa asato* (new yam festival usually celebrated on the eighth month of the year). Competition for young indigenes, with very attractive rewards for winners, on the use of Igbo proverbs, idioms and other expressions should form part of the highlights of some of the major ceremonies organized during festive periods when members of the community in diaspora come home. This will be entertaining, as well as instructive for community members. Efforts must be made by the community heads to keep language, especially proverbs, idioms, aphorisms and other phenomenal expressions such as *Enugwu nnem* alive.

4. Enugwu-ukwu culture and religion was gender sensitive and inclusive to a reasonable extent. Colonial influence, modernity and erosion of cultural values have dealt a blow to that reality. Things fell apart at some point. Women in Enugwu-ukwu therefore, should be sensitized on their worth by those with pre-colonial experience. Knowing their worth from historical antecedents, women should stop shying away, brace up and join hands with the men in complementarity to move the community forward. If this must be gotten by nonviolent struggles, then they should take up the challenge and continue to negotiate for proper inclusion. Little wonder, “patriarchy and its institutions have not fully yielded to women’s demands. To be in the struggle for justice and liberation is, therefore, to be in a *luta continua*, the struggle that always continues.”⁴⁶ They must not relent in their endeavour for gender equity in the community.

⁴⁴ Akachi Ezeigbo, “Gender Sensitivity and the Role of Umuada in Conflict Resolution,” in *Against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria*, ed. Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korie (Owerri: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2011), 189.

⁴⁵ Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, “Nneka: Is Mother Still Supreme in Igboland? Reflections on the Biography of Eze Mmiri, Madume Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo, Oguta, 1934-2007,” in *Against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria*, ed. Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korie (Owerri: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2011), 202.

⁴⁶ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 197.

CONCLUSION

Enugwu nmem among other things, connotes the maternity of Enugwu-ukwu, a patriarchal and patrilineal community in the south eastern part of Nigeria. Oral histories also show that the respected status of motherhood in the community has a protective effect on the environment. Drawing from Catherine Acholonu's theory – Motherism, there is link that connects the human mother, mother earth, mother deity or even 'community as mother' in Enugwu-ukwu. Hence, there is need to assiduously perpetuate these auspicious oral histories that advance the status of women in a community where they are treated as second class citizens. This will help to vanguard the struggle (effort) for gender equity and gender mainstreaming in the community vis-à-vis, Igbo communities. The recommendations already put forward in this paper, as well as putting measures in place to jealously guard language, culture and oral histories would go a long way to continue to make positive impact not just on the status of women alone but also on the environment which is a delicate issue in contemporary times.

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