



SPACE IN IGBO THOUGHT: PHILOSOPHICAL AND ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, PhD

Pontifical Faculty of Philosophy, Veritas University Abuja, Bwari

ikee_mario@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1977-202X

ABSTRACT

This paper focused on the value of space in Igbo eco-spirituality. The concept “Igbo eco-spirituality” was developed in 2021 by the researcher as an indigenous and traditional form of responding to the devastating realities of climate change, mass extinction, biodiversity loss, and the disruption of ecosystems among the Igbo-African people. It calls for a rethinking of the foundational beliefs regarding the preservation of the environment, and the need to create a welcoming space for indigenous voices so as to open the opportunity to benefit from a genuine exchange among cultures. The present research marked out three important spaces in Igbo ontology, which include land (ala), water bodies (mmiri) and sky (enu igwe) that shape discourses in Igbo eco-spirituality. This research introduces a discourse on the spiritual dimension of nature, which is a shift from the dominant paradigm, that is largely legalistic, consumerist, materialistic and profit oriented. The theoretical framework employed in this work is the Igwebuike framework, which is an indigenous holistic approach to the conservation of the environment that understands reality as complementary, interconnected and interrelated. Ultimately, this paper discovered the ecological value of land-space, water-space and sky-space in Igbo ecological discourses, which are relevant for conversations on the human struggle with climate change in the 5th year of the 2020s decade.

Keywords: Space, Place, Igbo, African, Ecology, Spirituality, Indigenous, Ecological Crisis

Introduction

In the ordinary sense of the word, ‘space’ designates “an empty or potentially empty expanse among things” or “a boundless extension which supposedly contains everything, or every thing of a certain sort” (Torretti, 1998). However, a cursory glance at the development of thought in Western philosophy reveals that, we can make a categorization of two perspectives of space. The first is the relationist perspective, which holds that space consists in the relationship between material objects (Baker, 2022). The relational perspective presents space as a way of understanding the relationships between physical objects. This perspective is grounded on ordinary things that can be sensed and measured without reference to mysterious entities.

The substantialist perspective holds that space is something real, like a material object that is made of many identical points, understood as infinitesimal, immaterial “containers” for matter (Peterson, 2022). They agree on the following- that points of space are the smallest possible units of space; and that points of space have well-defined metric properties that tell you the distance from one point of space to another. In this context, material objects and their parts can occupy points of space (Maudlin, 2012). Thus, while the relationists assert that space is not an independently existing thing, substantialists see space as an independently existing reality.



These notwithstanding, the question looming at the horizon of this piece is: How is space understood within the context of the African worldview? In African ontology, space is not just an independently existing thing or possible units with well defined metric properties that can be occupied by material objects. Also, it cannot only be defined in the sense of the relation between material objects. What contribution then is the Igbo-African worldview making to the global discourse on space? How does a unique African worldview contribute to the discourse on environmentalism? This paper will, therefore, study space (land-space, water -space and sky-space) from an Igbo-African perspective without neglecting their ecological significance.

Igwebuike Theoretical Framework

The Igwebuike theoretical framework will define the dynamics for the interactions of thought that would be responsible for the development of this paper. It is a combination of three Igbo words: *Igwe*, a noun, which means *number* or *multitude* made up of entities with ontological identities and significance, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other (Kanu 2020 & 2023). *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power*. Put together, it means ‘number is strength’ or ‘number is power’ (Kanu 2020 & 2023). Beyond the literal sense of the word, it captures the thermodynamics of the Igbo organic and holistic worldhood expressed in inter-relatedness, interconnectedness and complementarity. The Igbo worldhood is one that interacts with itself and reacts in consort.

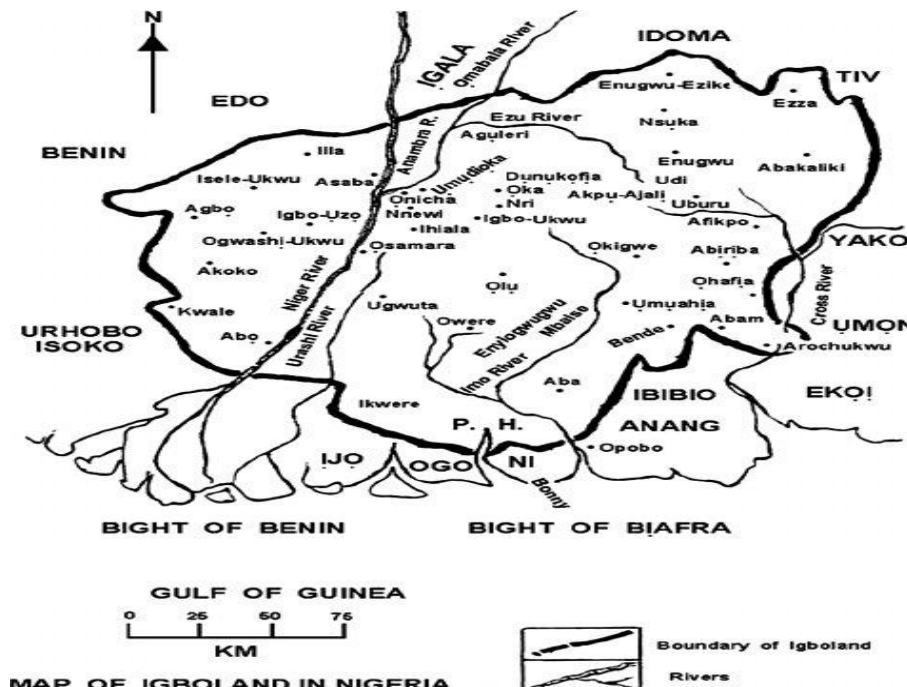
Igwebuike is a unifying concept and an explanatory theory of African thought, especially, that aspect concerning the human person’s conception of the spiritual and material universe in which he or she lives (Kanu 2020 & 2023). It interprets the puzzle of our complex relationships and strives beyond all forms of particularities, peculiarities, paradoxes and contradictions and espouses the path of complementation, therefore, showing how realities can relate to one another in a mutually harmonized non-absolutistic mode (Kanu 2023).

The ideas of inter-relatedness, interconnectedness and complementarity, which are at the heart of the Igwebuike theoretical framework are the concepts that will provide the pre-condition for the understanding and interpretation of the concept of space from an Igbo-African perspective. This theoretical framework expands the concept of space beyond the western view to include the African perspective, which is not only relational but sacred and spiritual. This theoretical framework would further provide the guide for the understanding of the Igbo-African worldhood, the Igbo-African concept of space, and how this concept of space relates to environmentalism.

The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria

The Igbo, according to Onuh (1991) is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. They inhabit the South Eastern Region (Njoku 1990), stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta (Kanu 2014). They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. They have closely related cults and social institutions and believe in a common Supreme Being known as *Chukwu* or *Chineke* (Kanu 2012).

Figure 1: Map of Igboland



MAP OF IGBOLAND IN NIGERIA

Culled from Ogochukwu

Socio-politically, the Igbo possess a complicated structure which has been qualified as *republican*. Their society is divided into clans, towns and villages, with the family as the nucleus of society. The traditional concepts of political power and authority are structured and determined by their concept of *umunna*, with a very strong sense of the family (Kanu 2014).

Igbo-African Philosophy of Space

a. Space as “Ebe”

Ebe is an Igbo world that means space or place. This section of the paper will attempt at developing the linguistic, ontological, epistemological and ethical implications of the Igbo word for space (*ebe*).

i. “Ebe”: Linguistic and Ontological Implications

Ebe in Igbo ontology is a category of being that speaks of *space* or *place*, and responds to the question of where. It is a category of being that is always used in relation to another Igbo category of being: *Ihe* (thing). *Ihe* could be material or immaterial. What qualifies *ebe* is the *Ihe* that is associated with it or occupies it. *Ebe* is always incomplete and less of meaningfulness without the *Ihe* that occupies it. It is always an *ebe* (place) where an *ihe* (thing) is. For instance, it has to be: *ebe oche na di* (space where chair is kept); *ebe aturu na ano* (where the sheep stays). As such, an *ebe* is incomplete without the *ihe* that occupies it. This is different from the Western pattern of thinking that is highly abstract, which can talk of a place without what is in the place. The pattern of philosophy in Africa is relational and concrete.

More interesting is the idea that an *ebe* determines the *ihe* that occupies it. However, it is the *ihe* that defines the *ebe*. For instance, *ebe ana agu akwuwo* (the place for study); *ebe ana azu ahia* (the place where buying and selling is done); *ebe ana ekpe ekpere* (the place for prayer).



The place for studying cannot conveniently be the same place for buying and selling of goods. A place shapes what happens in the place. Therefore, while the *ebe* determines the kind of *ihe* that occupies it, the *ihe* gives an identity to the *ebe* it occupies. For instance, *ebe ana eri nri* (where food is eaten)- while the place makes it convenient for eating, the eating gives the place a name.

ii. “Ebe”: Epistemological Implications

Ebe in Igbo ontology has epistemological implications, given that the knowledge of a place helps the person being communicated to about an event or a thing to understand how or why the thing (*ihe*) happened or what the thing (*ihe*) is. For instance, if one hears that a person came to Northern Nigeria and greeted the Emir standing, the question will be asked: where is he or she from? An understanding of where the person has come from will help the understanding of his or her action.

Ebe also helps to determine the justification for the claim for a thing that is or that has happened. Justification comes from the correlation between the thing (*ihe*) and the place (*ebe*). For instance, you cannot say that: a man got drowned while walking on the tarred road in the desert. The *ebe* does not correspond to the *ihe merenu* (what has happened).

From the foregoing, therefore, the understanding of the *ebe* helps the understanding of the *ihe*. It also helps to understand what has happened, why it happened and how to help the situation should help be needed. The African would, therefore, say in a proverb: *He or she that does not know where he or she is coming from will not know where he or she is going to*. In a similar proverb, the African says: *If one does not know where the rain started beating him or her, one would also not know when the rain will stop beating him or her*.

iii. “Ebe”: Ethical Implications

Ebe is also important in determining the morality of an action. Within this context, *ebe* also implies situation. There is an *ebe* that makes an action right, and another *ebe* that makes the same action wrong. For instance, in a situation of shooting a beggar who has visited your home to ask you for financial assistance, and the situation of shooting a burglar who has burgled your home and attempted killing you. These are different *ebes* qualifying the same action as right in one situation and wrong in another situation.

Another instance, showing the importance of *ebe* in morality discourse is a case of: a wife slapping the husband in their bedroom. When another hears it, advice could only be given the wife to be more charitable towards the husband; however, when a woman slaps her husband in a market place, in the presence of the ‘whole world’, it is taken to be a different issue and might attract the attention of the entire community. This explains why when an event happens, the African is quick to ask about where it happened.

b. Heterogeneousness of “Ebe”



In Igbo-African ontology, space is qualitatively heterogeneous. This implies that different spatial locations are physically different by virtue of their differences in location. Thus, the sky-space, water-space and land-space are different from each other, given their different spatial locations and what they contain. The uniqueness of their nomenclatures is shaped by the uniqueness of their spatial characteristics. These spaces are uniquely created to uniquely contain what they contain. For instance, a lion cannot live in the water, and the fish cannot live in the forest outside of water.

c. Object-dependentness of “Ebe”

Space in Igbo ontology does not exist independent of the object that inhabits it. There is, therefore, no void or vacuum in Igbo-African ontology as every space has a specific purpose. It also implies that one cannot be considering a space without reference to the object that occupies it. The value or meaningfulness of a space is in reference to the object that occupies the space. Spaces are, therefore, not just spaces for the sake of being spaces.

d. Personhood of “Ebe”

The Igbo understanding of the land, the sky and water bodies as manifestations of great spirits, means that they are not just considered things. These spaces are spiritual personalities deserving of respect and care. *Ala* and *Mmuo Mmiri* give the land and water bodies personal identities that have consciousness and also a voice and representations that can contribute to discussions about their own preservation through divination, negotiations and taboos (Kanu, 2021).

e. Sacredness of “Ebe”

Water-spaces, land-spaces and sky-spaces among the Igbo are not just spaces that can be measured; they are manifestations of the sacred. In Africa, places are referred to as sacred places because of the remarkable sacred events that took place in the space or its sacred formation or because it is an abode of the gods. Sacred places can be mountains or groves, forests, trees, stones, rivers, streams, lakes, etc (Nwachukwu, 2017). Water-spaces, land-spaces and sky-spaces are sacred spaces because of the relationship of the places with spiritual entities.

f. “Ebe” as centers of interaction

The partitioning of the universe in terms of land, water and sky, notwithstanding, there is a harmonious interrelatedness among the various portions of the universe. Thus, “nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (Eze 1998, 433).

Maurier (1985) writes that: “Relationship as the fundamental category of African philosophy, is the vital and active link between persons” (60). Iroegbu (1994) adds that: “Not only is relationship vital... It is also active” (360). It is in this regard that Senghor cited in Ahmadu (2021) avers that:

...the whole of the universe appears as an infinitely small and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from the gods to the spirits down



to man and end in the gods, who is the source of life and as a vital force. It is the Supreme Being who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces (4).

Igbo-African Eco-Spirituality

Igbo-African Eco-spirituality is distinguished by the connection it establishes between the understanding of the ecosystem and spirituality. Igbo spirituality is about the Igbo's consciousness and relationship with the supernatural (Kanu, 2021). This consciousness and relationship with the spiritual now becomes for the Igbo a basis for a responsible and humane relationship with and management of the environment. Thus, Olga cited in Kanu (2021) avers that "eco-spirituality brings together religion and environmental activism" (22) and Valerie cited in Kanu (2021) asserts that it is "a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment" (10).

The Igbo-African eco-spirituality, therefore, refers to ecological discourses or reflections that are anchored on the Igbo-African fundamental beliefs in the sacredness of the natural world and in the connection between human beings and nature, with the aim of finding solutions to the emerging ecological crisis. It is anchored on the Igbo worldview of spiritual interconnectedness of reality, and thus, the sacredness of the eco-system. Life in the African ecosystem is one in which relationships between nature and humans, spirit and nature are not dichotomized or compartmentalized, but are integrated into an interdependent system of existence that is tied together through spiritual interactions (Kanu, 2021).

Igbo-African eco-spirituality packages the understanding that the human person is a steward not master of the earth; reciprocity between land, plants and humans makes life on earth possible, a kind of a symbiotic relationship with the earth; it also raises awareness of the impacts of one's actions in the use of the environment on the present and future generations.

This offers an alternative approach to the present ecological crisis. Thus, Orobator (2016) posits that: "Upon careful scrutiny, the wisdom of the African spiritual tradition ... offers resources for cultivating sound ecological virtues and commitment" (1). In the contention of Uwineze (2021): "African spirituality invites us to an *aggiornamento*, a return to our origins (*ressourcement*), to use traditional African resources in deep appreciation of and conversation with Pope Francis' exhortation to care for and dialogue with our common home" (1).

Space in Igbo Eco-Spirituality

Spaces in Igbo ontology will be studied in this section of the paper, in relation to Igbo eco-spirituality.

a. Land-space: (Ala)

Land among the Igbo is called *Ala*, in some dialects, *Ani*. However, for the sake of this paper, *Ala* will be employed. In Igbo philosophy of religion, the land is not only a place or property, a thing or a space measured in square meters, it is life and a totality with religious, cultural, ecological, social and cosmological significance. It is also a spirit- *a female deity*. In fact, it is the most important deity in Igbo public and private cults as its sphere of authority extends to almost every aspect of Igbo endeavour, given that everything that is done has a bearing to the earth (Kanu, 2021).



God made all living things, including human beings and the vegetable kingdom from *Ala* and through *Ala*, and it is also through the *Ala* that human beings rejoin their maker – *Chukwu*. In the contention of Ogbukagu (2008), *Ala*: “... 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). Onwu (2002) further describes *Ala*: “as the goddess of fertility and guardian of Igbo morality, a power which controls - divinities and a force which brings fortune and economic prosperity” (2).

As a result of the special place that the land occupies in Igbo life, there is a bond between every child and the *Ala* deity, which is also a basis for interpersonal relationships in the community. Thus, Odigbo (2012) holds that: “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” (451). He also makes a connection between the land and fruitfulness: “Such goddesses make conception possible even for crops to grow to maturity to provide food for its inhabitants” (451).

Given the place land occupies among the Igbo people, it is always protected. Odigbo (2012) further writes that, “whenever anything affects this relationship by means of grievous sin or crime then, it is considered an abomination” (12). When a human person commits a crime, he or she is said to have “*Meruo Ala*” (defiled the earth) (Kanu, 2015). Among the offences against *Ala* from the perspective of Achebe (1958) and Ilogu (1974) include: incest, murder, stealing, exploitation of nature such as animals, streams, rivers and forests, etc. While *Chukwu* is in charge of creation and the giver of the moral law, *Ala* is in charge of conserving that which is created and enforcing the law of the land (Kanu, 2021).

b. Water-space: (Mmiri)

In Igbo-African ontology, water spaces, among other inhabitants, are abodes of female water spirits, and the spirit that inhabits the water are generally called *Mmuo Mmiri* (the spirit of the water) in Igbo or *Mammy Water*, *Mami Wata*, *Mami Wota* in pidgin English. It occupies a prominent place in the pantheon of Igbo-African gods and goddesses (Kanu, 2021). *Mmuo Mmiri* is also referred to with a variant of names: the sustainer of sea life, the bringer of hope, provider of help and protection, the bringer of gifts and exotic things. Indeed, she is said to hold the key to the gate that leads to the world of solutions. It is she who guides people to exotic lands, and chooses to permit human beings to travel and reach their destinations on top of the sea (Kanu, 2015). The identity and power of water-spaces, are determined by the spiritual beings that inhabit them.

According to Jell-Bahlsen (2014), *Mmuo Mmiri* is an ancient and important deity, which underscores awe for female fecundity, sacredness of life and water. She is supremely beautiful, colorful, sparkling, elusive and benevolent, however, equally dangerous as she can cause turmoil among a people, diseases and even bring about death. Unlike *Ala*, she usually has multiple spouses and can grant children to human beings. *Mmuo Mmiri* represents the female dimension of the Igbo universe and a role model of female achievement. Her icon among the Igbo is the python, crocodile and tortoise (Kanu, 2021).



c. Sky-space (Enu Igwe)

The sky space is not conceived as a vacuum but in relation to the spiritual beings that inhabit them. It is primarily known as the abode of the Supreme Being *Chukwu*. It is also the residence of divinities that are associated with planetary bodies. In Igbo philosophy of religion, the Supreme Being and two major deities are identified with the sky-space.

i. Chukwu/Osebuluwa

Chukwu and *Osebuluwa* taken from the Igbo language means Great God and Sustainer of the Universe, respectively. It is the name of the Supreme Being in Igbo philosophy of religion. He is the principal occupant of the sky-space, where he has been able to make provision for the habitation of other deities and human ancestors (Kanu, 2015).

ii. Igwe/Amadioha

Igwe is not only the sky, it is a deity also referred to as *Amadioha*, *Amadiora*, *Kamalu*; the son of *Chineke*, and the husband of *Ala*. It is the god of justice, love, peace, unity and hope for those in great need; and also, the god of enterprise that brings personal wealth. *Amadioha*, etymologically means ‘man of the people’, and stands for the collective will of the people. Even though *Chukwu* is the creator of the sky, it is considered that *Amadioha* is the “Owner of the Sky.” It is symbolized by lightening, and can pull down or up trees that have evil hidden in them, and such events are usually understood as an exposure by *Amadioha* (Kanu, 2021).

iii. Anyawu (Sun)

Anyawu literally means the sun. In Igbo traditional religion, it refers to the god of the Sun or the Sun god. It is also referred to as the eye of the light, and the god of insight, which is the capacity to gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding of a person or thing, and foresight, the ability to predict what will happen or be needed in the future (Kanu, 2018). *Anyawu* deity is the Igbo way of paying homage to the sun, which is revered all over the world for the light and heat it provides to make our planet earth habitable. According to Kanu (2018), “In the *Anyawu* deity, the Igbo expresses the central place that the sun occupies in Igbo daily life. For instance, the Igbo method of keeping time is based on it” (110).

The ecological significance of space in Igbo ontology

The ecological significance of space will be treated in relation to the land-space, sky-space and water-space.

a. Ecological significance of land-space

The understanding of the land as a deity, that is, the *Ala* deity introduces a new understanding in the human concept of nature with the concepts mother, source of life, nourisher, supporter and teacher. The land-space is not just a solid part of the universe, it is a she. As mother, it is the abode of the living and the dead as all will be buried in her womb, and thus, the home of the ancestors. From this understanding, the land is not seen as a property, or belonging to the people, rather the people belong to the land. *Ala* is, therefore, the landlord of the earth. And as a tenant, one must be of good conduct so as to avoid being thrown out of the earth (Afigbo 1992 & Orji 1999).

The concept of Motherhood introduces to the conversation on environmental sustainability the idea of respect, love, care, empathy, support, patience, etc., in relation to the use of the land.



These virtues enumerated are indispensable for the promotion of the good health of the environment. These concepts which are missing in the capitalist and consumerist relationship with nature is at the heart of the present ecological crisis (Odogwu, 2013).

b. Ecological significance of water-space

The Igbo understanding of water bodies as manifestations of great spirits, means that they are more than mere water bodies or places. They are great spirits given the spiritual being that inhabit them. They are, therefore, spiritual personalities deserving of respect and care. *Mmuo Mmiri* give water bodies personal identities that have consciousness. The identity that they give comes from the fact that water bodies are named according to these spiritual beings that inhabit them. This does not only give an identity but a voice and representation as the water bodies are now able to contribute to discussions about their own preservation through negotiations and taboos (Kanu, 2023).

The Igbo-African understanding of water bodies as spiritual personalities- a person, is manifested in the Igbo conception of these water bodies as having emotions. This means that they can be made happy or sad. At their sad moments, like a human person they can dash out their anger on the human person. This explains why the human society offers sacrifices of appeasement to them, especially in relation to taboos that have been violated (Kanu, 2023). This understanding introduces some caution in the human relationship with this dimension of nature as the destruction of the ecosystem can imply the destruction of a deity. Thus, Wallace (2000) avers that “the spectre of ecocide raises the risk of deicide: to wreak environmental havoc on the earth is to run the risk that we will do irreparable harm to the love and mystery of God” (60-61).

As a result of the respect given the spirits that occupy nature, protection is provided for nature. The crabs, crocodile, tortoise, snakes, water birds, frogs, etc., are seen as children and messengers of these water spirits and so are not to be harmed (Kanu, 2023). Such water bodies become breeding grounds for species of organisms for other connecting water bodies, with a great deal of biodiversity.

c. Ecological significance of sky-space

The Igbo understanding of the sky-space reinforces the relationship between the human person and nature- in terms of complementarity, interconnectedness, and inter-relatedness. The sky, the sun and the heavenly bodies are not understood as elements outside of the life and experience of the human person. They are part of nature, and the quality of relationship or our connectedness with them would determine or affect the quality of our lives.

The relationship with the sun and lightening only strengthens the consciousness that a wrong attitude towards nature, would have direct consequences on the health of the human person (Kanu, 2022). It is in this regard that Placid Tempels avers that: “The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (Eze 1998, 200).

Therefore, to treat other dimensions of nature with respect is to treat oneself with respect and to exploit them would mean waging war against oneself as there are future consequences. Within this understanding, the African sees himself or herself as part of nature and nature as part of his or her being. A kind of, “I am because nature is, and since nature is, therefore, I am”.



More so, the significant role that the sun and other heavenly bodies play in the daily survival of the human person on earth deepens the connection between our being and the being of the sky-space: the rain, the sun, etc., come from the sky and nourishes the earth. The sky is, therefore, seen as a nourisher of the earth and human life. The role of *Amadioha* and *Anyawu* in the provision of insights, understanding, intuition, justice, love, peace, unity, prosperity, show the daily relevance of the elements in the sky-space to the human survival and well-being.

Conclusion

The African concept of space distinguishes itself from the Western understanding of space in a couple of ways. In Western philosophy, while the relationists hold that space consists in the relationship between material objects, and, thus, ground their view of space in ordinary things that can be sensed and measured without reference to mysterious entities, the substantialists hold that space is something real, made of many identical points, understood as infinitesimal, immaterial “containers” for matter. In African ontology, which heavily accommodates both the ordinary and extraordinary, the concept of space does not exclude the mysterious and supernatural. This is based on the African view of reality that has been consistently based on the difficult synthesis of the natural and supernatural.

This African concept of space that is heavily immaterialistic, complementary, interrelated, interconnected, integrated, holistic, heterogeneous, with a distinguished capacity of personhood, interactiveness and sacredness, are the values that the Igbo-African worldview bring into the conversation on environmentalism. It is also what shapes the Igbo-African’s relationship with his or her environment. This paper, therefore, discussed the ecological value of the different dimensions of space in Igbo ontology, especially the land-space, sky-space and water-space in relation to the preservation of the eco-system. This paper strongly holds that there is a profound ecological value in the Igbo concept of space and believes that it is these ecological values that have helped the Igbo-African society to maintain ecological balance and order during the past centuries, especially in the period before the advent of colonialism, and that these values are still relevant to the human struggle with climate change in the 5th year of the 2020s decade.

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