

# CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE TRIALS OF THE SACRED PYTHON IN TEXT AND CONTEXT

Ngozi Udengwu  
&  
Ikechukwu Erojikwe  
&  
Ndubuisi Nnanna

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## ***Abstract***

*This study takes as a point of departure from the cultural transformation theory credited to Riane Eisler who argues against what she terms a dominator cultural model of the modern capitalist world, in favour of the partnership cultural model of ancient civilization. The present writing examines similar relationship between Christian religious groups and the indigenous cultural values, with focus on Christian crusade against the sacred python, the totemic symbol of the communities that make up the Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Consequently, the paper will interrogate the origin of the totemic symbol and its relationship with members of the community; the reason for the attack and the implications for national peace in Nigeria; and the role of government in the preservation of harmless cultural heritage. The paper relies on both primary and secondary sources. It finds that the sacred python is a symbol of the people's cultural identity and plays a fundamental role in their religious life; as such, attacks on the python is a breach of the people's cultural rights. The paper joins the call for the preservation of innocuous intangible cultural heritage.*

*Keywords: Cultural Rights, Cultural Transformation, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Totemism, Royal Python.*

## **Introduction**

It is easier to define tangible cultural heritage than to fully understand all that intangible cultural heritage entails. Since this study focuses on the intangible cultural heritage, attempt will be made to expand on existing definitions of the term to enable fuller appreciation of the argument of the present writing. Culture itself is an elusive etymological construct especially in this age of limitless border crossings that make a homogenous existence impossible. How to define culture becomes problematic in a globalized social system. One of the earliest attempts to define culture was made by the British anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor who in his seminal work *Primitive Culture* (1871) states that culture “is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society.” Advanced English Dictionary defines culture as “the attitudes and behaviors that are characteristic of a particular social group.” Culture is learned and that makes it an experiential reality. That, then, follows that there were experiential realities that gave impetus to cultural values and norms. These experiences, just as life itself, are bound to change in the light of new realities and new knowledge that may necessitate review, update, and transformation, or total abandonment and replacement of affected cultural belief.

Cultural heritages, on the other hand, include both tangible such as traditional clothing, tools, buildings, artworks, monuments, and modes of transportation (Study.com). sacred sites, worship objects, and intangible forms such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO 2011). They represent the way people characteristically do things inherited from ancient

times and passed down from generation to generation based on their interpretation and understanding of life in their environment. Culture is dynamic and these cultural practices and values shift and change in response to new exigencies, especially when they have become counter-productive and inimical to human development. Obnoxious cultural practices are known to have disappeared in many parts of the world, especially against women, these include bereavement norms in Eastern Nigeria (Onyekuru, B.U. 2011); genital mutilation, child marriage, honour killing, female infanticide in India (Sonakshi, 2015)

A lot of work has been produced by Africa's committed writers around the problems, too numerous to list here, plaguing Africa. A close look at these works, however, will reveal that the writers are mainly concerned with political, social and moral failings and the more they look the less they see that the root from which to approach these issues should be cultural more than any other perspective. Approached from a cultural standpoint even political, social and moral disillusionment will be redressed sustainably because the problem would have been tackled from the roots. The wanton destruction and desecration of cultural heritage in Eastern Nigeria, especially Anambra State, has assumed an alarming dimension and should be a cause for concern for cultural heritage defenders, relevant United Nations agencies, Human Right Activists, Civil Rights Movements, the National Orientation Agency, and all agencies, organizations, writers, and institutions who claim and are established to uphold human rights (cultural rights) of all citizens and groups; and operating on the principles of democracy. Though a few cases of intentional destruction of cultural heritage in Eastern Nigeria will be examined in this study, the paper does not in any way suggest that this incident is peculiar to Eastern Nigeria, nor Africa. In fact, cultural abuse is a global scourge as many ethnographic studies have demonstrated. In his research work titled "Animals, Governance and Ecology: Managing the Menace of Venomous Snakes in Colonial India" (2017), Lloyd

Price describes how, in 1871, the colonial government in India set up a bounty scheme aimed at exterminating the large population of venomous snakes that killed over 20,000 people each year. By that scheme the locals were given some incentives to eradicate the snakes, the population of which the colonial government blamed on the ‘irrational’ Hindu culture of tolerance towards animals. The bounty scheme was, however, a failure (202). The failure of the scheme forced the colonial government to adopt in 1890, an alternative approach – sanitation – to minimize the interaction between man and snakes.

Philipp Altmann (2017) discusses racism, intolerance and discrimination against some indigenous cultural values in Ecuador and the consequent emergence of a local concept of “good life” that serves the needs of the indigenous people as opposed to that defined by White thinkers. Altmann is in effect saying that for authentic cultural transformation to occur it must emanate from the indigenous movements and organization, not necessarily from the nation-state which in practice operates on colonial principles and is unwilling to cede autonomy to collective citizens (Radcliffe 2012, 248 quoted in Altmann 758). On another trajectory Dilyara Suleymanova (2018), in “Creative cultural production and ethnocultural revitalization among minority groups in Russia” discusses progresses made with preserving indigenous cultures in Russia through the appropriation of the new digital technologies by minority ethnocultural activists from Tatarstan who had lost their political autonomy under Putin’s Government.

To preserve and how to preserve ethnic cultures in the face of pluricultural environment has been a growing concern to social-anthropological, as well as cultural studies, and Nihat Kotluk (2018) proposes a culturally relevant and culturally responsive education for a multicultural nation such as Turkey. Such an approach to education will no doubt strengthen cultural respect and integration where children are brought up to feel a sense of belonging in their lived environment irrespective of the fact that they have a different

cultural background. Otherwise, as Kotluk's research further reveals, culturally different students have low expectations, low motivation, lack of adaptation, lack of self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, etc. (98). Da Costa Emboaba Alexandre (2018) likewise documents similar tension in Brazil where the adherents of the Brazilian Black Movement took a leap of fate to sever ties with the Municipal Government following the latter's failure to implement a proposed educational policy that will ensure racial equality in Brazil. Noting that racial violence and anti-black sentiment are not limited to Brazil but rather are a global scourge as societies of the world are seeking to solve the challenges of cultural diversity, Da Costa states;

From Latin America to North America, Europe to Asia recognition of cultural diversity and accommodation or distribution of rights for minority groups have shaped significant debates about national identity, belonging, citizenship and subnational forms of governance (29).

However, for the purpose of the present study, the searchlight is on selected incidents of intentional destruction of cultural heritage which occur in different form such as desecration of traditional religious shrines, wanton violation or killing of sacred animals, defilement of sacred spaces (rivers or bushes), and vandalization of cultural artefacts revered by a cultural group. Our focus is on the violation of sacred animal – the royal python of Idemili.

Unfortunately, most scholarly discourses on ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, and proposals for the resolutions of such matters are always targeted at Islam versus Christian conflicts the origin of which they blame on “forced” amalgamation of North and South Nigeria in 1914 (Arowolo 2010; Nwaomah, 2011; Ugorji, 2016). Dare Arowolo takes a holistic view of the effect of Western civilization and culture on Africa and declares that African culture

is in a logjam at the moment and is disappointed that African leaders are belittling themselves before Western leaders instead of stemming the “tide of Western cultural domination” (12). The list of works addressing the devastation of African culture by Europe is endless, but one such contribution that needs to be mentioned is the writing by Beloveth Nwankwo (2015) which among other things points out causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. First on his list of causes is “The Nigerian Government’s neglect of the needs of ethnic and religious groups, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, and violation of human rights” (298).

These discourses seem oblivious of the fact that the traditional religion is also under attack meaning that another form of religious war, of a more dangerous type, is brewing. This paper is not concerned with religious conflicts between the two major foreign religions -Islam and Christianity – because diverse and multiple research have focused on that already. The paper is not about the repression of Nigerian indigenous cultures by colonialists, either. The paper looks at the intracultural type of culture conflict in which cultural values are attacked not by colonial powers but by indigenes of the cultural group orchestrated by their adoption of foreign religious ideals that trivialize indigenous belief system which they regard as primitive and superstitious. These indigenes that act as an instrument for the suppression and obliteration of indigenous culture can be christened cultural saboteurs. True, the two volatile and invading religions - Islam and Christianity have been the greatest causes of instability in Nigeria. Religion and culture are inseparable. Religion reflects the culture of its origin embedded in the philosophy, symbols, values, customs, norms, and beliefs and worldview of the cultural group. Thus, Islam reflects and represents Arabic cultural norms and practices, Christianity embodies Hebrew cultural beliefs and experiences, while traditional African religion is a repository of African cultural identity. Again, religions are developed as the total of a people’s life experience in their lived environment over eternity, thus religion helps the people

interpret, manage and control their environment. In the end, theoretically, religions have the same goal which is to understand the world around and live in harmony with all things. Thus, all religions preach the same virtues that will help achieve harmony – love, and peace. Practice seems to contradict these religious theories and ideals.

The chapter four of Augustine Okwu’s book *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions 1857-1957: Conversion in Theory and Practice* is aptly titled “Attack on Igbo Culture 1885 – 1899” when the Roman Catholic Mission headquarters was set up in Onitsha, three years after which the Presbyterian Mission was set up in Uwana in the current Ebonyi state (99). Okwu also reveals that the first missionary project in Igboland was carried out from 1857 – 1869 by Sierra Leonean C. M. S. missionaries who were of Igbo descent including Rev. John Christopher Taylor (born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents), Solomon Samuel Perry, Julius Spencer, Thomas Samuel, and Simon Jonas (a teacher who acted as interpreter as well as a missionary agent); under the supervision of Rev. (thereafter Bishop) Ajayi Crowther. Described as “a practical missionary who understood the politics of the age and the culture of his parentage,” Taylor proposed and was approved by Crowther, “selective pragmatism” as opposed to “radical transformation” to introduce Christian message to the Igbo indigenes (100). His missionary approach is demonstrated in his statement on how to wean the indigenes from their barbaric practice of human sacrifice, thus;

[A missionary] cannot, isolatedly pull down long habits of traditional (sic) air handed down to posterity without seriously implicating himself to the politics of the nation – he may warn and lift up his voice against the madness of the people ... beyond that, he cannot go, it requires a high hand of authority to subjugate and suppress such inhumanity. (qtd in Okwu 100).

Okwu offers a statement that captures the focus of the current writing when he reveals that one of the most important converts of Taylor was a rich young Onitsha man named Okolo Okosi who in 1862 surrendered all his idols to the missionaries, abandoned his indigenous religion, dismissed all his wives except one. He was rewarded with baptism and change of name to John Samuel, (John from John Taylor) and (Samuel from Samuel Perry). He basically rejects himself and his birthright. Why did he not teach them the wisdom of Igbo people which says that the firewood found in an environment is best suitable for cooking in that environment? After Taylor was supplanted by his opponents, Okwu reports that,

The young overzealous Evangelicals introduced their reformist ideas and plans by prohibiting Igbo traditional practices such as customary marriage, payment of ‘bride price’ and the customary naming ceremony, indigenous time-immemorial customs that were neither hostile to Christianity nor connected with heathen worship. And in spite of the wise advice of the local church agents that the practices were not pagan customs, the European missionaries suspended without explanation, local missionaries, Christians, catechumens who were involved in any of the practices or who took a strong position against the ill-conceived program of reform (105).

These two groups of missionaries properly represent what Riane terms dominator versus partnership.

### **Roots of the Attack**

In his study titled “Religion in the Ancient World: Definition”, Joshua Mark (2018) dissects religious forms and contents of some ancient civilization including Egypt, China, India, Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia, and found that they all have common patterns even before they learned about the existence of one another. He finds that



actual belief structures, spiritual iconography, stories, and most significant figures in ancient mythologies are remarkably similar from culture to culture and have an enormous influence on modern religious beliefs and practices. Some of these patterns include the existence of many gods that have direct relationship with humans; belief in a creative supernatural entity through whom all life came into existence; existence of other supernatural entities as appendages of the supreme deity; a supernatural explanation for natural occurrences; relationship between humans and gods through worship and sacrifice; etc. The bottom line of his study is summarized in his statement that “The religions of the ancient world provided answers to people's questions about life and death and, in this regard, are no different than those faiths practiced in the world today”. Mark’s study is following a similar study published in 2013, *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World* in which many scholars researched into the history and philosophy as well as the practice and influences of world’s ancient religions. All these make it even more difficult for some scholars to understand the existing religio-cultural conflict as Patrick Enoch Nmah (2016) observed in his study of the socio-religio-cultural conflict between Christians and the people of Awka in Anambra state of Nigeria because the Christians antagonize certain religio-cultural practices associated with burial and marriage rites in Awka.

Frank Deaville Walker’s work, *The Romance of the Black River: The Story of the C. M. S. Nigeria Mission* represents one of the most damning documents that seems to seal the fate of tradition and culture in Nigeria through a calculated long-range plan for total wipeout of indigenous culture and religious beliefs and practices by turning the people against their own cultural principles and values. All it took was to select and brainwash a few individuals in the communities into self-hating and push them back to infect the rest of the community taking advantage of African culture of the kinship system. The national census of 1921 fueled the determination of the missionaries to aggressively pursue their missionary crusade. That

census revealed that in Southern Nigeria there were 614, 000 non-Roman Catholic Christians (7%), 146, 705 Roman Catholics (2%) Moslems (5%) while pagans (referring to the traditional non-Abrahamic religionists) constituted a staggering 86% of the population. The struggle was intensified, between the Catholics and the non-Catholics especially the Church Missionary Society, for the souls of the “pagans.” To achieve success in this religious campaign a change of tactics was needed as clearly stated here, “What our West African Christians need is not so much nice sermons as definite instruction in the Christian life and the making of Christian homes”. That was how the people were indoctrinated and brainwashed into self-loathing that translated into attacking and destroying their own culture adjudged sinful and primitive by the alien invaders.

Attack on indigenous cultural values and norms thus started from the foreign religions of the colonialists (Meziemadu 1987) who through reward and punishment forced the people to hate their culture and replace same with the culture of the invaders. Thus, in Nigeria, everything got displaced – mode of dressing changed, this was contested by teachers who were told they may not wear their traditional outfits to school (Echeruo 1981). Textiles and clothing fashion that were not suitable for tropical climate were introduced; African names were changed to English ones; system of democracy was displaced; our religious beliefs and cultural values were displaced; Our thatched roof and mud house (now considered more appropriate against global warming) were replaced by zinc (now considered harmful to health): kinship and close family system was discouraged.

### **The Trials of the Royal Python?**

In a report posted in some print and online media including *Vanguard*, *Sunday Tribune* (Jun 22, 2013), *Metro News* (7<sup>th</sup> May 2013), the Overseer of the Mercy Throne Assembly Church in Umuoji whose name was given as Rev. Jude Chibueze, killed a

python which he claimed came into his children's room while they were asleep at night. He killed it and threw it into the bush. Umuoji is in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria where it is forbidden to kill pythons because of its link with the great deity of the land, Idemili. The community gave the man a list of items he must buy to appease the deity, but he refused. He claimed that the items would cost not less than fifty four thousand, eight hundred and ninety Naira (₦54,890). According to a community leader, the pastor had earlier agreed to provide the sacrificial items, but later changed his mind claiming that it is against his Christian faith, and besides, it was a snake and not a man that he killed. He called the police claiming that he was beaten up by some community members. Six members of the community were arrested. Consequently, his church was sealed off with palm fronds. The police played a mediatory role in the case to avoid breakdown of law and order. This is one of such incidents that have been witnessed in recent times against an age-old custom by overzealous Christians. Reverend Chibueze's action was no doubt hailed by some other Christians of like mind. For example, reacting to the incident, one Rev. Celestine Ekpunobi of the Umuoji Gospel Ministries Fellowship declared that any culture that forbids the killing of snake is "barbaric". One wonders, at this point what is more barbaric than killing an animal that does not harm anyone.

The reason for violating an age-long cultural norm is not clear. Reverend Chibueze said something about protecting his human rights. He probably has no idea that there are animal rights, too. It does not make sense why plunder, desecrate and destroy other people's cultural or religious symbols until one reads Riane Eisler's 1987 paper titled *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* in which she developed a conceptual framework for studying social systems, with a view to understanding how social relations are constructed to produce societies with capacity towards violence, or tolerance. Her study of Western culture from prehistoric times to present reveals a continuous tension between

two opposing social principles corresponding to two models of social systems – the “dominator model” (17) in which “gods and men of war ruled” (58), and Partnership model marked by humane principles. Dominator model describes a fascist modern world order in which the blade, marked by violence and disregard for human life and dignity, as opposed to the Partnership model which describes a democratic world in which the chalice, marked by nurturing, protective, and the humane principles, would henceforth be supreme, a world in which peace and harmony remain elusive, sacrificed on the altar of authoritarian hierarchies. It is not any wonder that the negative attitude towards the sacred python was initiated by the colonialists as we will see from Chinua Achebe who has written very passionately about the fate of the python as a representation of Western socio-cultural dominance masquerading as civilization. However, the incidents that inspire this study did not occur during the colonial period, nor perpetrated by colonialists, but by people who though not from Idemili, but are from Igboland, and so they are not unfamiliar with the cultural norm. Lately, there have been reports in both print and online media about members of the Christian religion who intentionally killed the sacred python and refused to appease the Idemili deity (Ogunbanke 2012; Niyi 2013; Ogbeche 2016; Duru 2017; Onyeakagbu 2019, to mention but a few).

Idemili is a Local Government Area in Anambra State in the Eastern part of Nigeria, comprising 17 towns. The name of the Local Government is derived from the name of the biggest river in that area known as River Idemili, named after the greatest deity in the area. From its source in Agulu, the river flows through towns and communities of the area to empty into the River Niger, at Onitsha. The symbol of Idemili is a python because the python is believed to be the messenger of the Goddess. Its visit to homes is believed to be a spiritual mission to bring messages from Idemili, though it also rids the homes of unwanted rodents. We find that this specie of python, short, fat with clean spots is not venomous and

has never been known to bite humans. It has never been given any cause to bite since it is immune to human aggression. Some people use it as pet. But some people do not like it to come close to them, and in such a situation they use a long stick to collect it and throw it far into the bush. For it not to return to that house, the stick is usually thrown away together with the python. There is that level of communication between the people and the python. When a stick is pushed under the middle of the python, it coils round the stick making it easier for the person to carry it away. They are not worshipped but they are respected as messengers of Idemili. The people's attitude towards the animal is more social than religious. Because of the bond between this animal and the communities, it can be described as a totem not exactly as John McLennan (1870) views it as primitive form of religion, but more as Tylor (1899) views it as a sociological connection.

### **Totemism**

Totemism is a universal human practice and anthropologists have tried to understand its complex philosophical imports (McLennan 1899, J. G. Frazer 1887 and 1910, Alexander Goldenweiser 1910)). The term itself lacks a definitive quality as it exhibits complex characteristics from one place to another and from one period to another. All attempts by scholars to define that practice have failed to capture its complexities. It refers to the tendency in man to attach a mystical power to an aspect of nature regarding it as the controller of an aspect of their lives. Based on that belief they accord the object, animate or inanimate, a special respect and recognition in their society, and their identity get to be associated, one way or the other, with that object. To add to the confusion, anything can be a totem – tree, river, any animal, food, weather, name it. Again, totems come in all varieties. Frazer groups them under three categories namely, clan-totem which connects a whole community; there is individual-totem, and sex-totem. Any wonder Michal Wagner (2019) has no faith in totem research all of which only

proves one thing, there is no such thing as totemism. He arrives at that conclusion after analyzing theories of such scholars as James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud whose research is a display of great effort in applying an existing scientific formula in explaining a phenomenon that is far removed from the formula.

In the case of these three, we can see how one's perspective can impact research in a similar way as working within the scientific community and its paradigm. Totemism, as a non-existent subject of the study, shows this dependence more clearly because the individual perspective (as well paradigm) is not so much indicative of the possible range of solutions of the puzzle but imposes its solution. In this way, totemism becomes a mirror reflection of the philosophical and methodological assumptions of a given scholar (55).

As the Scottish ethnologist, John Ferguson McLennan's study *The Worship of Animals and Plants* (1870) reveals, totemism is a stage in the development of all human races. The problem with the study is its assumption that the totems are worshipped. When a totem is worshipped, it has transcended its primary status as a social or religious symbol to becoming a god or a deity. at least not the sacred python of Idemili people. The totems are believed to be in kinship with the social group, but not necessarily worshipped. Deities or gods are worshipped, but totems are respected just as other members of the community. The origin of the relationship between a cultural group and its totemic symbol is always found in the group's folklore. Being an ethical practice, totemism is invariably linked to the cultural and religious philosophy of a given group, but it is not a religion because the group may already have a religion before the incident that brought them to respect a particular animal or object, as the case may be. Eke Idemili is not really worshipped but respected as the messenger of the deity, Idemili.

According to the local myth and which is recounted in much detail in major research carried out by both Ifeyinwa Amadiume (1983) and Obiageli Umeji (1997), Idemili was a very powerful goddess who had her shrines in all the communities through which the river passed and the sacred python was her totemic symbol. She was so powerful that women did not enter her shrine, and her priest must be a “female man” because he did not only serve the goddess but he did that dressed in a wrapper like a woman, instead of the loin cloth that was male attire. Explaining the preference for female gender Amadiume states:

The female gender had the more prominent place in myth, indigenous religious and cultural concepts. There was a strong female-orientation. The supernatural, a goddess, is female. The stream, Iyi Idemili, is the source of divinity (78).

### **The Sacred Python in Chinua Achebe’s Novels**

Chinua Achebe (1930 – 2013), the internationally acclaimed icon of African Literature, and the author of classical works such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, was a native of Ogidi, the headquarter of the Idemili Local Government Area whose totem is the royal python. It is, therefore, significant to note that he, more than any writer from that part of the country engaged readers with the tradition and significance of this sacred animal and its eventual demise in the light of Christian crusade against indigenous ideas, values, and models.

Richard Bryan McDaniel observed Achebe’s fixation with the royal python story in at least three of his literary works including *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and “Lament of the Sacred Python”. McDaniel states,

What seems significant about Achebe’s use of python is that it always appears in the same type of episode. It is always portrayed in a situation in which a Christian commits

sacrilege against it. Furthermore, the Christian, significantly, is never European, but rather always African (1976: 101).

It is not just that the culprits are Africans, but the status of the African saboteurs is very appalling because these are the very ones who should lead the crusade to save African culture from extermination, who should be cultural defenders, the African intellectuals. Wole Soyinka (2008) is irked that “this same breed of intellectuals employ the alien yardstick of their spiritual and intellectual enslavers to annihilate the spiritual heritage of that same society.” (24)

The fact that it is indigenes that are violating this intangible cultural heritage is of utmost importance to the current writing that seeks to understand why and the implications of this aggression against one’s own culture. These recalcitrant indigenes are practically puppets manipulated by European missionaries. As M. Keith Booker acknowledges:

The python also plays an important role in traditional Igbo myth and culture where the royal python is associated with the god Idemili and considered sacred. Given the association of serpent with Satan in Christian tradition, it is perhaps not surprising that the British colonizers of Africa worked especially hard to eliminate the python worship (228).

Achebe has python episodes when depicting the conflict between the Christian religion and traditional values. In *Things Fall Apart* (2008, first published in 1958), there are two incidents of attack on indigenous values by Christian converts carrying out the instructions of the European missionaries. In chapter eighteen, after converting to Christianity, a local named Okoli was accused of killing the sacred python. The clan met and ostracized members of the new religion, and though it was suggested that Okoli denied committing the crime he fell ill and died days after. The second



incident is more devastating for the indigenous culture and indicative of the true mission of the new religion. Another local convert, this time the son of the priest of Idemili, the deity whose insignia is the sacred python, killed and ate the sacred python. His father disowned him. His fanaticism continues when on the feast of the Earth Goddess he unmasks the great Egwugwu masquerade. It is perhaps in *Arrow of God* (1986, first published in 1964) that one begins to realize how life-changing the experience with the foreign religion will be. It is also in this novel that both sides argued out their case. For instance, there is a heated argument between the fanatical Christian convert from Niger Delta and a new teacher in Umuaro, Mr. John Goodcountry and Moses Unachukwu when the former commanded his church congregation to kill the sacred python. Goodcountry cajoles, incites and taunts his congregation:

If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for our faith...You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it, do not count yourself a Christian (AOG, 47).

Chinua Achebe refers to this crop of people as “superficial minded Christians” because they are shallow, naïve and uncritical and even ludicrous. They throw away the baby and the bath water. The first sentence in the above quotation is a fanatical utterance and the rest are indicative of one who has really not enough knowledge of the subject. The word ‘father’ only indicates respect, word of endearment. Yet he calls Eve his mother. How is that possible? The last statement makes it clear that to be a Christian is the best thing that each convert should give up his life for. However, he does not go unchallenged. Moses Unachukwu, the first and most famous convert in Umuaro, is opposed to killing the python for two reasons. While he does not dispute the point that it was this python that

deceived Eve, who he believes to be his first mother, he sees that as more reason they should leave the “cursed” beast alone. Having said that, he tells Mr. Goodcountry to face the missionary work he was sent to do and leave the python alone. Again, he retells a story of how Umuama, the seventh village in Umuaro was wiped out because once upon a time in that village six brothers killed and ate the python. Goodcountry calls it a foolish story that is not fit to be told in the house of the lord. In response to the insult, Moses lashes out,

If you are wise you will face the work they sent you to do here and take your hand off the python. You can say that I told you so. Nobody here has complained to you that the python has ever blocked his way as he came to church. If you want to do your work in peace you will heed what I have said, but if you want to be the lizard that ruined his own mother’s funeral you may carry on as you are doing. (AOG, 50)

The striking thing about this python debate is the lackadaisical attitude of the indigenes. Moses, though the most famous and highly respected convert, is not able to rally his fellow Umuaros to oppose the wantonness and excesses of the overzealous Goodcountry.

In *Beware Soul Brother* Achebe warns his “foolish brother,” Beware soul brother/Of the lures of Ascension Day. He basically berates African leaders whose incompetence and amateurish leadership has thrown the continent into a state of wretchedness and inconsequentiality. In yet another poem in that collection titled “Agostinho Neto,” in honour of the first president of the independent Angola (1975 – 1979) he describes the “sinister grin of Africa’s idiot-kings / Who oversee in obscene palaces of gold / The butchery of their own people”.

Readers are first introduced to the sacred python and its oppression in Achebe’s first novel *Things Fall Apart* in which the

python undergoes the first assault from a Christian convert in Mbanta named Okoli, who commits the taboo of willfully killing the revered totemic symbol of Idemili signaling the beginning of the obliteration of a humane culture and exposes the incapability of the local leaders to defend their own. As a result of that incident, members of the new religion are ostracized, and the culprit dies mysteriously a few days after committing the crime. Readers learn a thing or two about the sacred python namely that it is the symbol and messenger of the great River Goddess, Idemili “an emanation of the god of water.” The narrator goes on to explain that

The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as “our father” and allowed to go wherever it chose, even into peoples’ beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hen’s eggs. If a clansman kills the royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who kills the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen (126 – 127).

In *Arrow of God*, the same totemic animal confirms the symbolic function it suggests in the first novel. The python works figuratively as a symbol of the state of convulsion in which the community is as a result of the choking grip of the new religion and colonial power. This is apparent in the plight of the python that Oduche, Ezeulu’s son imprisons in an airtight wooden box (Omar Sougou 2004, 41).

In “Lament of the Sacred Python,”  
And great father Idemili  
That once upheld from earth foundations  
Clouds banks of sky’s endless waters

Is betrayed I his shrine by empty men  
Suborned with the stranger's tawdry gifts  
And taken trussed up to the altar-shine turned  
Slaughterhouse for the gory advent  
Feast of an errant cannibal god  
Tooth-filed to eat his fellows.

And the sky recedes in  
Anger; the orphan snake  
Abandoned weeps in the shadows (In Catherine Innes  
Lycette, 1990: 146 – 147, and Sougou 1991: 49).

It is important to clear a misconception that has been repeated in Achebe's works. The sacred python is not addressed as "our father" but "our mother." It is not clear why Achebe consistently used the male title. The sacred python is addressed as a mother by the communities in Idemili area because it is believed to be the messenger of the goddess or the goddess wearing that form to appear physically to humans. Why Achebe decided to change the gender of the deity is a matter for concern because it seems to suggest a dereliction or usurpation of power. Any wonder then that the Christian religion, with its destructive male dominator orientation, is not relenting in its effort to obliterate the symbol of the humane religion? Exercising the ultimate judgment on the peaceful harmless animal may be interpreted to represent the mortal combat between male and female element for domination and supremacy.

### **Cultural Imperialism Should Stop, But How Can It Be Stopped?**

Why should it be stopped? It should be stopped because it constitutes religious intolerance that has rendered peace elusive in Nigeria. Over the years, the war has been between Christianity and Islam which has led to enormous loss of lives and property and the

fact that such religious fracas demonizes one group in the eye of the other makes the most needed peace difficult. To begin to address this issue and avert a more catastrophic religious disturbance in the near future, awareness of citizens should be raised towards the rights of every individual, and how they stand to gain from religious diversity rather than lose; the benefits of mutual respect and the evils of intolerance. The governments at all levels should be more proactive in stopping religious intolerance and forestalling religious extremism and insurgency. One way of doing this is by initiating legislative frameworks and adopting affirmative actions to curb religious extremism and protect all religious groups as well as safeguard endangered cultural heritage.

Why should cultural heritage be protected? Because it is identity, it is history, it is knowledge, it aids mutual understanding and respect, it is a human right. Rule 38 titled “Attacks against Cultural Property” of Customary IHL as captured by the International Committee of the Red Cross is directed towards groups engaged in armed conflicts. The law condemns the destruction of buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education, and historic monuments, as well as “property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people.” Cultural property is considered civilian and, therefore, should not be made an object of attack. Attack on such objects is considered a punishable offense unless such objects are used for military objectives. The world is rich in declarations such as this. The surprising thing is that they remain cosmetic whereas the cultural crimes soar unabated as Serge Brammertz, et al (2016) reports that the efforts to curb attacks against cultural heritage in time of conflict is as old as the crime itself. The authors are rather more concerned with the intentional destruction of cultural property as part of cultural cleansing campaigns, and the prosecution of such attacks by the International Criminal Court. This means that attack on cultural heritage is unacceptable even in a war situation. The attack against cultural heritage which this paper is concerned with is

not done during armed conflict nor is it perpetrated by military personnel, nor are they used for military objectives, yet the offenders are never confronted by authorities.

Again, in 2016, the United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennoune, invited all relevant stakeholders to contribute to a consultation on the intentional destruction of cultural heritage as a violation of human rights. The consultation aims to assess the intentional destruction of cultural heritage and its impact on the exercise of the rights to enjoy and access cultural heritage, to access, contribute to and enjoy the arts and to participate in cultural life. To this purpose, all States, United Nations agencies, academics, and civil society organizations are invited to send their contributions. The invitation constitutes a further fundamental justification for the present paper.

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding pages we saw the need to stop the wanton killing of the sacred python for the sake of peace, the observation of human rights and cultural rights, for the preservation and documentation of cultural history and heritage. Respect for the python may not be understood by foreigners and even indigenes who have alienated themselves from their roots, but it does for the communities and this is where the problem lies because the indigenes see the killing of the sacred python as an act of war hence they fight back. For a country that has been devastated by religious intolerance and conflict, between Christians and Moslems, to watch while another kind of intolerance and conflict develop will be preposterous. It is the duty of the Federal Government, through its relevant organs to declare a cultural practice unlawful when that practice has become injurious to life. Also, it is the duty of the Government to prosecute any person or persons that take laws into their own hands by antagonizing another's cultural values simply because their belief is opposed to it. Importantly, it will be disastrous to continue to ignore the wanton destruction and strong

intent to annihilate the cultural heritage of a group of people because of the belief that yours is better. The risks facing cultural defenders should be minimized in order to achieve a good result. The situation on the ground is that most traditional rulers, legislators, some people in the academia, civil society groups and others that fall into the category of cultural defenders in Eastern Nigeria ignore the plight of traditional worshipers.

### **Recommendations**

Governments should intervene and establish the rule of law that forbids individuals and groups taking laws into their own hands, in order to prevent total breakdown of law and order that can easily result to violence and other acts of war.

It is easy to live in Idemili and avoid encounter with the python. Keeping the environment clean and clear of rodents and ants that attract python and even venomous snakes is a necessary way to live in order to avoid visit from unwanted reptiles. A culture that respects lives including those of animals is a humane culture, and an ecological friendly environment (Gumo et al 2012). On the other hand, a culture that kills harmless creatures is inhuman.

In the ancient times pythons had easy access into people's homes because they were welcomed with open doors and windows. However, with closed doors and windows protected with mosquito net and burglary proof, it beats the imagination how a python gains access into modern homes.

It is also recommended that in the case of ophidiophobia or herpetophobia, meaning that somebody is afraid of or allergic to snakes or reptiles, the individual should exercise wisdom and not live in a community that revere reptiles. In view of this, the partnership model proposed by Eisler (1987), will help forestall future religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Further research should be carried out into this specie of python found in Idemili to determine the reasons they do not bite

humans, and also to find out if they can ever, under certain circumstance, bite humans.

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#### **AUTHORS' NAMES AND ADDRESSES:**

**Ngozi Udengwu, PhD**

Dept of Theatre and Film Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

**&**

**Ikechukwu Erojikwe**

Dept of Theatre and Film Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

**&**

**Ndubuisi Nnanna, PhD**

Dept of Theatre and Film Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.