



# Nature worship in the digital age: A case of Omabala clan in Anambra State in South East Nigeria



## Research article



This article is published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the:

**Research Journal in Advanced Humanities**, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2021

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### Article Information

Submitted: 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Accepted: 25<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Published: 4<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding: None



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ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)



To read the paper online, please scan this QR code

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### Abstract

The study examined the patronage of nature worship in the digital age with focus on Omabala clan in Anambra State. It is premised on the fact that nature worship still holds sway in the digital and Christian-dominated society. Five research questions guided the study which employed a survey design. The population was the Omabala clan scattered in four LGAs in Anambra State. 100 respondents drawn using convenient sampling formed the sample. Data were elicited by means of a researcher-designed questionnaire tagged 'Female Nature Worship Questionnaire' (FENAWOQ). The percentage was used for data analysis. The findings revealed among others that the most popular form of nature worship in the area is water worship and that nature worshippers employ digital devices and other mass media in their operations – an indication that African Traditional Religion (ATR) moves with the times. Also, most water worship centres are presided over by women in spite of the male-dominated society. It was equally observed that the major reason African Traditional Religion (ART) thrives in the area despite the spread of Christianity is due to the life-threatening challenges the people face. The study concludes that the potency of ATR is still upheld by adherents, Christianization notwithstanding.

**Keywords:** African traditional religion, christianity, digital-age, indigenous religion, nature worship



### How to Cite:

Ude-Akpeh, C. (2021). Nature worship in the digital age: A case of Omabala clan in Anambra State in South East Nigeria. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/advanced-humanities/article/view/565>



## Public Interest Statement

This research was conducted to answer some questions about traditional religion in the Omabala area and offer explanations to some misconstrued practices. Scholars have not delved into research in the traditional practices of this people and with the influence of Christianity, their practices are given negative labels such as old fashioned, mundane and evil. Surprisingly, people go back at hidden times to apply them for personal benefits. This highlights nature worship urging more research into traditional religious practices of Omabala people and others in Africa. It is an effort at cultural patriotism to help correct imbalance between African religion and Christianity.

## Introduction

Religion is one of the terms that have defied a unified definition as many scholars have posited differing definitions. Snell-Hornby (2006) defines religion as the belief in and worship of superhuman controlling power especially a personal God or gods. This subsists as a summary of religious activities, be it Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or African indigenous or traditional religion (ATR). Taylor (1989) sees religion as the belief in spiritual power while Whitehead (1926) defines it as that belief in that power which gives internal cleanliness to human beings. Kant (2019) however conceptualises religion as the recognition of all duties as Divine.

From the foregoing definitions, one can define religion as the belief in the presence of a superior supernatural being who has an unseen (spiritual) superior relationship with man. The superior being is often conceived as one who has sovereignty covenant with all flesh and other spirits are held as inferior and dependent on Him. It involves a defined faith or organised belief. Religion accommodates a system of worship coupled with devotion. All these are meant to serve some intrinsic spiritual purposes. Often, the activities embraced to achieve this include praying or worshipping in a special building (like church, temple, mosque or shrine) or arena (such as grove, hill or water).

African traditional religion (ATR) permeates and controls virtually all aspects of the life of Africans be it economic, social, political or otherwise. This makes ATR peculiar as attested to by Bonsu (2016). Also, Mbiti (1969) sees African traditional religion and philosophy as a systematic study of the attitudes of mind and beliefs that have evolved in many African societies and affect the way of life of most African people. The views above capture African traditional religion as a way of life of Africans from inception. ATR has also continued to thrive and be practised in different shades and forms in the various African communities including Omabala clan in Anambra State. With the advent of Christianity, it is regrettable that African traditional religion became painted with all sorts of negative colours. The early scholars unfortunately did not attempt to understand the elements of the religion which is the indigenous belief and religious practices of the Africans which were handed down to them by their progenitors. In regret, Bonsu (2016) avers that over the years, some foreign scholars, investigators, Missionaries and media outlets have been belittling

the African traditional Religion by describing it with some racially motivated terminologies such as savagism, juju, fetishism, animism, magic, paganism, heathenism and ancestral worship. All these labels have lingered even as Christianity gained ground and continues to dominate in most African societies. Despite these ugly connotations about ATR, practitioners continue to thrive as they keep getting adequate patronage from people of all walks of life. Many reasons may have been responsible for this. Some of the factors according to Maduabuchi (1985) include challenging problems of life, culture preservation and the need to preserve legacy. Till recently, African scholars, including Asante (2014), have called for an Afrocentric paradigm shift in the study of African traditional religion. Asante explained this as an intellectual paradigm that privileges the centrality of African people within the context of their own historical experience. There are different shades of ATR. Most ATR rely heavily on worshipping or reverencing natural objects of existence like water, fire, air, land, food among others (Ibeano, 1980). With studies, education and evolution, Africans are now able to understand and explain what they do in their religion which has caused some authors and scholars to even reject the addition of "traditional" to African religion seeing such as racism (Asukwo, Adaka, & Dimgba, 2013).

Presently, Africans have understanding of their traditional religion. Christian religious messages are broadcast in the media in Igboland, particularly in the Omabala area. Many (if not a greater percentage) of the population are Christians but still, the indigenous religious practice also thrives with a good number of female adherents showcasing their symbols even with their dressing or hairstyles. Some of them have sponsored programmes on television and radio and even advertised on social media platforms. Suffice it to say that some ATR practitioners now employ digital media for their nature worship. Based on the African notion about women as the weaker species of human, it is expected that most ATR practices are headed by men, but observation indicates that the reverse seems to be the case as most leaders of ATR in the study area are women. With the foregoing scenario, the researcher wonders if the negative descriptions given to ATR have not affected its practice in Omabala clan. Could it be that some Christians in the area may not be honest with their faith? Also, does the issue of female relegation appear in religion and how has digitalization affected the religious practice of this people? These questions are the bases for the current study.

Campbell and Vitullo (2016) worked on assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religious studies. The study was a 30-year review of digital religious studies focusing on how religious communities have been studied and approached within the area. The study adopted four stages of research in religious communities while presenting the key findings of this study to show the evolution of religious studies with specific attention to the Catholic Community online. The study made theoretical analysis assessing current research on religious communities within digital religious studies. The researchers made propositions for future research undertakings.

Campbell and Vitullo's study cited above is related to the present study based on the fact that both have to do with religion and digitalization. However, while this present work is empirical and targets the practice of traditional religion in a natural setting – Omabala in the Southeast of Nigeria, Campbell and Vitullo's study reviewed above was focused on a Catholic online community.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the spread of Christianity to the hinterlands of Nigeria, the Omabala clan spread across Anambra East, Anambra West, Oyi and Ayamelum Local Government areas was lucky to have Christianity planted in the area as early as the 1850s. This is enabled by the fact that the Omabala (Anambra) River is a tributary to the River Niger. This made traveling through the waterways from Onitsha to the area for evangelism a lot easier. Also, the Royal Niger company already had an established presence in Otuocha which attracted missionaries.

Obviously, Christianity as a new religion then witnessed some resistance before it could be planted as the people believed their gods could visit them with anger if they embraced the new religion (Okeke, Ibenwa & Okeke, 2017). The people of Omabala clan were tenacious with their faith. As part of the general Igbo people described by Ugwu (2014) they are truly religious and could be said to do everything religiously including eating and dressing. Ugwu stressed that their religion (which was basically ATR) is their existence and their existence is their religion.

Eventually the conflicts between Christianity and ATR adherents settled and this allowed both religions to coexist. However, the position of the womenfolk in the tradition is that of relegation because, till date, there are some religious practices that women cannot partake in or some deities that they cannot preside over. But with modernization and having all religions showcase themselves using the media, it seems the digital age has absolved the subjugation/relegation of women in religious affairs with regard to the traditional religion. This is because some nature worship centres are now wholly headed and administered by women unlike before. Also the level of patronage being enjoyed by many nature worship outlets raises concerns to the researcher. Now the problem of this study is to examine nature worship in Omabala clan in a bid to provide answers to these questions.

### **Research Objectives**

The study is designed to:

1. Find out the most popular form of nature worship in Omabala clan.
2. Ascertain the reasons behind the proliferation of nature worship despite Christianity in the study area.
3. Determine the caliber of leaders of most nature worship centres in the study area.
4. Examine the category of clients that patronize nature worship outlets in Omabala clan.

5. Identify the digital media employed by nature worshippers in Omabala clan.

### **Women in Traditional Religion in Omabala**

The biological features actually separate the men from the women and in spirituality, as the myths, beliefs, rituals, bans also hold sway. However, the role in religious practices confer status of man or woman to individuals (Buchanan 2006) avers that in most cases men conducted studies on the religious life of their own gender while neglecting the spheres of women. It has also been observed by Ziman (2006) that duties performed by men in traditional religion are commonly considered to be more important than those that are done by women which he said are culturally conditioned. Ziman (2006) also notes that women are excluded from participating in tribe and clan rituals even when they are ascribed great religious powers which are often considered harmful and dangerous. Oduoye (1995) observes that more rituals especially purificatory are performed for women by men with the purpose of purifying them and protecting them from their powers and to use such powers for the good of men. Women have been observed to hold such religious positions as priests of deities, possession of Spirits, medicine, diviners though other crucial roles are better handled by young virgins who have not reached menstrual age or menopausal women.

In Omabala clan, those roles are upheld in traditional religious practices. It is observed in this area that deities are classified as male or female. Also, the natural phenomena like, places, water are designated male or female. Therefore, the women who have positions or roles in the religion uphold such either for themselves as priestesses or diviners or merely initiates. Some of them if not all, do not disprove or contend with the spiritual powers of the Christian Faith but they argue that they are surer of what they know which has come from their forebears.

### **Nature Worship**

A look at Nature worship which falls into the group of matriarchal religion (Cengage, 2020) upholds a number of reasons which are used to describe this aspect of ecology and religion to include: natural religion, nature worship, nature mysticism and earth religion. These terminologies are simply associated with reverence for nature or put in another way, religion of people who consider nature to be sacred. Given the numerous derogatory descriptions of nature religion such as paganism, atheism, animism, Albanese (1990) calls for proper examination of not only religions in which nature is explicitly considered divine or worshipped but also those in which it serves as an important symbolic resource.

In Omabala area, with the advent of Christianity, there have been debates and opinions about nature, particularly water worship as some consider it religiously or politically primitive, regressive or dangerous while others see it as spiritually perceptive or authentic. For all intents and purposes, what the nature worshipers in Omabala are perceived to be doing involves

supplication to and veneration of celestial bodies and some natural entities and forces. This position is made trite in the views of Fraser (1926, p.17):

By the worship of nature, I mean the worship of natural phenomena conceived as animated, conscious and endowed with both the power and the will to benefit or in injure mankind. Conceived as such they are naturally objects of human awe and fear to the mind of primitive men. These natural phenomena assume the character of formidable and dangerous spirits whose anger it is his wish to avoid, and whose favour it is his interest to conciliate. To attain these desirable ends, he resorts to the same means of conciliation which employs their favours towards human beings on whose goodwill, he happens to be dependent; he profers requests to them and he makes them present; in other words he prays and sacrifices to them; in short, he worships them. Thus, what we may all understand as the worship of nature is based on the personification of natural phenomena.

With the foregoing backdrop, it is evident that nature worship takes place in various parts of the globe. However, it has not been well researched into or documented. Suffice it to say that the concept of nature in its entirety is yet unknown rather its manifestations such as wind, water, hill, stars, animals are upheld and understood as natural objects, forces or manifestations that influence people and therefore deserve veneration or to be placated. Hence, this is the premise for the worship of water in and around Omabala.

### **Nature Worship versus Christianity**

African indigenous religion is a body of interlinked religious practices that are not mutually exclusive nor is one inferior to another (Ogunranti, 2018) . The study of religion cannot be adequately handled if nature is excluded. Hence the various definitions or types of religion end up with a "nature-flavour". In most indigenous African religions, the supreme God is usually the governor of the world though the means of relating with him may differ depending on the place and context. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (nd) offers these descriptions: pantheism- belief system in which god is equated with the forces of the universe; deism- belief system based on a non-intervening creator of the universe etc. The Encyclopaedia Britannica however notes that the worship of nature in the pantheistic sense has not yet been documented anywhere. While Christians may not subscribe to worship of natural phenomena, or environment, they obviously believe and adhere to environmental protection. They uphold such environmental concerns and ecological responsibilities since they consider themselves stewards of God on Earth.



Hayes (2019) avers that Christianity is a religion that believes in one God as the creator of heaven and earth who has the indivisible makeup of father, son and Holy spirit. Much as nature worship and other indigenous religions uphold one supreme deity. They believe in lesser gods (pantheism) or other manifestations of the deity as could be found in nature worship. While Christianity presents as more of universal and not confined to the descendants of any particular physical ancestor, the indigenous religions are clan or community-based which is the case with worshippers of the Omabala (Anambra) River.

At inception, Christianity was said to have corrected some negative practices like the killing of twins and human sacrifices though some indigenous scholars, including Emmanuel Oladipo (2017), acknowledge that the faith that once moved mountains has been corrupted by life on the plains as many who go to church are reverting to the sacrifice including human sacrifices that did not benefit their ancestors. In trying to draw similarities Nana-Togonmes (2018) insists that Christianity is less tolerant noting that early Christians even committed acts of genocide and terrorism against African traditional religion funded by evangelical donations. Nana-Togomesi however submits that the relationship between the two religions is contentious because Christianity cannot abide in African traditional religion even though African traditional religion can abide in Christianity. Hayes (2019), in a bid to proffer an answer to the issue of combination of indigenous religion with Christianity, contends that Christianity has been adapted to solve problems and so if it did not offer the needed solutions to adherents, there will be the natural tendency to revert to the old indigenous system. This may be the reason some Christians are still patronizing nature worshippers.

### **Religion and Digitalization**

With technological advancements to the extent of digitalization, the media (beyond their basic duties of information, education and entertainment) have veered into televangelism. This is a coinage of religion and entertainment which has blossomed into religious organisations maintaining their own television and radio stations and online presence like the EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network) owned by the Catholic Church. El-Naggar (2014) avers that the internet has become a new paradigm where voices can compete for authority adding that the use of digital media has afforded televangelists as well as various religions an opportunity to further popularise their discourses. The intersection between emerging digital technologies and religion has implications for understanding of spirituality and religiosity (Campbell & Evolvi 2013). Much as this study is not specifically on digital religion, it offers a framework for articulating the evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously (Campbell & Evolvi, 2013). It is worthy of note that both Christian and indigenous religions in Omabala area have evolved from having presence in the traditional media to the use of the new media in propagating their messages. The Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) has evidence of

purchase of airtime by Christian religious bodies and indigenous religion adherents. This study has been able to explore manifestations of religious organizations on the digital device. While the challenges and opportunities are expected to abound, this study is poised to highlight them and proffer solutions.

### Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Mediation by Martin-Barbero (1993) is considered as the underpinning for the study. This theory focuses on the process of communication that passes through a medium and involves the relationship between individual and culture. This theory was elaborated by Brigit Meyer in 2010, to the religious sphere focusing on religious objects that bridge the distance between immanence and transcendence which includes other material forms (images, books, sounds etc.). Hoover Stewart (2006) applied this mediation theory to religion in the media age and was able to explain how media technology assist religious adherence to articulate cultural meanings. This theory is adequate for this study since the study seeks among other things to examine how digital media are used in nature worship in Omabala area of Anambra state, South east Nigeria.

### Methodology

The study adopted the survey design. The population is 1.3 million people of Omabala clan resident in four (4) LGAs of Anambra State. A sample of 100 respondents (50 males and 50 females) was selected for the study on the basis of convenience. A researcher-designed structured questionnaire tagged 'Female Nature Worship Questionnaire' (FENAWOQ) was used for data collection while data were collected by means of personal contact method. Simple percentage was used for data analysis for the five basic research questions posed for the study. Explanation building techniques was also adopted.

### Results and Discussion

#### Popular Form of Nature Worship in Omabala Clan

S/NO	Form of Nature Worship	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	Earth/landgod	72	28
2.	Fire Goddess	46	54
3.	God of fertility	54	46
4.	Air Worship (Celestial Body)	18	82
5.	Water worship (River goddess)	74	26
6.	Ancestral Worship	86	14



**Source: Researcher's Field Work, 2020**

Evidences in Table 1 revealed that Water worship (River goddess) with 74% affirmative response is the second most practised African traditional religion in the study area. Ancestors worship and worship of god of the land are prominent, while air worship (celestial) is the least with only 18% affirmative response. It can then be deduced that water worship is a very popular nature worship (ATR) among the Omabala clan.

**Reasons for Prevalence of Nature Worship Despite Christianity in Omabala Clan**

S/NO	Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	It is a form of legacy	46	54
2.	It is a means of culture preservation	68	32
3.	To avoid the wrath of the gods	70	30
4.	It addresses numerous life threatening challenges	82	18
5.	It is a means of livelihood for practitioners	78	22

**Source: Researcher's Field Work, 2020**

It is clear from Table 2 that nature worship still thrives in Omabala community. Some of the reasons include to address numerous life-threatening challenges (82%), as a means of livelihood (78%) and to avoid the wrath of the gods (70%). However, the least observed reason is that it is a way of retaining legacy (46%).

**Caliber of Presiders of Nature Worship Centres in Omabala Clan**

S/NO	Nature of Leaders	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	Young men	55	45
2.	Young women	63	37
3.	Aged men	58	42
4.	Aged women	70	30
5.	Children	26	74

**Source: Researcher's Field Work, 2020**

Data in Table 3 reveal that women mostly preside over nature (water) worship centres in Omabala clan. This is evident in the 63% (for young women) and 70% (for aged women) affirmative

responses as against 55% (young men) and 58% (aged men) affirmative responses. Consequently, the study holds that most nature worship centres are presided over by women.

### Category of clients of nature worship an Omabala clan

S/NO	Category of Clients	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	Traditionalists	59	41
2.	Occultists	43	57
3.	Christians	53	47
4.	Orthodox Christians	75	25
5.	Fellow nature worships	20	80

**Source: Researcher's Field Work, 2020**

From the result presented in Table 3, the highest patronizers of nature worship are orthodox Christians (70%) and traditionalists (59%). Going by the overwhelming majority it could be concluded that Christians are the major clients of nature worship centres with traditionalists as runners up.

### Digital Facilities (Media) used by Nature Worshipers in Omabala Clan

S/NO	Category of Clients	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	Hand sets	88	12
2.	Laptops	79	21
3.	Internet	63	37
4.	Televisions	78	22
5.	Social media platforms	58	80

**Source: Researcher's field Work, 2020**

Going by data in Table 5, it could be seen that nature worshippers in Omabala clan have gone digital. They are no longer restricted to manual means. The lead digital devices operational in their nature worship are handsets (88%), laptops (79%) and television (78%). However, the least observed digital medium is social media platforms (58%). Based on data above, it could be deduced that handsets and laptops are the widely employed digital facilities by nature worshippers in Omabala clan.

### Discussion

Nature worship has been in vogue far before the advent of Christianity in Anambra State. However, even with the rapid spread of Christianity, nature worship still thrives. In the study area, the most

popular kind of nature worship is water worship (river goddess or Mami Iwota). The reason may be linked to the indispensability of water to human existence in addition to the Omabala River that has helped economic activities in the area to thrive. Omabala clan is located in a riverine area; it took its name from the Omabala River (Asukwo, Adaka & Dimaba, 2013). The Omabala River is a tributary to River Niger. In essence the most visible nature element among the Omabala clan is the river hence their keen interest in water worship.

The study found that despite the high penetration of Christianity in the study area nature worship still thrives. The reason was found to be connected to life threatening issues and legacy factor. This finding is in tandem with Ikennadi (2018) who notes that human beings at one time or the other face challenges that may overwhelm their senses of endurance and prayer. In such cases, they may resort to nature worship for help. In addition, the speed at which such helps are needed may be another factor that may be responsible for consulting nature worship as opined by maduabuchi (1985).

In the same manner, the study revealed that presiders of most nature worship centres are women. This is in contrast to the popular notion that ATR is basically headed by men due to the superiority imposed by God (superstition) on men over women. However, it is worthy of note that water as it were (being the most popularly worshipped nature element) is used more by women than men. Women cook, wash clothes, bath children, clean the house and wash plates with water more than men. This may be the reason why most nature worship centres in Omabala clan are headed by women. There is also the belief that the water spirit is feminine and aligns better with women.

Similarly, it was gathered from the study that Christians are the lead category of persons that patronize nature worshippers in the study area. This is not surprising because Ibeano (1980) notes that most modern religions are off shoots of the ancient religion handed down to their descendants by their progenitors. In essence, it is likely that some Christians that patronize nature worshippers may have seen no distinction between Christianity and nature worship. In addition, a lot of persons face over whelming challenges and may not have the endurance and zeal to pray on their own to solve their problems hence they resort to nature worshippers for immediate help (Ikennadi, 2018).

Some of the digital facilities used in nature worship include laptops and mobile phones. The reason is not farfetched. This is because of the rapid growth and penetration of technology into all facets of life. Mobile phone is most common even among rural dwellers due to its great role in facilitating information. Moreover, it is not location bound and is relatively cheaper to maintain. This finding is supported by Ikennadi (2018) who says that the use of digital means in transaction makes life easier and better as audience or clients could be reached at a fairly shorter time. These adherents use technology to communicate with even their clients abroad.

## Conclusion

The study was on nature worship in the digital era in Omabala clan in Anambra State, Nigeria. It was designed to examine the extent of nature worship in the study era in the digital era. The motivation for the study stemmed from the continued high prevalence of ATR despite the spread of Christianity. From the findings, water worship (river goddess) is most popular. It was gathered that nature worship thrives despite Christianity due to many life challenging problems people in the area face. In addition, a majority of the nature worship centres are controlled by women even as Christians are part of the clients of many nature worshippers. Finally, nature worshippers were found to incorporate some digital facilities like laptop and handsets in their operation. The study concludes therefore that nature worship in Omabala clan is real and has gone digital.

## Recommendations

The study has revealed that nature worship is real in the study area. Consequently, the following are recommended:

1. Water worship was found to be most popular in the study area; hence it is imperative that people who preside over the various nature worship outlets should seek to use their worship for the good of the people of Omabala clan and not for bad.
2. Life threatening challenges make nature worship to thrive amidst Christians; it is therefore recommended that people should have faith in God to meet their needs and to help them out of danger.
3. The study revealed that most presiders of nature (water) worship are mostly women. It is thereby suggested that they should be ethical and uphold the practice, since it is not by choice but by appointment by the spirits.
4. The study discovered that major clients for nature worshippers are Christians; hence, it is important that Christians and adherents of other religions should stop castigating nature worship since it is another form of religion. They should rather research into the practice so as to adopt the positive aspects for the greater good.
5. Nature worshippers are found to use digital facilities like laptops and handsets; however it will be imperative that social media platforms like whatsapp or telegram are also used for wider audience and coverage.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** May I acknowledge the assistance of indigenes of Omabala and nature worship practitioners who assisted me with information during this research.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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