

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND THE URHOBBO CONCEPT OF CREATION: ECOPHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The Urhobo people are an indigenous people who live in Urhoboland in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Like every other part of the Niger Delta, Urhoboland is suffering from environmental pollution and degradation. The Urhobo people shares with other African peoples a concept of creation that this paper argues can help to curb environmental degradation. Urhobo indigenous thought affirms that nature or the environment, and everything that exists in the universe is created by the God, almighty and humans are at the center of creation. The paper uses a critical analytic method to decipher if the Urhobo concept of creation can help in curbing environmental degradation in Urhoboland. The paper finds and concludes that humans as center of creation are placed here not to dominate creation or nature but to live in harmony and peace with creation.

Keywords: Environment, Degradation, Urhobo, Creation, Niger Delta, Nigeria, and Africa

Introduction

Urhoboland is part of Nigeria's Niger Delta. Like other parts of the Niger Delta, it is suffering from environmental degradation. According to Ekuereh (2007:556), Urhoboland used to have abundant resources such as a luxuriant rain forest, various brand of wood for timber, a high biodiversity of insects, reptiles, birds and mammals, and a lot of food items such as fish, starch and tapioca. It is remarkable to note that cost of living many years back was low and life expectancy was extremely high; but it is unfortunate to note that all these have changed as oil exploration have degraded and polluted the lands and rivers, made the land infertile and life unsustainable (Ekuereh 2007:557). Urhoboland equally suffers from much of what the Niger Delta has experienced. Adeola (2009:135) writes that though endowed with resources, the region is be-deviled with conflicts and claims. He writes as follows:

Appropriation of communal lands for oil extraction, environmental degradation, destruction of habitats, decimation of modes of subsistence of indigenous population by oil production activities, plus inequitable compensation for oil and gas minerals, and the destruction of farmlands and fishing waters are among the contentious claims. In most recent years (2005-8), high intensity conflicts have erupted over oil mineral rights, political marginalization, relative and absolute deprivation, and ecological

injustice between oil-bearing communities (OBCs) and the multinational oil companies (MNOCs) and the federal government of Nigeria (FGN).

Urhoboland has suffered from what much of the Niger Delta has suffered from and experienced. The land is plagued by oil pollution arising mainly from oil spillage and failed oil facilities. As noted above, there are constant conflicts between the oil companies and the communities. There is high youth restiveness as a result of massive unemployment. Urhoboland and the entire Niger Delta suffers from years of neglect as there is lack of adequate socio-economic infrastructures.

In searching for ideas and insights to help in formulation of policies and constraining human and corporate behaviours, the search does not have to be necessarily done outside Urhoboland. The argument presented here is that the Urhobo traditional or indigenous concept of creation rooted in a creator God, and humans as the center of creation can be helpful in curbing environmental degradation. A critical analytic method is used to present the arguments that follow. This is done by examining some concepts such as environmental degradation, Urhobo, and creation. The situation of environmental degradation in Urhoboland is presented and this is accompanied by the Urhobo indigenous concept of creation. The role or purpose that this concept of creation can play in curbing the environmental degradation is also discussed.

Conceptual Clarifications and Analysis

Micheals (2004:71) defines environment as “the sum of all external conditions and influences affecting the development and life of organisms.” From the ecological perspective, the environment means, “the whole strata of the ecosystem... An ecosystem encompasses both living (man inclusive) and non-living components and their physical surroundings i.e water, soil, air, etc” (Adewusi 2011:1-2). The environment embraces all that humans see around them-the plants, animals, oceans, mountains, rocks, fishes, air, atmosphere, the firmament, etc. It includes not only the natural environment but also the socio-cultural environment of humans, this is human culture. Yet, the main concern here is with the natural environment. The term, “degradation” is defined by Bellamy (2007: 122) as “the process of bringing down leading to end. It is the process of lowering a surface by erosion and the removal of rock waste; the general lowering of the land by erosion processes. Also the decomposition of a compound into its elements.” Environmental degradation refers to a lowering of the quality and beauty of the land and its environment. When the land and its environment suffer from various harms and injury done to it as a result of human activities or even natural disasters, the land gets degraded or polluted. Things like soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, drilling for oil, wars and violence, climate change, and others lead to a lowering of the quality of the land. There should be no doubt that when the environment is degraded, it makes the life of humans and non-humans unsustainable. Human life is threatened and that of other organisms is endangered.

Environmental degradation has taken place and is taking place in Urhoboland. The Urhobo people live in Urhoboland in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. According to Edafeifejrhaye and Akpojotor (2011: iii), “The Urhobo nation is the 5th largest ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and it comprises 23 kingdoms, and it is located in the rain forest zone, which presently is the heart of the Niger Delta region of the country. These areas are partly upland and coastal or riverine in nature with the former accounting for over 70 percent of its total land mass.” According to Aweto (2005: 683-4),

The Urhobo people are one of the major ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta. They live in the western part of the Niger Delta, the salient features of which essentially encapsulate the geography of Urhoboland. The location of Urhoboland in a delta has not only influenced the nature of the physical environment but also the mood of life of the people. The population of Urhobo was 1.12 million people in 1991. Today, the population is about 1.5 million.

Formerly, Urhobo was made up of 22 subcultures units. Ekeh (2008) asserts that: These basic subunits of Urhobo culture were prehistoric. That is, their existence predated modern historiography that assigns dates and ascertainable time periods to historical events. Today, Urhobo scholars and culture artists have arrived at a sum total of twenty-two of these units of Urhobo culture. By saying that they are prehistoric, we mean to say that all of them -- *Agbarha-Ame, Agbarha Otor, Agbarho, Agbon, Arhavwarien, Avwraaka, Ephron, Evwreni, Eghwu, Idjerhe, Oghara, Ogor, Okere, Okparebe, Okpe, Olomu, Orogun, Udu, Ughelli, Ughievwen, Uvwie, and Uwherun* – were well settled before the rise of significant historical epochs that defined the boundaries of medieval and modern Urhobo history.

Today, another subcultural unit or kingdom of Mosogar has been created making 23 kingdoms in Urhoboland. The existence of this kingdom is acknowledged in Delta State (2014). The issues regarding that are not the subject of discussion here.

Ekeh (2005:1- 2) describes the environmental context of Urhobo culture as being situated in the Atlantic forest belts of West Africa and because it is located in the terrain of the Niger Delta, “the watery condition of the Niger Delta has accentuated the forests of this begin to yield unique ecological features of mangrove and swamp forests in which the cultures of the Urhobo...have been developed.” There are various historiographies of the Urhobo people and for more study of that, one needs to consult Ekeh (2005:1-50).

To understand the Urhobo concept of creation, it is proper to decipher the meaning of creation. The Oxford University Press (2014) defines creation as: “ The creating of the universe, especially when regarded as an act of God: the big bang was the moment of the Creation, and therefore the work of God.” Creation refers to everything that exists in the universe including human persons. The animals, birds, mountains, oceans, atmosphere, etc are all aspects of creation. The word creation can be synonymous with nature or environment. The word, creation is used here to refer to everything that exists, inclusive of the environment or nature, the ecosystems, and all life in the universe. The idea of creation is not a strange one in philosophy. The cosmological argument of Thomas Aquinas is based on it. The universe has a cause or maker and a force responsible for its existence. While not all may accept this position, it is accepted by some. The idea of creation is that the universe did not come into existence by its own. From a biblical perspective in the story of creation, the universe comes into being by the power of the creator. Almost all indigenous cultures have myths that show that the universe comes from a spiritual creative force, named God or the absolute spirit.

The question of creation is a deep concern in ecophilosophy. While in ecophilosophy, it may often not be called creation, it is called environment or nature.

Whether you call it creation, nature, environment, or ecosystems, it is an issue to be reflected upon. Ecophilosophy is the branch of philosophy that critically examines the issues raised concerning the environment or ecosystems. Critical questions that arise from the issue of creation are: is creation purposeful? Is there a creator God? What is humans' place in creation? Does belief in creation contribute to environmental preservation? While all these questions may not be answered here, it is important to state that the implications of belief in a created universe should not be neglected in the environmental dialogue. Environmentalism should not become dogmatic but should be open to plural solutions of the environmental crisis. The viewpoint of Curtin (2005: ix) should always be fore-grounded in the environmental debate: "Clearly, one of the great dangers of an environmental ethic is that it will reflect only those voices that are easily heard, our own. Justice, not to mention pragmatism, requires that a new environmental ethic be plural-voiced. At a deep level, it needs to reflect the world of diverse places and peoples." There is a place then for studying and factoring Urhobo traditional ideas of creation into global environmental dialogues.

Creation in Urhobo Thought

Urhobo understanding of creation begins from the idea of a supreme being. The Urhobo people call the Supreme Being, "Oghene", the creator of the world and everything (Ubrurhe 2003:22). In the African understanding, there is no creation without God. God is the source and the power that gives life to creation. Everything exists because they were given life by God. Naming God as creator affirms that the created order or the universe did not come by itself. Even if it came through evolution, there is the power the precipitated that evolution. That power is the creator. Many African cultures affirm that the universe was directly created by God. In discussing Urhobo cosmology, Ubrurhe 2003:23) affirms as follows:

As the Creator of all things, the Urhobo call *Oghene Orovwakpo, vweriwi ve odjuvwu* (the owner of *akpo* (world) is in most cases used to denote where *Oghene* is). As the creator of all things visible and invisible, the Urhobo refers to Him as *Omemamo*(creator of all things) and the creator of man, He is called *Omaromojwo* as the creator, the Urhobo conceive Him as a Moulder. Hence, in most cases when an unusual event (sudden death of a prosperous young man or a disaster) occurs, the Urhobo express their surprise by saying: *Emu ra mrere-e ye Oghene maro-o* (whatever is not seen was never created by God).

In Urhobo understanding of creation, all things, including the human persons are created by God. Humans have their origin from God and not through evolution. There are many myths in Urhobo thought that describe how humans were created by God. Ubrurhe is helpful again in understanding one of these myths. He writes as follows:

It is said that man molded a lifeless man to which man could not give breath of life. All man's attempt was to no avail. In man's perplexity, *Oghene* came, told man to back him after which *Oghene* breathed on it and the molded man became a living being. Thus, the uniqueness of God's creative capability emphasized (Ubrurhe 2003:24).

In Urhobo thought man is considered to be the centre of creation. This implies that everything is created for man (Ubrurhe 2003:25). Man is a carrier of the spirit of God but it is not only man that is animated by the spirit of God. It should be noted that: "Africans

believe that the Creator imbues both animate and inanimate objects with life forces. It is this life force which the objects have imbibed that connects them. This life force is the quintessence of the thing itself. This includes man, trees, beasts, or stone.” (Ubrurhe 2003:35).

Creation or the environment is not lifeless. This idea that creation is animated with spirits is often termed animism. Animism is akin to Tempels theory of vital forces. Animism an idea proposed by Tylor in his work, *Primitive Culture*, implies that: “souls or supernatural beings...inhabit people, animals, or other creatures, plants, and objects, and govern their existence” (Mulemi 2010: 74-75). Mulemi (2010: 76) rightly avers that:

...animism is an aspect of traditional African belief system positing the existence of an array of spiritual beings linked to a common source.... Hidden spiritual beings or forces are believed to grant both animate and inanimate entities inherent will, force, and personality that underlie their agency. This animistic aspect does not displace the Supreme Being as the controller and existential ground of all spiritual beings and supernatural phenomena in the universe.

In the animistic conception of the universe, the universe is filled with vital forces or spirits. This is not to imply that all of African religious conception of God or the universe is animistic. It is rather proper to describe aspects or a fundamental characteristic of Urhobo (African) religion or culture as animistic and not that all of it is animism. Because of the animistic features of Urhobo understanding of the universe, it will be wrong to subscribe to the theory of an “absentee-God” who is not present in creation. Realize that you cannot speak of Urhobo concept of creation without speaking of the creator God. Emusi (2012) citing Raphalele Pettazzoni’s “Deus Otiosus” theory asserts that the theory means that once God has created the universe, God has finished working and no longer intervenes in the universe. If God intervenes and still works in the universe it can lead to disorder and chaos (Emusi 2012). The Urhobo understanding of creation is not a creation that is on its own. Without the power of God, the universe or creation cannot be in existence or work. God is deeply involved in the universe and people can feel God’s power in all things. If God is not present and active in creation, the following statement of Erhueh (2005: 231) would not be true. He argues that:

In every home, first thing in the morning, the name of God is called upon for blessings upon the entire family by the father and mother. Throughout the day, the name of God is ever-present by way of prayer, cry for justice, in the moment of sorrow and joy, and other circumstances of life. This is evidenced by the names given to children and in the proverbs and wise sayings of these people. From such sayings and names, an understanding of the person of God is clearly evident.

The Urhobo conceives that there is order and justice in creation or the created order. Creation is not disorderly or chaotic. This order and justice arises from the fact that the God of creation imbued into creation that orderliness. It should be understood that this is an inference from the idea of God shunning oppression and injustice. Erhueh (2012:231) notes that the Urhobo people see God as: “the helper of the helpless, the defender of the oppressed, the provider for the have-nots. This *Oghene* (God) is totally good, there is no evil of any kind in him,

and He is the giver of all good gifts. He is the giver of life, children, health, wealth, longevity, good harvest, etc.” This present author argues that God cannot be all these unless these traits are also present in the universe that he created. Whatever happens in creation, whether it is natural, if it is tantamount to harming human wellbeing or the created order is against God’s purpose.

The fact is that if people are just and kind as the creator who wishes the wellbeing of all, humans will build one united community where the needs of all are met. The great impact that humans have on the earth as a result of struggle over the earth’s resources often can be as a result of human greed, and consumerism. Idowu as cited by Erhueh (2005: 235) writes that the African idea of justice is rooted in the fact that creation belongs to God and the social and moral order of the universe are ordained by him. If there is justice in the human community, it impacts on the earth. There will be love and sharing and there will be less pressure on the earth’s resources.

It is vital to remember that creation exists for the sake of humans. Man is to harness the resources of creation to enhance his vital force. These resources of nature include animals, plants, water, birds, air and the mineral resources on the soil. The place of humans in creation should not be ignored; after all it is anthropogenic activities that have caused much environmental degradation. The human person is called to live a moral and just life in creation. It is based on this that the human can ascend into the cult of the ancestors. Mbiti (1991: 44) argues thus: that man is the center of the universe does not mean man is the master; he is expected to live in harmony with nature as a friend. It should be realized that when nature is unduly interfered with, it is man who suffers (Mbiti 1991:44).

In African culture a primary goal of human life is to enter into ancestorhood. Yet, you cannot enter into ancestorhood, unless you lived a moral life. Awolalu and Dopamu argues that the African concept of ancestor enunciates that after physical death, those who have live a good and honest life, attained a ripe old age, experienced a good and natural death, have a family and offerings’ and are accorded a good burial enter into ancestorship (Gbenda 2005:92). The world of the ancestors is one in which though they are physically dead, they continue to live on spiritually in their families and communities. The point that is being argued is that life matters.

The Urhobo concept of *akpo* can be equated to creation. As Nabofa (2005:123) will put it, it is inclusive of the physical world, the totality of the universe, the created order or the cosmos. In another sense, it implies the life of human beings, animals and plants (Nabofa 2005:123). A human being is not expected to live a reckless life. The point is well made by Nabofa (2005: 123) thus:

A person who lives a reckless life, which the Urhobo describes as *Akpo fafarhien* is said to have surrounded himself with reckless *Akpo* aura, and everything around him vibrates recklessly and he could end his living in a reckless manner. While a person who leads a very cautious, peaceful and steady life (*Akpo denden ve akpo ufuoma*) is believed to have been enveloped in a peaceful and harmonious aura and everything around him beams peacefully.

Environmental Degradation and Pollution in Urhoboland

Writing on the environmental degradation of Urhoboland, the First Urhobo Economic Summit (1998: no 5) states that:

The Summit notes that the oil companies are paying lip service to the issue of environmental pollution and degradation and in collaboration with government have created opportunities for disunity among ethnic groups in the oil producing areas. The oil companies have been more interested in hand outs and not partnership. They stay aloof as government enslaves the oil producing areas.

Urhoboland like every other area of the Niger Delta is suffering from environmental pollution and degradation. That statement of the just mentioned summit is still applicable to Urhoboland today. The oil multinational companies have continued to devastate the area. In a paper describing the situation in Urhoboland, Akpomuvie (2009) indicates that:

Another problem confronting the Union and inhibiting the development of the land, is environmental degradation arising from petroleum exploration and exploitation. The conviction of most respondents is that the most pervasive and predominant cause of environmental degradation in the area and by extension the Niger Delta region, is petroleum exploration and ancillary problems of spillage. The discovery of petroleum oil in Kokori, Otorugu, Ubogu, Emadadja, Ughelli, Jeremi, Afiesere, Ewvreni and Aghigho in Urhoboland, raised fresh hopes for a bright future. With the abundant supply of dollars accruing from the demand and sales of oil from Nigeria, the parameters for an endogenously driven initiative for sustainable development, would have been firmly established. The initial hope was lost and despair became the order of the day. General feelings of despair, disillusionment and a profound sense of alienation became pervasive among the Niger-Delta people especially, among the Urhobo. Common environmental hazards and impacts associated with oil exploration and exploitation in the land include: soil quality alteration, destruction of aquatic ecosystem, air pollution and health problems.

There is no doubt that the area is suffering from environmental degradation. Everywhere, a researcher is not needed to tell the plight and suffering of the people. In many towns in Urhoboland, oil pipelines criss-cross people's farmlands and even residential areas. People are exposed to the suffocating air and acid rain that comes from gas flaring and oil spillage. The rivers and land are polluted by oil spillage. There is hardly a year that passes when there is no felling down of trees and digging of the land to lay more pipelines to drain oil from the region. Various kinds of birds and animals that used to exist in the region have gone into extinction. Many species of plants and trees have been destroyed. The woes and the various manifestations or consequences of environmental degradation in Urhoboland cannot be fully enumerated. Since the discovery of oil and exploration in Urhoboland the followings have taken place: the land and waters have become degraded, the land has been rendered infertile and unproductive, forests and farmland have been destroyed, and the economic base of the people have been dislocated (Ekuerhare 1994: 557). That oil

companies do cause environmental degradation is also supported by Odisu (2015), and Godson-ibeji & Chikaire (2016).

This paper does not in any way imply that it is only oil exploration and related activities that have brought about environmental degradation in Urhoboland. A walk through the land reveals that many people in the area lack a concern for environmental issues and protection. Every month in Nigeria there is a day set aside for environmental sanitation. Even on this day set aside for environmental sanitation, many people rather than observe the day simply sleep in their homes. Market and public squares in the land are inundated with garbage and waste. Many lack positive environmental sanitation habits. They throw their waste right on public streets and roads. The fact that it is not only oil companies that causes environmental degradation is corroborated by the following statement:

Over the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in the level of pollution in Urhoboland, especially in the urban areas and oil producing communities. In the urban areas, the absence a urban sewer systems and waste management/disposal systems means that each home or compound has to have its own “soak-away” pit and make its own arrangement to dispose of its refuse, usually at dumpsites or along the streets or outskirts of the towns. In some cases, the refuse is incinerated. Due to the non-existence or unreliability of public water supply, most people now install their private boreholes or wells. In the rural areas, people get water from well, rivers or streams and in some cases, boreholes. The practice of burying people at homes (rather than in cemeteries) is may compound the problem of ground water pollution in the immediate future if it has not started already. There has also been a significant increase in air pollution resulting from old and rickety automobiles and motor-cycles, use of generators (due to unreliable public power supply). The refinery and petrochemical plant in Warri is causing significant air pollution around the plant just as oil spills and gas flares in oil producing areas have increased air and water pollution. (Ojameruaye 2004: nos. 4.5)

The implication of this is that the call for a Deeper Environmental Consciousness Rooted in Urhobo Concept of Creation is not only for Corporate Bodies. It is also for Individuals and all Social Agents.

The Place of Urhobo Creation Thought on Curbing Environmental Degradation

One vital implication of Urhobo thought on creation is that it is anthropocentric. Creation has no other reason for being in existence than for the sake of humans. This does not mean that creation can be polluted or degraded. Creation is to be valued and revered but it is for the sake of humans. While it is true that in most other African traditions, creation is to be accorded value, the issue is that it was the interests of humans that are taken into consideration. The interests of non human persons were not taken into consideration. This is an important question that must not be ignored. Nature should be preserved not simply from a humanistic perspective, but also for the well being of the entire ecosystem.

Another vital implication of Urhobo concept of creation is that creation or the natural order is not man-made or artificial. Though human activities have impacts on it; human persons have a duty to be responsible in living on earth. Urhobo morality does not permit a reckless lifestyle of wanton destruction of the resources of nature in the name that

man is the centre of creation. The human person is expected to live, “a very conscious, peaceful and steady life (Nabofa 2005:123).

The animistic idea has implication for creation care and curbing environmental destruction. In the words of Ikeke (2014:79), “because of the belief of a sacred presence to a certain degree even in non-human lives, they were accorded respect, reverence and preserved.” If this belief is practiced in contemporary times, much of the devastation of the environment of Urhoboland will be a thing of the past.

The belief in animism is connected to that of totemism. Since nature is imbued with spiritual powers and deserves reverence, Urhobo people as other African people have set apart totemic animals, plants and other elements of nature. Among the Orogun people of Urhoboland, the Iguana is held to be a sacred animal (Otite 2005:279). In some part of Ughelli South in Urhoboland, a particular type of snake is held to be a totem. In some part of Urhoboland, it is the snail. That these can help in environmental degradation and even help in combating climate change should not be in doubt. Steyne as cited by Turaki (2006: 39) contends that: “In totemism certain taboos apply to the totem animal(s) and/or plant(s). Totem objects are not to be killed, spoken of by name, eaten, or even looked at in some cases. They elicit feelings of brotherliness. They are believed to have souls of similar nature to man’s.” If not for the drilling and exploration for oil that cares little for nature, and cuts down forest to make way for pipelines, many trees and endangered animals in Urhoboland will still be there. Totemic practices preserve animals and plants and thus help in conserving biodiversity.

Another point worth reflecting upon is that the idea of an ordered created universe and moral order among humans helps humans to live a moral life that preserves nature. Without an ethical order and morality, it is not only humans that will suffer, but nature also. Mbiti (1991: 41) notes that: “Every society is able to formulate its values because there is moral order in the universe. These values deal with relationships among people and God and other spiritual beings; and man’s relationship with the world of nature.” This belief in a moral and ordered universe has fundamental implication for environmental preservation. The words of Mbiti (1991: 44) comes to mind here:

African religion sees nature as a friend of man and vice-versa. He is an integral part of nature and the priest of nature. The destruction or pollution of nature (including air, water, forests, land, animals, trees, plants and useful insects) brings harm to all life in general and injures human welfare in particular. Therefore, man has to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for its own and its survival.

Concluding Reflections

Environmental degradation in Urhoboland can be ameliorated and curbed. This can be done by reverting to retrieving Urhobo ideas of creation and practices that helped in the preservation of nature, in a critical manner. Much of the environmental degradation that has taken place in Urhoboland can mainly be attributable to corporate practices of oil multinational companies and other allied industries. These companies lack a deep respect for creation or nature as they do not hesitate from excavating into sacred land and spaces in the Niger Delta to drill for oil (Nwaomah 2011:91). If corporate practices of oil companies in grounded in an ethics of the Urhobo people with regard to their respect for nature, it will

help to curb environmental degradation. It is important to also note to avoid confusion that individual behavioural practices of people in Urhoboland have also precipitated environmental degradation. It behooves individuals also to imbibe the positive ideas present in Urhobo concept of creation and use it to inform their practices with it.

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