

THE IMPACT OF ECOLOGY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Aniekan Etim Nana

Theological Institute Umuahia

Abstract

African Traditional Religion recognizes the sacred quality of the ecological system because it serves as dwelling place for divinities, deities, spirits as well as the medium through which the sovereign or Supreme Being (God) can be reached. It has been discovered that the influence of modernism and secularism has created an irrevocable havoc and devastation to the ecological system and unspeakable catastrophe to African Traditional Religion. The objective of this paper was to examine the African ecological philosophy as a practice and ideology of resolving the present world ecological problem. This article adopts phenomenological method. The work recommends that both government and traditional societies should put serious measures to check the wanton destruction of the ecological system.

Introduction

In the 1970's the ecological peril facing the world became a huge concern. Indeed, this concern has risen mainly because of the depletion of the earth resources, pollution and sheer destruction and degradation of the environment. Granberg-Michaelson (1992:1) observes that, it has taken the earth summit in Rio (1992) to raise that development as traditionally understood had failed. How then can modern society embark one course of ecologically sustainable development? It is impossible to separate African Traditional Religion from ecological system and all that are in its trees, Oceans, Rivers, Seas, Mountains, Stones, which serves as a medium through which Africans worships the Supreme Being (God). In Africa, the Supreme Being is all-powerful, all knowing and all present, it is therefore, the responsibility of human to maintain harmony with the cosmos and to create harmonious relationship with the environment that he lives, in order to sustain perfect harmony with the Supreme Being. In African Religious thought and philosophy, man is a component of the environment. However, whatever lies outside of man is supporting his existence. Environment is therefore the basis of human existence. The environment is created by God and is made of two complementary worlds, the physical world and the spiritual world. According

the Gbende (2010:18) the physical world is made up of the earth, populated by humans, animals, birds, reptiles, and material surroundings, others include rivers, forests, mountains, lands, valleys, grasses, seas, oceans, and lake among others. All these constitute the physical world on the other hand, there is the invisible world or the spiritual world, which is made up of the ontological beings like the Supreme Being, the divinities, deities, ancestors and spirits. It is worthy of note that there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual worlds. The two worlds shade into each other.

Furthermore, there is no distinction or opposition between the two worlds. The African seeks to live in harmony and to balance their life in a harmonious and peaceful existence with entire world and especially the spiritual world. As a follow up, the above is the belief that the cosmos represent an organic unity, and within this, the environment is seen as a nurturing mother, sensible and alive, capable of responding to human action. The work examines the state of detrimental destruction of the ecosystem by the society and the government who pay deaf ears on the destruction environment. The objective of this paper is to examine the African ecological philosophy as a practice and ideology of resolving the present world ecological problem, "For the future and beyond, Africans will continue to suffer if she does not look to the past to recapture those values that ensured the survival of her people and the environment" (Manu, 1992), unfortunately, religion which is perceived by many as a defining force within cultures and development agenda is in practice playing second fiddle to the excessive want for productivity and profitability in our society today. For instance, theories of development in our society have devoted little or no attention to religion although in traditional thought. Akrong (1992:37) observe that, politics, economics, and religion are closely intertwined why does it seem that the role of religion is being ignored by policy makers? If the world cannot be built without the full engagement of religion, why sidelining instead of embarking and appreciating religion? This paper is expected to educate the traditional rulers and the people on policy making on environment and civic educators, the religious leaders, farmers, estate developers and mining companies on possible repercussion unsustainable development might unleash on the people. This will also contribute to the existence knowledge of the impact of ecology unsustainable development agenda. Finally, the methodology adopted in this paper is phenomenological approach.

The African Concept of Ecology

The African concept of ecology includes individuals (men, women and children), variously related with one another as member of families, societies, groups etc. This concept also has artificial (man-made) objects as furniture, tools, machine, decorated materials etc. plants and animals. Natural or Cosmic objects as sun, moon, mountain, air etc. Furthermore, events and

happening such as the rising and setting of the sun, moon, rainfall, changing weather are also aspects of this ecology.

According to Faniran (1997), “the ecological system of environment includes; the physical or biotic environment, the lithosphere, rock, minerals, land-firms; and from processes. The atmosphere- gases moisture, weather, climate, atmospheric processes and elements. It is also made up of the hydrosphere, water vapor, liquid solid (ice), plants and animals”.

Faniran believed that in African concept of ecology, these features are mutually exclusive and interact closely between and among themselves. He further pointed out the sociological environment (ecology) to have assumed a complicated dimension of social activities originating from culture or civilization. Adegoroye (1997), supported this view of African Traditional Religion concept of ecology on environment. He sees it as an aggregate of the physical and biological entities outside of man and supporting the existence of man whether on land, in water, and air. According to him, “the environment as a community of organism is a dynamic nature at complex levels of interaction unfolding in drama sketches, stretching between the remotest part at creation and the unforeseeable future”.

Traditionally, religion plays an integral role in linking people to the nature world, imbuing them with the knowledge and values that make caring for the environment or ecology a priority. As such, religion occupies a unique place in ascertaining ecological friendliness and at the same time it is a major instrument that has been to cause ecological problems. However, in African Traditional religion, religion has been a source of ecological preservation and protection even though abuses also exist. The indigenous people recognize and understand their place in the ecology system bearing in mind that nature or the ecological system has spiritual dimension attached to it. By virtues of the fact that the Africans recognizes that spirits inhabit nature, there is a tendency to nurture and take good care of it.

Religion and Ecology

The study of religion and ecology according to Tucker and Grim (2001:16), explores the many ways in which religious communities ritually articulate relationship with their local landscapes and bioregions. Religious ecology therefore gives insight into how people and cultures are able to create Human-earth relationships and the practical means of sustaining and implementing these relations.

Young (1980: 162), suggest that, religion may be defined in two ways, descriptively and normatively. The descriptive, he states is concerned with religion as it is actually found in man’s experience, while the normative endeavors to set forth what a religion ought to be. Tucker and Grim (2001:14), add that, “religion is more than simple a belief in a transcendent deity or a means to an afterlife”. It is rather, as they put it, “an orientation to the cosmos

and our role in it'. This definition according to Tucker and Grim (2001:14), make apparent the limitation of phenomenal reality, hence the need for human specific practices which have often brought about self transformation and community cohesion within the cosmological context. Religion consequently refers to those cosmological stories, rituals, ethical norms and practices. It connects humans with a divine or mystical presence, with the human community. Tucker and Grim (2001:14) have further suggested that, religion situates humans in relation to both the natural and human worlds with regard to meaning and responsibility. For some traditions this is a creator deity; for others it is numinous presence in nature; for others it is the source of flourishing life. According to Tucker and Grim (2001:14) this experience of a creative rise to a human desire to enter into process of transformation and celebration that link self, society, and cosmos. The individual is here linked with the larger human community and thus, to the ecosystems. Be that as it may, humans can neither disassociate from nor despise the other created forms. Young's separation of religion into descriptive and normative should therefore be reconciled in real terms to establish a stronger connection between human and the ecosystem. Religions are key shapers of people's world view and formators of their most cherished values and so religious participation in ecological endeavor is crucial. According to Sullivan (2000), human beliefs about the nature ecology are the distinctive contribution for species to the ecology itself. Religious beliefs especially, those concerning the nature of powers that create and animate, become an effective part of ecological system. It appears the case that religious worldview are all encompassing because they fully absorb the natural world within them. Sullivan adds that, they provide human beings both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings in the cosmos who possess the capacity for symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole or at least a picture of the whole within itself.

The Role of Traditional Religion and World View Formulation

Akyem Abuakwa ecological cosmologies like those found in the indigenous people of many tribes elsewhere do not always put a stop to environmental degradation as they continue to carry out slash and burn agriculture. That notwithstanding, Tucker and Grim (2000) argued that, most indigenous people have environment, they have respect for the sources of good, clothing, and shelter that nature provides. The traditional people of Akyem Abuakwa conceived nature as divinely given gift that are held in trust for posterities and therefore should be prudently manage. Pobee (1979:28) provides us with a vivid description of the Ghanaian religious worldviews. He intimated that, "A traditional Ghanaian, be the *Akan, Ewe, Gia*, or whatever, believes is surrounded by numerous hosts of Spirit beings ... who are able to "influence the course of a man's life for good or bad or ill". It is therefore important to

note that, the belief in the metaphysical cults across the length and breadth of the Ghanaian religious landscape. For instance the Akyem cosmology has it that, ancestors and hosts of Spirit beings have been actively involved in either, sustain the people or providing resources by way of daily nourishment and security. This perhaps, explains why Mmirikkissi Okasum Apori Atta Chief of Hemang, will not ravage decreed groves that host the Mpanin italie dae or eban Mu (Royal Mausoleum) and Konabamoa the nsu bosom (river deity) of Heman. He believes that, any interference of these could arouse *Mananom Nsamnafo abufuo* (anger of their ancestors and other Spirit beings). According to the Ghanaian worldview, Obi Nkyere Obofra, Nyame. Literally, “no one points God to a child. Every Ghanaian child knows of the existence of God right from birth. By worldview we mean an overall conceptual frame work or as James Sire (1988:17) put it: “a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously) about the basic make-up of our world” Mbiti (1975:31) explains that the African, and for that purpose, Ghanaians did not form their opinion about themselves and the universe out of nothing. According to him, an African:

Observed the worldview around them and reflect upon it, they looked at the sky above with its stars, moon, sun, and meteorites; with it clouds rain, rainbows and the movement of the winds. Below they saw the earth with its myriad of life, forms, animals, insects, and plants, and its rivers and lakes, rocks and mountains ... this experience stimulated them to reflect upon their life and the universe in which they lived. The result was a gradual building up of the African views or ideas about the world and the universe at large.

It should be acknowledged that, Mbiti’s observation is not exclusive to the African; some tribal Indians and others on nature. The African worldview therefore has to do with the way Africans understand themselves and the world around them. According to Sowu (1997:26), these views find expression in myths, legends, proverbs, rituals, beliefs, wise saying and everyday speech. He further declares that, most African scholars share their view that, to the life of the African is fused with religion from the cradle to the grave. Virtually every area of the African’s life involves some elements of religion. God is often perceived in creation. It is raised that customs and traditions, festivals, the concept of land, methods of farming and taboos are closely linked with religious beliefs and practices of the Africans.

Ecosystem and her Components

Gbenda (2010) opines that the traditional African understanding is that everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment is profoundly religious and many things on earth are held in high esteem for religious, especially, when they are thought to be dwelling places for Spirits. However,

human beings have always collected food, medicine and other material from the environment.

Land in African Communities: Land in African communities belongs to the clans and not the individuals. The individuals are holding the land in trust of the clan which consists of the living, living dead, and the unborn members. This has enhanced the idea of sharing and caring for nature. In many *Ibibio* Communities, there are purification rites of the lands, to remove abominations, bad practices and restore the land to its former state of purity. Farming is restricted on certain days as Spirits of the ancestors visit the land. There are also designated forests as abode of the masquerades. Moreover, land in some communities is seen as a goddess for example Ala in Igbo, and Asaaseyaa, by the Akans in Ghana.

On the other hand, land set aside within the confines of the settlement or immediately outside the settlement where farming or any other forms of human activity would be forbidden, such lands retain its original flora and fauna. Shrines of some deities might be located therein. The forest thus becomes known as sacred forest or forest of the spirits. Hence, only the priest and adherents of such deities could enter such a restricted area and only at specific times. Among the people of eastern Nigeria, Ala is the mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and custodian of public morality in association with ancestors. Farmers take permission from her before they till the land.

Sacred Grooves: All over Africa, sacred grooves are found. Gbenda (2010) asserts that originally, sacred grooves were based on religious and cultural beliefs, but they have since made significant contributions to the protection of wild life and other biological resources. Some of the sacred grooves serve as water sheds for catchment areas where they protect sources of drinking water. Many of these indigenous areas usually protected by customary laws are considered to be abode of the gods. In some cases, royalty from a particular community was buried there and the area is threatened plants and animals species of the ecological zone.

Rivers and Streams are Treated Sacred: Gbenda (2010) elucidates that in traditional African, rivers and streams are treated as sacred by the people who live there. The surrounding environments are protected in the belief that the river god lives in the forest. As a result logging, cultivation is forbidden. The Asao akosua stream in Ashanti region is said to be inhabited by a beautiful woman goddess. The deity is worshipped and cloth washing and farming are not allowed. Communities located close to lakes and sources of warm spring water venerated such formation of evidence of curative property which is associated with the water e.g/ Ikogosi spring in Ikogosi Ekiti. From an ecological point of view such stream, rivers, forest constitute natural reserves

whose vegetation is primary and where the ecosystem has not been disturbed by humans. The native of Kanuri around Lake Chad also has such cultural belief in the efficacy of the water of Chad.

The Ikwere of upper Niger Delta live in a hydrosphere environment with numerous creeks, streams and river. The Owumni (Aquatic Spirits) plays a dominant role in their live. Wotogbe Wotogbe Weneka (2003), observes that “one of the highlightsof the beliefs and practices associated with these aquaticbeings is the belief that each of them has songs peculiar to them as composed by their human associates through their instrumentality”, The aquatic Spirits are believed to control the abundance of fish, prevent river accidents, give children to the barren, give people money, property and good luck decoration of shrines. Today shrines are being erected at various river banks and streams, as well as homes of the votaries of the aquatic Spirits throughout Ikwere land. Olaniran (2003), stated that the first manifestation of culture in environment management is the preservation of eco-system due to religious considerations. The Yoruba in South Western Nigeria have sanctuary or heritage sites which the exploitation of biotic resources is considered a taboo.

Preservation of Ecosystem due to Religious Consideration

In certain part of Ghana and the Igbo area of the Nigeria, Gbenda (2010), stated very clearly that forest is also venerated because they house a variety of wild life animals considered sacred or totems.

A totem can be an animal, reptile, a plant vegetable that has a special relationship with the group in which man is believed to have kinship relationship or mystical relationship with any of the above things of nature. Emile Durkheim explained that relationship could be established between ethnics with creatures of things other than man. They belong to the sacred as contradistinguished from the profane. A totem brings solidarity and is invisible sign of unity and kinship relations. Ikyarem (the green snake) is a totem among the Tiv of central Nigeria, python and green snake in some parts of Igbo land, in Ibibo, Etefia Ikonois a totem represented by snail (*Equong*), the Akan people revere dove, parrot, and crocodile among others as totems. The facial tattoos of the Yoruba people of Nigeria are associated with totems. Relationship is possible between groups, animals; plants among others have become sacred.

The Notions of Eco-Wisdom

African people’s ecological intelligence and wisdom is apply captured in their structures, particularly, beliefs in omens, taboos, rituals and the sacred. These beliefs help people to interact with nature virtuously, morally, ethically and justly, that is, in a way that shows ubuntu (Rusinga and Maposa 2010). These belied structures create and enforce a somewhat vague caste system aimed at

promoting the sustainable use of the natural resources. According to MadhavGadgil (ecologist) and KailasMalhotra (anthropologist), cited by Dwivedi (1996), the caste system serves to discipline the society by partitioning the use of natural resources according to specific status/caste, age, sex, kingship, etc. This creates an ecological space in which competition for resources is reduced. Rusing and Maposa (2010), echo similar sentiments by posting that through belief structures the indigenous people use natural resources in a systematic way by following taboos associated with sacred. The dichotomization of animals, trees, caves, rocks, rivers, well etc into sacred (tabooed) and non-sacred (not tabooed) enables human beings to use natural resources selectively, systematically and sustainably. Dietary laws that have given rise to the three categories of food; that is, the permitted foods, the forbidden foods not eaten at all, also promote the sustainable utilization of natural resources. The categorization of foods restricts access and regulates gluttonous competition for these resources because, if unchecked, competition leads to extinction. Food restrictions also follow totemic beliefs and even conditions such as pregnancy and illness. In short, there is eco-wisdom in taboos that govern human treatment of animate objects.

How to Recover the Traditional Ecological Ideology

There are ways on how we can recover the traditional ecological ideology and such ways include:

(a)

Increase the area and standard of management of protected areas. The provision of protected areas is fundamental in any attempt to conserve biodiversity (Myers, 1994:27-40) protected area alone, however, are not sufficient to conserve biodiversity. They should be considered alongside, and as part of a wider strategy to conserve biodiversity. The minimum area of forest to be protected is generally considered to be 10 percent of total forest area. It is protected 12.4 percent of the world's forest are located within the protected area. Tropical and temperate forest has the highest proportions of their forests in protected area and boreal forest has the least.

(b)

Promote Sustainable Management: In order to promote sustainable forest management. It must be sustainable ecologically, economically and socially. Achieving ecological sustainability means that the ecological values of the forest must not be degraded and if possible they should be improved. This means that silviculture and management should not reduce biodiversity, soil erosion should be controlled, soil fertility should not be lost, water quality on and off site should be maintained and that forest health and vitality should be

safeguarded. However, management for environmental services alone is not economically and socially sustainable. It will happen until or unless the developing nations have reached a stage of development and affluence that they can accommodate the cost of doing so. Alternatively, the developed world must be prepared to meet all the cost.(Anon, 2011:38). There are vast areas of unused land of which is degraded and of low fertility. Technologically advanced are being made to bring this land back into production. This should be a major priority since significant proportion of cleared tropical forest will eventually end up as degraded land of low fertility.

- (c) Increase area of forest plantation: Increasing the area of forest plantations by using vacant or unused lands and waste and marginal lands especially as road side, along railway tracts, on contours, avenues, boundaries and on land and suited for agricultural production should have a net positive benefit. Planting trees outside forest will reduce pressure on forests for timber, fodder and fuel-wood demands. Moreover, the deforested areas need to be reforested.
- (d) Increase investment in research, education and extension: Training and education of stakeholder's helps people understand how to prevent and reduce adverse environmental effects associated with deforestation and forestry activities and take appropriate action when possible. Research substantiates it and helps understand the problem, it cause the mitigation. This arena is lagging behind for paucity of funds and investments encourages this arena. There is lack of knowledge and information in the general community about forests and forestry. Forst manages and those developing forest policies need to be comprehensively educated and need to appreciate the complexity of the interacting ecological, economical, social, cultural and political factors involved.

Conclusion

The impact of ecosystem on African Traditional Religion has been critically looked at. The Traditional African Religion has for centuries, through myths, taboos, festivals and the cultural practices, been preserving the environment except that too many people are despising the same practices and traditions. People today are no longer scared of the dictates of the deities which were shrouded in myths and in taboos. Such behavior has rendered nature naked before it devourer in African traditional area. It has discovered that mankind has influenced the ecosystem in its technological development; the rate at which the ecosystem is abused is so alarming. In this regard, not until mankind look for the alternatives, we shall continue to live in perpetual danger

of the consequence of the abuse of our ecosystem in the quest for development. Religion and the environment intertwined in that they have a history and will continue to have a role together in the future. This may be one area where science religion can find a common ground both have the environment in best interest and can work together to find a solution to the current environmental crisis. As religious traditions and beliefs have shaped human values and behaviors towards the environment in that this is one possibility for working towards positive environment attitude for the future. Clearly, religion has a central role in the formation of worldviews that orient us to the natural world and the articulation of ethics that guide human behavior. The size and complexity of the prot we face requires collaborative efforts both among religion, ecology and in dialogue with other key domains of human endeavor.

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