

ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY AND THE DECLINE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN IGBO LAND (A.T.R IN FOCUS)

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Abstract

Ecological features like trees, animals and rivers are of immense importance to traditional religious practices. Animals are used for various religious sacrifices. Trees are used as medicinal herbs: Forests preserve herbs and trees used for shrines and places of worship. The same is true of rivers, streams and water ponds. What temples, churches and mosques are to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, bodies of water and forest are to African traditional religion. The above mentioned ecological features promote the practice of African traditional religion. African traditional religion on the other hand protects the ecology with the enactment of taboos that deter people from ecological abuses. Two important observations are notable about the relationship between religion and the ecology. One is that, ecology promotes religious practice. It is a source of divine revelation and it offers material assistance to religious practice. This is because every interaction with the divine is mediated through some material medium. The second important observation is that religion on the other hand preserves and protects the ecology. This paper therefore evaluates how the ecological environment in Igbo Land is affected by the decline of traditional religious practices.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Religious Practices, Ecological Sustainability, Diminishing Returns, Igbo Cosmology.

Introduction

Ecological features are not only important but very useful in the maintenance of traditional religious practices in Igbo Land. This is because they serve several purposes in the maintenance and sustenance of religious practices in Igbo Land. The ecological features on their own promote the practice of African traditional religious practices within the Igbo world view. To buttress the need to maintain the balance between the ecosystem and religious practice, Awolalu (1979:45) argued that for the people of Rundele community in Emohua local government area River state, it is a huge honour to bath in the minikoro stream named after a river goddess. This is essentially because anyone chosen by the goddess to bath in the river receives instant favours, blessing and breakthrough in life. Minikoro is at the heart of the culture of Ndele people, it reportedly blesses those obedient to it with fertility and fortunes (Iheamanchor, 2015). In the same view, the ecological wisdom demonstrated in the traditional religious mechanism put in place for the care of these living creatures is fascinating. The totems, sacred actions and beliefs here weave the story of the traditional religious universe which is both enshrined and communicated in the myth and rituals involving the aquatic creatures. This provide a network of symbolic forms which unite the religious, social, conceptual and ecological elements into a locally bounded centurial system (Ray, 1976:17)

Igbo World View

A world view has been referred to as how people perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or change in their environment. According to Animalu (1990) world views are products of experiences so pregnant with drama that such experiences give rise to symbols or totems of some sort. The symbols give rise, in turn, to the customs and codes of the society which are so internationalized as a way of life.

A cultural group such as the Igbo is able from their world view, to explain reality, life and the human environment, and predict space – time events, and finally exert control over them.

The Igbo people have a religious conception of the universe. They see their world as made up of two planes: the physical and the spiritual. Igbo world view, however, abhors the tendency to a digital categorization of things. They believe that there is a dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds (Metuh, 1981).

In this way, the understanding among the Igbo is that spiritual and cosmic forces are highly intermingled. The activities of spiritual beings and forces often directly impinge on the affairs of humans in the human world. This fundamental religious outlook on life continues to adjust itself each time to the changing circumstance of the life experiences of the people.

In Igbo religious world view, the human world is three dimensional the sky, the earth, intricately woven with water, and the spirit/ancestral world. Each of the three dimensions operate as a viable reality or a place of habitation, with all three interconnected or contiguous

and continuous in a non-hierarchical manner. This means that in such a worldview, although the supreme being is believed to live in the sky and major divinities such as lightening, the thunder, sun and moon are near Him, there is nothing to suggest that the ancestors who live in the ancestral world are inferior, Kalu (1993).

Perceiving the world in this way, Igbo cosmology understands the sky as the supreme beings palace. He is believed to dwell there with a host of powerful divinities and primordial beings like Anyanwu (the sun god), Amadioha (the god of thunder), Igwe (the Sky god). In the same vein some local major divinities are equally believed to live in the sky as well. The earth surface is seen as the abode of the human beings, the earth deity, minor divinities and personified nature forces. Finally, ancestral spirit, myriads of disembodied spirits and other personified forces some of which are malevolent and capricious to the living populate the underworld (Ejizu, 1987).

The Igbo worldview is heavily anthropocentric. In it, the activities of the various categories of spirits as well as the happenings in the other realms of the universe are seen as meaningful insofar as they relate to human life and the general welfare of humans in the environment. Furthermore, in Igbo worldview, the human world is perceived as a mirror of the spirit world. In this way, the traditional Igbo cosmology inspires and sustains a religion that is this-worldly affirming (Nwoye, 2005)

Ecological Features in Igbo Society and Taboos regarding them

The ecological features in Igbo cosmology are many but this study will pay particular attention to the following:

- Rivers
- Streams
- Forest
- Animals
- Tress

It is generally believed that there are spirits inhabiting the rivers in Igbo cosmology. For these reasons, these rivers are held to possess powers that affect human beings and other creatures in the environment.

This belief is not peculiar to the Igbo society but other areas as well. According to Parrinder (1969) among the Yoruba people all the great rivers have their presiding spirits. The goddess Oya is the goddess of river Niger, wife of shango the thunder god, two other wives of his were the rivers Oshun east of Ibadan and Ovia at Benin. One of the most popular river spirits is Yemoja, who is called mother of all deities, and has shrines in many parts of the land, but especially rules over the river Ogun at Abeokuta some rivers are said to inhabit sea animals like crocodiles and fishes. Such sea animals are said to posses the soul of the people of the land. Due to this, they are not touched or killed. If by any mistake they are killed, they are buried with sacrifices to appease the gods of the land. In this case, it becomes a taboo to kill them or fish in such rivers.

In some Igbo societies, it is forbidden to eat animals like monkeys, owl and others. Some of these animals are said to be souls of the long dead ancestors who reincarnated into animal

forms. This way of looking at and relating with some animals is not peculiar to the Igbo people alone.

Among the Tiv, it is a taboo to kill or harm green snake Ikyarem. However, when it is mistakenly killed or found died it is buried with respect. The reason is that the snake is said to have saved the Tiv nation during their flight from their assailants, by forming a bridge over with which they crossed a big river. (Abys, 2005) sacred objects by virtue of their consecration as such assume the statues of ritual agents. These according to Ekwunife (1990) express and communicate the rich treasures of a people's worldview and also validate their cosmological, political, social and economic values. Among the Yorubas:

Certain trees and believed to be out of the ordinary. For example, the Iroko (*Chlorophora excels*) is held to be sacred and is believed to be inhabited by some powerful spirit. Men fear having the tree near their dwelling place for it is believed that the spirit that inhabits it makes terrible sounds at intervals. Furniture made of its wood can also make disturbing noises in the house and doors made of the wood can fling open of their own accord. The tree cannot be felled unless special rites are performed.

Furthermore, important meetings of witches are believed to be held at the foot or top of the tree and this might account for the reason why it is one of the regular places where the sacrifices offered is placed.

Besides the Iroko trees singled out as abode of certain spirit include Eegun (Silk Cotton trees *Erodendron orientale*), Ayan (African satin wood) and omo (cordial *Melenii*). Many of these trees are huge, towering over and above other trees they strike awe into men who look like dwarfs in their presence. Similarly, trees that have abnormal growth for example, a palm tree with three trunks cannot but be regarded as unusual and as such is considered a likely abode of spirits, men revere such tree and ties round it a red or white piece to mark it out as sacred offerings are brought to these sacred trees from time to time but particularly during annual festival and wherever medicine men went to take the root or the barks of such trees. (Awolalu, 1999:49)

Parrinder (1969:37) observes that "every Igbo village has a shrine of Ala and this shrine is senior to all others in the village. This is usually a tree with a pot for offering"

The Decline of Traditional Religious Practice in Igbo Society

The decline of traditional religious practice in Igbo society is as a result of the ecological degradation.

One of the reasons for this decline is the effect of land degradation on the ecology. According to Udaya (2019) land degradation leads to soil erosion and food shortages, desertification, atmospheric contamination and loss of biodiversity. Biodiversity is the variety of life and its processes which involves all life forms like fungi, protozoa, bacteria and mammals. The loss of biodiversity results mainly from the destruction of habitats by felling down trees, clearing the grounds and the pollution of water bodies.

Deforestation leads to the shortage of arable plants and extinction of medicinal herbs and animals. It causes green house gas emission by causing the release of carbon store held in the soil. Apart from that it reduces the level of oxygen that is released during photosynthesis. Insufficient oxygen in the atmosphere leads to health hazards for living organism because it causes difficulty in respiration (Nwosu, 2013).

These ecological problems indicated above affect religious practice in Igbo land. This occurs because when the ecological features are distorted, they affect the practice of religion among the people. Sharing this opinion, Gbenda (2010:24) opined that religion connects all human beings a divine or numinous presence as well as all other biotic and abiotic members of the broader earth community in a mutual union and into an exulted mystery. In other words nothing curviness by itself in nature for everything is interconnected and interdependent, we humans are not separate from or above nature but part of an interconnected community of plants, animals rivers, mountains of African traditional Religion as an entity has been very rapid in the recent past generations. This rapid decline has brought about consequent ecological religious practice in Igbo Society has both primary and secondary effects. Primarily this decline has created a loss of the sense of the sacred. Coming from this loss of the sense of the sacred is a consequence which forms the second primary effect. The second primary effect is the uninhibited predisposition to environmental over exploitation. The secondary effects are those resulting from the primary effects as mentioned above under the effect of environmental degradation.

Recommendations

The researchers, following the discourse of this paper, recommend the following:

- (a) Traditional religious concepts for the sake of their intended and unintended functions towards environmental preservation should be encouraged.
- (b) Ecological preservation mechanism enforceable by traditional religious taboos should be reconsidered.
- (c) The educational programmes at the nursery, primary and secondary schools should include areas of traditional religious and cultural orientations.
- (d) The ministry of environment, culture and tourism should help in the fight against environmental degradation so that through that way traditional religious practice can be encouraged.

Conclusion

An ecological notion of the meaning of religion is projected in this study. Gbenda, (2010) rightly points out that religion is not only a belief in a transcendent deity or a means to an afterlife but also an orientation to the cosmos and the role of human beings in it. In a broad sense, religion is understood as a means whereby humans, recognizing the limitations of phenomenal reality, undertake specific practices to effect self-transformation and community cohesion within a cosmological context. Religion thus refers to those cosmological stories, symbol systems ritual practices, ethical norms, historical processes and institutional structures that transmit a view of the human person as embedded in a world of meaning and responsibility, transformation and celebration.

It is not difficult to see that once the taboos are no longer observed the practices are no longer maintained and the priesthood of the religion is abandoned, the entire system that enforced

religious rules of environmental preservation is broken in ecological management and preservation is concerned, leaves the environment vulnerable to various ecological abuses. The deforestation of sacred grooves and woods, desecration of sacred bodies of water and ritual trees hunting and eventual extinction of game do occur from the above

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