

## AFRICAN RELIGION-CULTURAL VALUES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

*Gaiya Kagarko*

### **Abstract**

The paper titled “African religio-cultural values and environmental conservation” will focus on the country Nigeria. Nigeria, just like every other African community is made up of many tribes and cultures. Each tribe has its cultural and sub-cultural grouping, as well as their peculiar means of earning a living. Their impact on the environment definitely depends on what they are doing to earn a living, their settlement pattern, population as well as other social institutions. The researcher shall therefore consider same aspect of socio-cultural values and traditional religious world view as they affect the physical environment in the communities in Nigeria as a country.

In a world where the practice of religion flourishes in a rich diversity in a country where many social and political issues contain a religious dimension and in communities where issues are charged with: human relationships, abortion, fundamentalism, human rights, inculturation, economic status, western education, ethnicism, violence, crime, war and so on. In such a context Gaiya (2014) observed that, ignorance of the role of religion in society is unfortunate.

As a result of ignorance, misunderstanding of certain values and manipulation, religion has been blamed and condemned by many as the major cause of societal chaos and crises. Tanimu (2012) observed that, most people have erroneously concluded that without religion, the society would have been a safer and more peaceful place. It is quite unfortunate that most of those who propagate this deception are graduates who otherwise should be enlightened enough to propagate the truth.

The researcher aims to consider some aspect of socio-cultural values and traditional religious world view as they affect the physical environment in the communities and Nigeria at large. There is the need for Nigerian to be in a position to religiously enlighten the general public around him/her on the relevance and importance of religion in the society. Nobody when every Nigerian does that, who then should be religiously enlightened. The paper also aims to expose the urgent need and relevance of research on the topic: African Religio-cultural values and environmental conservation.

Ejizu (2013) observed that, the values of education increases when people have better understanding of the presence, adversity and influence of religion in individual, corporate, ethnical, regional, national and global life.

### **Traditional Occupations**

Occupation as used by the researcher refers to the economic activities people engage in occupation in this research refers to the economic activities that a community is known for and which it uses to sustain the life of the people. These include agricultural farming, hunting, fishing, carving, tapping and chew-stick/charcoal making.

### **Farming**

Yakubu (2011) defined farming as the cultivation of the soil to produce edible food crops or activities of persons settled on the land, utilizing natural growth processes to produce food and animal products. Many communities in Nigeria are still agrarian. The traditional means of farming which allows shifting cultivation and encourages rest for the land that is, fallow is very helpful in protecting the environment. Added to this Ugwu (2004) indicated that, practice of agrarian allows for natural replenishment of soil nutrients.

Also, in the traditional rearing of domestic animals, the fallow grounds did not suffer any form of damage from over grazing. In line with this, Gbenda (1998) observed that, people continued their domestic animals so that their crops could be saved. Thus, land was saved from soil erosion because it had enough litters that protected the land.

Bush burning is one of the agricultural activities harmful to the society. Bush burning is prevalent in many parts of Nigeria. Ugwu (2004) observed that, some set bushes on fire so that it will be easier for them to clear the bush. The author is of the opinion that, this indirectly exposes the soil surface to erosion. As far as agricultural practice remains unmechanized, most of the lands subject to exposure to the danger of soil erosion.

Modern technology on agricultural practice also has negative impact on the environment. Okwoeze (1999) noted

All human activities at improving agricultural production namely elimination of species from an eco-system and transfer of a new specie from one eco-system to another building dam, large irrigation project, spread of broad-spectrum insecticide such as PPT and other man made changes have unforeseen back lashes on the ecosystem.

PPT for instance, which was used in killing pests and insects has adverse chain effect on other living things. Ugwu (2002) added that man's construction on high ways, dams, pipeline irrigation project and use of insecticides or fertilizer has modified the environment while his careless use of technology creates room for environmental indiscipline in society.

The effect of agricultural activities on Nigerian environment made Jooli (2008) to remark that the bid to develop our agricultural practices to astronomic heights has ended up dumping toxic chemicals in the soil, rendering it unproductive for sub-terrestrial organisms to play their roles which are necessary for the existence of plants and animals.

### **Hunting and Fishing**

Hunting reduces number of animal species and put some species on endanged species list. The national park and world wide-life fund have decried the rate of which some animal species are getting extinct. Samuel (2010) pointed out that indiscriminate hunting is, therefore, very harmful to

the co-existence needed in the ecosystem. Selective hunting spares the lives of very young animals. This helps to sustain the particular species there by, encouraging biodiversity.

Fishing styles have also been responsible for some environmental havocs. Inline with this, Ituma (2013) suggested that, Hook and line method is far better than the use of chemicals. The former enables the fisher man to select the caliber of fishes he wants. The latter endangers the life of both fish and other aquatic animals. Agha (1988) confirmed that, chemical like gamalin is a poisonous chemical which affects the life of the consumer of fish killed with the chemical. It also affects the source of water especially if it is a local stream used by the people for domestic purpose.

Other traditional economic activities which can affect environment include tapping, carving, chew-stick cutting and charcoal making.

Adukwu (2006) posited that tapping is a source of income in some communities in the eastern and southern parts of the country. In addition to this Udeinya and Ezema (2007) orally that in some of the communities, many palm trees are felled between February and April just for the purpose of tapping. Felling of palm trees for that purpose is an aspect of deforestation which many people have not taken careful look at yet, it is serious because it reduces the number of the trees in the community thereby, contributing to problems associated with deforestation.

Carving occupation also contributes to deforestation. Udeinya and Ezema (2007) noted that carvers use strong wood. Aruwa and Abraham (2008) added, they fell a lot of trees which they use in their carving work. It is known that trees are wind breakers. Once a tree is felled, it leaves a space which may indirectly enhance the velocity of wind thereby, increasing the rate of havocs caused by wind.

### **Logging**

In some south-eastern part of the country, people engage in chew-stick making. They cut many shrubs and trees especially those they use in preparing chew-sticks. This in turn, contributes to deforestation.

Nnaemeka (2007) observed that, the high demands for wood as fuel for domestic and industrial uses is another source of deforestation. He added that, high cost of kerosene and cooking gas has pushed people back to the use of fire wood as source of fuel. Therefore, house wives, bakers, blacksmiths, go for firewood. This increased what for fire wood has made some people to take to firewood business. They cut down trees indiscriminately without minding the effect on the environment.

Still on the deforestation, one would not forget the effect of logging. Agha (2003) has it that logging for the purpose of getting wood for building houses, making canoes and boats. Processing wood for export and so on, weigh much on forestation. They contribute in reduces the quality of the environment.

The aggregate effect of all these activities could be summed up in the effect of deforestation on the environment. According to Okey (2004),

The destruction of the world's forest is proceeding at an alarming rate. In the early 1990s, the world resources institute estimated that tropical forest alone were disappearing at the rate of 40-50 million acres (16-20 million hectares) per year. Increasing demands of an expanding population for agricultural land and timber resources.

Commenting on the effects of deforestation on the environment he stated that

Deforestation represents a severe world wide environmental problem. Forest takes enormous amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in the process of photosynthesis. Their destruction would, therefore, tend to exacerbate the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which many scientists believe will cause global warming green house effects.

Apart from increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and reducing the amount of oxygen in the air, the loss of forest in the tropics especially in Nigeria poses problems to wildlife. Some extinct or endangered species of animals, plants and microbes of world are still found in tropical forest. Olawele (2004) submitted that some of those plants have high medicinal value. Deforestation, therefore, threatens the existence of these species of plants and animals which are already extinct in some parts of the world. It may also adversely affect the wildlife fund and programme.

### **Chieftaincy**

Many African communities have titles through which social status of an individual is defined. Adukwu (2006) stated that title taking involves some rituals and ceremonies which must be accompanied with objects (items) such items demanded for the rituals have impact on the environment; for example, there are titles which require the skin of a leopard, tiger, hyna or lion before the initiate sits on the throne. This means that such endangered animal species must be further destroyed.

The same applies to the culture which requires titled man to carry or wear elephant tusks. In this case, the world of elephant will suffer depopulation just as Udeinya and Ezema (2007) observed that, animals in the first category symbolize strength and power. Sitting on their skin or decorating a chief's throne with their skin connotes the seat of power. In the same way, Ezeme (2007) added that, elephant tusk symbolizes authority and wealth.

Agha (1988) posited that chieftaincy or title taking and funeral ceremonies also contribute to environment degradation especially through air and noise pollution. Title taking and funerals are announced with gunshots especially canon gunshot. In some communities, the symbolic twenty-one gun-salute must be fired before one is coroneted a chief. Ogenyi (2009) made it clear that,

traditional belief is that ancestors see gun-shots as symbolic announcement to the world beyond that a soul is arriving.

In the same way, gun-shots declare to the living and dead that ritual ceremony is taking place in the land of the living. Adukwu (2006) put it straight that, it is through these ritual actions that people are empowered to exercise certain amount of control over the invisible world and the forces of nature but scientifically, they are causing some environmental hazards. The air is polluted by the burning of the gun-power which is always offensive. It contaminates the air in addition to other health risks.

Noise pollution is another environmental problem associated with the cultural activities mentioned above. It has been noted that uncontrolled noise constitutes pollution. It has effects on the auditory organs resulting in the imbalance of the psyche. Rimfat (1999) made it clear that, there are reports of noise effects on blood pressures, heart beat and physiological anxiety. Thus, it could be seen that while some social cultural values elevate the status of some individuals, they, at the same time, endanger the physical environment.

### **Traditional Marital Values and Environment**

African concept of marriage especially as it affects procreation has impact on the environment. Okwueze (1998) noted that Africans place high premium on marriage because it is a major avenue through which production of large kinship groups and lineages is ensured. Marriage, in African cultures is a socially recognized rite for the onset of a family; hence Nworie (2009) defines marriage as the established institution for starting a family.

Marriage in some African societies is not only a social fact but has some religious implications. Ugwu (2002) noted that in several African societies, one has to be married and have children to qualify as an ancestor. In such societies, there are crucial religious and social reasons behind marriage.

Polygamy is the ideal marriage form in many African societies seen under African cultural context. Polygamy answers crucial economic, demographic, psychological, emotional and social questions. It was traditionally prestigious. Onyebuchi (2003) put it that, it was a reflection of economic success and it also increased the chance of producing large kinship group and lineage. Gaiya (2014) added that, with this notion about marriage, the number of children a man had becomes one of the criteria for assessing his success in life.

This is further complicated by the patriarchal system. In patriarchal kinship structure, more regards are given to men than women hence, Iliya (2012) observed that more preference is given to male than female children. In this case, one's success in procreation is calculated based on the number of male children. This practice has implications on the population on the environment. However, this may suffice all to say that high regard for male children has led some couple into having more

children than they can train especially where there is preponderance of female children. It has also led some men into polygamy.

The acceptance of many population policies would naturally depend on the convenience of couples which in many cases, depend on the number of male children they have. Marrying many wives has serious implication on the environment. In the same way, having many children have serious impact on the environment.

For a religion like Islam which emphasizes polygamy, a maximum of four wives without limitation to the number of children each wife will have makes high population growth inevitable. The west African religion (1979) observed that

This marital value as endorsed by Islamic religion, therefore, has cumulative effect on the environment since the aggregate impact of population growth on the environment include exploitation of available social and health facilities, increasing growth of solid waste, noise and other population related pollution.

### **African Traditional Religions Worldview and the Environment**

Africans are noted for their intense religiosity. According to Jooli (2008), religion is the strongest element in traditional background and it exerts almost the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned. Therefore, religion affects every sector of African life. African traditional worldview holds that the environment is made up of two complementary worlds, namely the visible and the invisible world. Hannah (2001) confirmed that, these are worlds of reality inhabited by beings who have the powers of affecting one another.

For the African, reality exists in three spheres namely the heaven, the earth and the underworld. The heaven and the underworld make up the invisible world or environment while the earth makes up the visible environment. The invisible world is the abode of the deities', spirits and ancestors and God. Ugwu (2004) affirmed that, the Supreme Being lives in the sky and has full control over what happens in the whole universe. The invisible powers cohabit the earth with men. Thus, man is at the centre of the spheres of reality.

The visible world depends much on the invisible world and the powers there in for sustainability. The invisible world also depends on the visible world for their recognition and manifestation. There is a symbolic relationship between the two worlds. Agha (1988) posited that

The main duties of man include living in a manner that would maintain spiritual equilibrium between him and the unseen powers in environment. It is also to maintain cordial relationship between him and his fellow men.

Man is to obey all the rules that enhance and foster symbolic relationship between him and other creatures which though, lower but have powers capable of injuring him. To understand African traditional religious approach to the environment, one will understand his conception of creation, his

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myth, totems and taboos. Ituma (2013) presented that, these are principles through which the African concept of an approach to the environment would better be understood.

The whole earth and its inhabitants were created by the Supreme Being. Muhammad (2002) opined that, mass bodies of water-sea, rivers, streams, springs and all living things in them were created by God. The mountains, valleys and plants are all creatures of God. They also possess souls which give them their powers. Thus, they are not ordinary creation but veritable abode and source of power. Man is the prime of all creation since he is the only culture-bearing animal.

In African concept of creation, God is the creator of all things. Even minor deities owe their origin to him. In interpretation of creation, the traditional belief sees man as the paragon of God's creative power. Ogenyi (2009) put it that, he is such a precious gift of God that everything must be done to preserve him. Man sees himself at the centre of the universe. Therefore, the world exists for the sake of man. According to Gbenda (1998), African people look for the usefulness of the universe to man. This means what the world can do for man and man can use the world for his own good. Gbenda further orally that this attitude of the African towards the universe makes many African societies classify animals into those things they can eat and those they cannot eat.

Plants are also classified into those that can be eaten by people, those that can be used for curative or medical purposes, or for other things. Thus, for Africans, certain things have physical uses, some have religious uses for ceremonies, rituals and symbols while other things are used for medicinal and magical purposes.

Aruwa and Abraham (2008) posited that, coupled with the belief that natural objects and phenomena are inhabited by living beings or have mystical life, the attitude of the Africans to the environment seems to be a bit friendly and reverential. All the animals and plants which have religious and medicinal uses are treated with more respect and friendship.

The universe is therefore, not to be completely subdued and destroyed. Rather it is to be friendly and in some cases, to foster the friendly relationship the totemic and taboo principles come into play.

#### **The Role of Totems and Taboos in Maintaining Sustainable Environment**

Hannah (2001) defined totems as an animal or plant specie which is revered by a community and therefore because of its mystical relationship with the community or because of mystical powers attributed to it. A totem is regarded higher than animals, even higher than animals of the same specie. Adukwu (2006) put it that it is believed that the particular totem possesses some extraordinary force or "spirit" which works in the totem.

Though grounded in mythology, totemism as a principle attributes extraordinary strength, knowledge and life to special animals and plants. The tree or animal that belong to this category is not tempered with. No one cuts, kills or uses it for firewood or eats it as the case many be. Okey (2004)

presented example as the “ofo” tree among some sub-culture area in Igbo-land which is not destroyed indiscriminately. Among the people of Aniocha, Idemili, Aguata, Nnewi local government areas in Anambra state and Oru, Ideato and Urlu local government of Imo state, python (Eke) is a totem. It is not killed. Among them the Utanga and Becheve people of Cross River state forbid deer. Some areas of Edo state and Akpu and Ufuma people of Anambra state abhor snails. The Achi people of Enugu forbid tortoise while the Agulu people of Anambra state forbid crocodile. The author admitted that, explanation as per the reasons why the communities forbid the animals mentioned above may either be connected with a deity or with the animals played one role or the other.

Taboo on the other hand was derived from Polynesian term “tabu” which means something forbidden or prohibited. Totemic practices according to Olawale (2004) are associated with serious taboos hence, they are forbidden. It is anathema for somebody to temper with a totem. Set of taboos are used to guard the relationship between man and deities, man and animals, man and plants, man and his fellow man as can be seen in the following.

#### **African Religion and Aforestation**

Shrines are located in markets, village squares, graves, valleys, banks of rivers and so on. Aruwa and Abraham (2008) stated that, each shrine has grove which separates the sacred place from the profane. Trees in the shrine are not cut carelessly. Hannah (2001) added that, it is taboo for any man, apart from the priest to tamper with even herbs in the shrine. Wild animals within the shrine are also safe since it is a taboo to hunt in the shrines. The researcher observed that this taboo saves the lives of the animals thereby helping the conservation of their species.

Some African communities have large expanse of land dedicated to a deity. Some have what they call evil forest. These forests reserved for religious purposes, helped to protect some plant species from getting into extinction. It is in most of these religions forests that medicinal plants are still preserved.

#### **Taboos Associated With Water**

The belief that some streams are inhabited by spirits or are owned by deities help to check the rate of pollution and the rate of destruction of aquatic life. Such rivers as Gwakuru in Kagarko, Ulasi and Agulu lake in Anambra State, Njaba in Imo state and other local streams and springs in villages owned by deities are treated with priority. Their fishes, reptiles within their banks are tabooed. This conserves their lives.

Ezeme (2007), observed that, there are taboos guiding fetching of water from such sacred streams. Washing of pots, oily substance, clothes containing excreta, menstrual blood, cloth used to carry a new born baby are tabooed in some of the streams. This taboo, though originally carried with religion undertone serve environmental purposes. They help to check the rate of water pollution in those water bodies.



### **Summary and Conclusions**

African worldview as it relates to the environment or nature need to understand the African concept of being. Okey (2004) observed that being in African is dynamic and not static. It is animated and not medical and can be found every where. Thus, while the Supreme Being is the creator and overall superintendent to other beings namely: divinities and spirits, share some attributes of ubiquitousness and in that capacity, influences man, animal and plants.

The dynamic nature of the beings in African worldview and their vital force help to explain why African believe that these beings can influence man, animal, plants, and the environment at their whims. It also explains the animistic nature of African traditional religious thought hence, the serious respect given to totems and plethora of taboos in African society.

With reference to man's relationship in the ecosystem, African religion recognizes man, plants and animals as creatures of God which need not be completely destroyed for the sake of man. The worldview provides rules which guide man's into reaction with other members of the ecosystem in a manner that some religiously guided restraints are applied in the way man relates to and treats other members of the ecosystem.

First, the totemic principle governs mans relationship with some totems. This ensures their conservation. Rimfat (1999) noted that totemic is rooted in the primitive sense of deep kinship with creatures or things other than human. A tribe may feel itself especially allied to one particular animal or plant. So intimate is the relationship that the totem object is usually regarded as the great ancestor of the clan or has mystical relationship within it and is honoured with greatest courtesy, reverence and ceremony. The totemic arrangement, therefore, helps to preserve certain species of animal and plants in Africa.

Secondly, the taboo arrangement regulates the relationship between man and his fellowmen, man and plants and man and animals. Taboo clothes certain acts, plants and animals with serious force of sacredness there by, ensuring that they are treated with propriety and reserved to man's relationship with plant and animals. Some communities have specific days they do not go to farm. The taboo principle sets apart some portions of land, forests and some species of animals that cannot be destroy by man. Directly and indirectly, this principle functions to protect plant, animals and micro-organism in the revered portions of land. Thus, it can be seen that though the taboos are religiously oriented yet, they have inherent environmental values.

Thirdly, African traditional medicine recognizes the symbiotic relationship between man and plant, man and some animals, and between the two and governing beings in the universe. Adukwu (2006) observed that healing is a cardinal religious practice in African traditional religion hence, the practice of magic and medicine is among the five – fold structure of African tradition religion.

Ugwu (2004) remarked that health, for the African is not an isolated phenomenon but part of the entire magi co-religious fabric of the people. In African traditional medicine, one is not surprised to see some particles of plant and parts of an animal used as preventive, protective or curative

medicine. Medicinal plants abound in African forest. These plants have some potency which distinguishes them from other plants.

Some indigenous medical practitioners especially herbalists say that plants and herbs speak. The traditional healers often tell the stories of how tutelary deities reveal to them in a dream or symbolic sound particular herbs for a particular ailments. Thus, one sees the African forest clothed with spiritual powers which are believed to be the good of the people if they know how to relate friendly with the invisible powers governing the community of man and community of trees.

### **Recommendations**

It is in line with the discoveries of this study that this research recommends that:

- ❖ Viewed against the backdrop of the traditional medicine and healing practices, African religion encourages merciful and friendly treatment of the environment.
- ❖ Creation is clothed with air of goodness as manifested in the belief of soul habitation or possession. Land, water, tree are inhabited by souls. Therefore, the traditional ideas should be incorporated into school system to enable preserve some of these things discussed above.
- ❖ Religious authorities and specialists are sacred and or quasi sacred personalities. Both the priest and laity in African religious thought are bound by set of rules and principles which make them treat nature (water, land, plant) with sobriety and religious restraints. These rules give human, plant and animal communities a sense of respect, justice and right to live. Therefore this should be maintained to keep African cultural values and to maintain environmental conservative.
- ❖ The government should support the priests by providing modern facilities to preserve most of these historic places, in order to maintain cultural values.
- ❖ Training of priest in modern education is necessary.
- ❖ Most of these areas discussed can serve as excursion sites by various educational institutions to know and maintain African religio-cultural values and environmental conservation.
- ❖ Replacement of trees whenever they are cut down should be our culture and practice. There is the need to evolve a systematic programme designed for character formation and enhancement in the nation's education system. There is a craving need for character education or formation in the country. This should be incorporated through the primary school level that is a period when the child becomes aware of his external environment, secondary level and tertiary level. It is important that adequate and proper attention be paid to this endeavour at all levels because sometimes, learner leave the formal education system into other life ventures. Therefore, no matter the level at which the learner leaves, he would have acquired enough or considerable character development to be able to function optimally where he finds himself.
- ❖ There is also the need for the orientation of the members of the university staff both academic and non-academic. An orientation seminar/workshop programme should be in cooperated in the academic calendar of universities for the staff. This is very important because the trainer needs to be trained on the African Religio-cultural values and environmental conservation. Furthermore, scholars in the field of education are there by called upon to carryout further research with regards to the topic of this paper which advisably, should be national in scope.

- ❖ Finally, curriculum developers and education bodies and agencies should work towards the inclusion of Religion and human values as a general studies course programme. Having recognized this course to be very valuable especially in the achievement of the goals of higher education in the country, authorities in policy making are called upon to see its necessity in the all-round development of the student.

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