

**MAN, SPIRITUAL FORCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY IN IGALA RELIGION**

Israel Yunisa Akoh, Ph.D

Department Of Religious Studies
Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State
israelakoh3@gmail.com

Abstract

A level of consciousness is observable with regards to environmental sustainability in the Igala traditional religion. The research seeks to motivate high and quality environmental consciousness based on the physical environmental challenges of soil erosion, flooding, physical environmental quality and deforestation within the environment. It also seeks to loud sufficient precautions that have been overlooked over time against the need to maintain desirable environmental quality. To achieve this, the researcher has the following in mind: to state a descriptive view of the Igala people's environment in relation to their religion as well as to investigate the level of consciousness of the Igala religion in relation to the environment, and suggest ways of reducing global warming, climate disaster and destruction of environmental deposits. The methods adopted are descriptive, historical and phenomenological. Data collection was done through interview. It is observed that the environment plays a key role in the everyday practice of the Igala people's religion hence, the need for more effective integration of its religion with its environmental policies.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Igala traditional religion, Eco-system, Africa

Introduction

The Igala people's religion like any African religion is not a religion of the holy book like the Koran or the Holy Bible. It is a religion that is written on the hearts of *Igala* people and can be learnt through their songs, myths/legends, idioms, wise sayings and arts/symbols. This religion like other African religions, according to Shishima, "is part and parcel of life in traditional African society. Religion permeates all aspects of life, be it politics, economics, education, etc. This is to say, to be an effective member of the community, one must belong to the religion of the land" (2).

The idea held by Eurocentric authors as stated by Idowu, “that the African people (Igala inclusive) had no idea of God and where the devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held Sway” (87). Idowu thus cites the Berlin Journal to hold that:

Before the introduction of genuine faith and higher standards of culture by the Arabs, the natives had neither political organization not strictly speaking any religion.... Therefore, in examining the pre-Mohammedan conditions of Negro races, to confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and often cannibal customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols and their squalid homes (87).

The researcher disagrees with the above statement because there can be no people all over the world who are totally devoid of cultures and religion as it relates to the knowledge of the living God. What Igala people’s religion does was that since the Supreme Being (*Ojo Chamachala*) is so mighty, powerful and above the physical reach of man, they convey their religious ideas through supernatural beings as agents of the Supreme Being (Kanu 2013 and 2015).

In our society today, environmental studies are receiving greater attention by biblical scholars. In some of such scholarly works, the ecological concept of the natural world, as distinct from the theological concept of creation, is clearly an emerging subject matter in biblical studies, thus in the words of a biblical scholar, Fretheim, “we have a lot of catching up to do” (16). In affirmation of Lynn White’s Theory of ecology, Eneji writes:

Everybody now says they are Christians and that the ancestral belief was misleading, God gave man dominion over all living creatures for Man’s satisfaction of his needs, so why would anybody put restrictions of the use of any part of God’s Creation? We must exploit these resources to our satisfaction. God was not a fool because he knew we were going to need these resources (50).

With the above, one would accept Lynn White’s theory that Christianity has played an important role in the erosion of former traditional belief systems. According to Eneji:

Things formerly held sacrosanct have been destroyed and the ascription of psychic power to these objects of worship has been completely removed, hence traditional African religion is now seen as an evil thing to believe without considering the efficacy of the belief system in the conservation and management of environmental resources (Eneji 50).

The researcher is, therefore, of the opinion that other faiths should be blamed for the crises we experience in our world today. Furthermore, religion without etiquette is bad. The questions that arise include: How can we dwell in harmony when the rights of members of ecosystem are not respected? How could there be harmonious relationship when animals (land or sea) are killed with reckless abandon even to the point of using chemicals developed through technology and science to destroy them? Following the question above, Chiedozie and Ufele comment, "More science and more technology are not going our old one" (4). Chiedozie and Ufele further observe that, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen because it gave man the right to dominate and exploit nature" Chidozie and Ufele (5). As to what Christianity contributes to this emerging technological world view, Lynn White as cited by Chidozie and Ufele further adds that "Both our present science and technology are so tinctured with so called orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature so that no solution for our crises can be expected from them alone" Chiedozie and Ufele (5). The position of Chiedozie and Ufele is not conclusive as many other scholars will understand their position as a misunderstanding and one-sided rendering of the Christian creation story.

Human Relationship with the Natural Environment in Igala Religion

The Igala people believed that God (*Ojo*) is both the creator and the maker of all things. This is evident in Igala story of creation that in the beginning, only God (*Ojo Chamachala*) existed, and the shapeless world was in total darkness. Out of his eyes came lighting that brought forth the sun (*olu*) and the moon (*ochu*) with the stars (*amilawo*)... God created man out of the clay and breathed upon his forehead of the man created. Thus the first man became *Atinalo* (*Ata ene olo*) (father from the sky) (Egbunu 9).

The Igala people lived harmoniously in a religious world where both human beings and their natural environment relate well with each other. The Igala people consider the earth as both home and mother of

all, but with the coming of the foreign religions, things started changing from what they used to be. In line with Lynn Whites's theory as quoted by Chidozie and Ufele "what used to be the traditional method of environmental preservation collapsed and sustainability even disappeared" Chidozie and Ufele (32). Nevertheless, religion still played a major role among the Igaka people. Though the exact time when man was created in Igala creation story is not stated, it is evident that man was brought into being after heaven and earth and other heavenly bodies were created. Man is regarded among the *Igala* as the head of all things, but that God is the most powerful and the source of all powers.

The Igala people regarded God as the Supreme Being, the Almighty, All powerful, dependable, and that he is eternal. As such, he is both creator and sustainer of all that was created. The Igala people believed that the spiritual world is populated with divine beings. These beings have a hierarchy (Miachi 114). They believe that the earth and material world was created, they also have belief in a multitude of gods and spirits. It is a religion that is dogmatic and thus no questions or challenges are entertained (Chidozie and Ufele 54).

Important factors associated with the Igala religious system are that spirits are everywhere in persons, trees, rivers, animals, rocks, mountains, forests and other sacred personal effects. Interestingly, Igala people believed that God could be at work any of the above since religion permeates all aspects of human life in Igala society. It is, therefore, abnormal to be involved in crimes such as adultery, stealing, cheating and suicide. The priest and traditional custodians of the people communicate the wishes of the spirits to the people. In Igala religious system, all events have their proper rituals that could not be overlooked in anyway. These rituals are performed through dance, music, liberation or art. Some of these rituals have been retained in one form or the other in various communities concerned. In Gbenda's view "part of God's self-disclosure to human is in nature" (43).

The *Igalas* in their religious questions pondered on the mysteries of the universe such as mountains, rivers, streams, lakes, forest, animals, plants, season, weather and climatic changes. They then asked themselves questions such as "who could be the author of this well patterned universe, and what the mysteries behind them are?" Usually, they conclude that it must be the handwork of a supersensible

intelligent being. According to Gbede, "Man's responsibility was to maintain a harmonious relationship with cosmos and other beings such as the fauna, flora and spirits of ancestors in order to sustain perfect harmony with God and His agents" (44). Awolalu and Dopamu support Gbede's view that, "Each people in Africa responded independently to the experience of our immediate environment. When all these beliefs and practices are put side by side, they present an unitary view with common orientation, religious thought and philosophy" (27).

Another action for man's relationship with nature is from the fact that the universe and all therein are creatures of the Supreme Being. It, therefore, means that everything belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has strong spiritual meaning for man. The traditional Igala view, therefore, is profoundly religious and it forms the basic attitudes that characterize most, if not all spheres of life. That is why there is no basic distinction between the sacred and the profane, material and immaterial. To Igala people, many of the things in his environment are held in high esteem for religious reasons.

Furthermore, the attitude of the Igala people is rooted in the belief that those things were created by the Supreme Being and for continuity of harmony with nature; there must be a relationship for mutual obligation between all the things created by the Supreme Being. Since there is no visible dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual worlds in that they both interlink into each other or overlap, the visible world acts as a vehicle for spiritual power while the physical is held or modeled after the spiritual world. The Igala people believe that the cosmos is a representation of an organic unity thus the environment is seen as a nurturing mother, sensitive and alive, and its capable of responding to human action. It is further believed among the Igala people that these natural resources were provided for the benefit of man and Man's duty is to explore, develop and use with moderation, all the available natural resources to enhance his wellbeing. According to Apendad and Adegba as cited by Gbede, "Nature is created on the principle of balance and all the systems in nature must exist and function in harmony with their balance (387). This of course, is a contrast with the outright domination and control as in Gen. 1:28 which Lynn White says was the cause of the environmental crises seen today in our world.

Though, the Igalas have always collected food, medicines, and other materials from the wild animals that all depend on these natural resources for their livelihood. “Consequently, if these natural resources are used up to as a result of over exploitation, or lack of protection, or even due to our change of attitude towards them, their number would greatly reduced, thereby, depriving the future generations the opportunity to either see them, talk more of even using them to better their lives” Gbenda (46). That is why Igala culture, reveres, protects and respect things in their natural environment.

In Igala religion, lands are often set aside at the out sketch of the village settlements. Examples are *Ayabi* in Affa-Ibaji, both sides are rivers and streams, *Okwula* forest, *Egbe* forest in *Egume*, *Ojaina* (Royal Cemetery at Idah), farming and other human activities such as hunting, felling of tress, fetching of fire woods, etc., were not allowed. These forests retain their original flora and fauna. To signify their importance, shrines of some deities are located therein. With singular action, the forest is the small forest dedicated to ‘*Agana-Obagwu* in Ofu Local Government Area of Kogi State. In this case, only the priests who are custodians of such sacred forests could enter at specified times of the year. The researcher’s quest to know why the surrounding of *Ofu* river remains bushy from *Ojofu Anyigba* to the lower part after *Okogba* in *Ibaji* generated the response from *Momoh Omata* (*Gago Ajetachi*) thus: “Rivers and streams in Igala religious setting are treated as sacred by people who lives in its forest”.

While the researcher was schooling at *CMML Secondary School Anyigba*, there used to be strange noises from within the *River Ofu* between 11:00am-1:00pm. It was then believed that the water spirits were celebrating at those periods. Consequent upon these we were not allowed to go to the stream around the same time to avoid the wrath of the spirits. Towards the middle of the river at *Ofokopi* near *Ugwolawo*, there is as point in the river called *Ulokoamo*. This place is said to be the abode of the spirit living in the river. Similarly at *Ugwolawo*, opposite the local government secretariat, there is a place which is referred to as *ejuliomimamo* (the eyes see water that cannot be drunk) where there was a cave where some spirits were said to have lived. History has it that a priestess, *Serahagali*, a traditional doctor had shrine there. The river in *Maboloegane* in *Olamaboro* local government area of Kogi State, is also a place said to be the home of *aligenu* (water spirit). Most of the priests and priestesses of *aligenu* visit the site regularly, at

times they even jump into the dreaded area of the river *mabolo* so as to obtain more powers and inspirations from the spirits dwelling within. These histories and activities have made these sites sacred and kept away from human activities.

In line with the above, most of the people that live along river banks in Igala land mostly revere or venerate water spirits which to them gives them fortune in fishing, farming, prevention of water accidents, some even believe that the barren could be given children though some prescribed sacrifices and rituals. As a result, people built shrines and veneration centers along the banks and mysterious parts of the river.

In Igala religious system, there is protection offered for totems. Here, there is an intrinsic relationship of friendship and protection between a person or group of persons and a particular animal or a natural object. Both parties keep to mutual close bond of life. Among the *EgwuAfia* (Long Masquerade) people in Igala land, the animal called *Ewolo* is neither to be killed or eaten. Some group in Igala land like the Ajire in Ajaka forbid the killing and eating of alligator (*Abaji*). Some clans around Ibochi prohibit the killing and eating of rabbits (*Afolo*) because it was said to have saved their forefather from the danger of being killed during war. Among the descendants of Ogbajele in Ofakaga, Ajetachi and Agala in Igala land, they are forbidden from using *Okopi* tree for fire wood because it was used to save their forefather from a dreaded disease.

The Igala people believe in the power of spirits as forces behind lightning and thunder. It is believed to be an avenger of wrong dealings and as such when properties are stolen, the thunder spirit is consulted through the diviner. Days are given to the victim to either confess before the day or be ready to face the consequence. When confession is not made as to who stole the property, full rituals are carried out. In effect, the victim would be stricken by thunder and in that case, nobody must cry or mourn for the victim, neither shall he/she be touched until the necessary rituals are observed. Thus, when an Igala man or woman hears the sound of thunder they utter this expression *Tukpara, Tukpara, Ojomudubanwu mi* (I recant, I recant, my God forgive me). Therefore, with the fear of the wrath of thunder evil actions were curbed in Igala communities.

In another development, the earth is revered so much in Igala land because of the religious importance it has. Specific locations are set

aside where the earth divinities are venerated (*Eṛṛane*). There and then cleansing extends to the whole community (*Anṛ-efa*). To the Igala people, this cleansing brings about good rain, soul fertility, good fortunes and likes. The *Ereane* is usually marked with the planting of a tree to mark the spot. A good example is the *Obala* tree in the middle of Omata's compound at Ajetatchi-Anyigba as the starting point of the human community in the area.

Because of the sanctity attached to the earth by igala religious system, it is purely an abomination to have intercourse with a woman on the ground. People who do so will never flourish in life because they have defiled the earth goddess and so they are under a curse.

Science and Technology and the Natural Environmental

According to David and Dada,

There are lots of ecological problems and hazards that man does to the world of nature. This can be due to the fact that the livelihood of man depends largely on natural resources which are obtained by striving for survival through massive production of food produce (32).

Man's quest to achieve the above; seek after land allocation which of course has its ecological consequences on the natural environment, has resulted in wanton destruction of natural vegetation, leaching, disruption of biogeochemical circle among other negative effects on the land.

Another activity of man that disrupts the originality of man's natural environment is the act of bush burning. This act destroys the potentials of the soil, soil structure and the ecology is arbitrarily destroyed. Through bush burning so many microbes are destroyed as well as soil macro organisms in the likes of earthworm, snails, rodents, insects, etc., and this had led to their reduction as well as some going into extinction; the ecology is also interrupted when man uses pesticides and herbicides which has led to the death of many pests and herbs. Similarly, human activities have threatened the peace and stability of the natural environment. According to Obasola cited by Asiodu:

It is now plain that the path blazed the material civilization that has been dominant in the world in the last one and half centuries is leading mankind to disaster because of the devastation that is

has brought on the environment. The motivation, orientation and goal modern civilization have been overwhelmingly materialism is one the major cause's wanton destruction of beasts and their habitats as well as the earth and its beauty (205).

Other agents disrupting the continuity of natural environmental resources are the issues of urbanization and industrialization. When land is cleared in large quantity for housing, construction of roads, industries, educational and social reasons, it results to the destruction of many economical plants, pounds, lakes, etc. The above action of man brought about by science and technology also led to the destruction of wildlife habitats and species living among the vegetation of the affected areas.

Man's action on the ecosystem has been more negative than positive through his mode of operations. Investigations have shown that the destruction caused by man to the ecosystem is far more that roles he plays in training and benefiting from the environments. The point above is manifested in the cutting and felling of the trees which have resulted to gradual desertification of Igala land. Not only that , the trees of religious importance in the land had been cut off thus depriving the spirits of their abode which has resulted theses spirits hunting for man since they have been made homeless.

The activities of rain makers is counter-productive in the sense that they prevent rain when it is needed for farming activities all in the name of festivals and mud house building. The action of these rain makers in Igala land has in no small measure affected the rate of rainfall. If this is not checked, it could lead to crop failure, famine and untold hardship on both human on the ecosystem.

In view of man's negative interaction with the natural environment, Schumacher quoted by Obasola States that, "we are at war with nature and if by chance we win the war, we shall be the loser" (199). By this he meant to say that our civilization is at risk because we are misusing natural resources and disturbing natural systems.

Another area worth noting is the area of pollution of air, soil, fresh waters and the oceans which has become a serious and continuing threat to humans and other species.

To conclude this section, the words of Hoffman as quoted by Obasolaare is important:

The true cause of the catastrophic environmental destruction is the hubris of modern man who has become godless, who believes himself to be an unlimited master of his environment and one unleashes his boundless hedonistic consumer passion on nature as if it has no right of its own to exist intact (201).

Ways of Tackling Environmental Crisis

For the simple fact that each of the world religions has acknowledged care for the earth and all therein, the adherents need to be fast in recognizing and applying such ideas that express deep moral obligation to promote ecological justice. The inability of putting relevant strategies in their proper place would amount to the destruction of the future of humanity. Similarly, religious traditions should question any economic progress that allegedly is in contradiction with the preservation of the environment.

There should be rediscovery of ecological sensitivity in the light of religious traditions so as to encourage those lagging behind to rediscover the ecological sensitivity and take radical steps towards combating ecological crisis.

To maintain the originality of the natural environment, the sacredness of the cosmos should be promoted, rotational farming and bush fallow system should also be adopted to protect the ecosystem. Indiscriminate tree felling in Igala land should be stopped if the wildlife and trees and herbs used in traditional medicine is to flourish. Similarly, bush burning should be discouraged for the protection of the eco-system.

Furthermore, the issue of grazing by Fulani herdsmen should be addressed since they also contribute to leaching, destruction of micro and macro organisms living in the soil as well as farm lands. The use of chemicals on lands and water bodies should be minimized or stopped.

Igala taboos, religious beliefs, sacred rites and totems provide a frame works for defining acceptable resource use. When these traditional practices are promoted and protected, ecological balance would be restored.

Conclusion

The Igala people believe in the existence of spirits/deities in their natural environment. They also believe that these spirits protect, heal, hear them and are capable of communicating their wishes and aspirations to the Supreme Being (*Ojo Chamachala*). Because of belief that natural environments have some super natural powers in them, sacrifices are offered to them for onward transmission to the most high (*Ojochamachala*). It could therefore be deduced that because man is not lording or claiming total dominion over the created beings, but believes that there are transcendental power in nature, the human person protects them since their livelihood and survival depends on these agents of the universal creator. It is submitted that the Igala must protect his or her environment for sustainable preservation of life and nature itself.

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