

**AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND GLOBAL
ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL REVIEW**

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Abstract

It is powerfully documented that man's hostile attitude to nature is not a new development. Humans have for all time seen their environment as something to be degraded, exploited and dominated. These human activities are accountable for the loss of bio-diversity and disruption of bionetwork processes which has led to the lessening and obliteration of the number of species of plants and animals in the ecosystem. Every religious tradition describes or outlines its relationship to the natural environment very clearly. This relationship is based on how we have made up our mind in a deep and hard think about the natural environment affects the very way we live in it. This work has shown that African Traditional Religion (ATR) has the potential to situate humans in relation to both the natural and human worlds with regard to meaning and responsibility (stewardship), through its taboos, proverbs, sanctions and moral authority and institutional power that help effect a change in attitudes, practices and public policies in respect to addressing the urgent environmental problems of contemporary society and sustainability.

Keywords: ATR, ecology, taboos, proverbs ethics and eco-theology.

Exordium

Every religious tradition describes or outlines its relationship to the natural environment very clearly. This relationship is based on our opinion about the natural environment. How we have made up our mind in a deep and hard think about the natural environment affects the very way we live in it. Human activities have wielded very large or great influence on the environment, unchangingly, which has resulted in the depletion of both biological and biodiversity. This is why some of the most serious problems facing human life today in this twenty-first century are ecological crises and environmental problems.

According to Ekpenyong, "these problems have now formed contemporary issues of serious concern with everyone realizing how

much the earth within which we live and work is slowly losing its ability to support a worthwhile existence. It will not be wrong to say that, this is the greatest problem and crisis being faced by mankind in both under developed and developed nations of the world today” (136). In the similar vein, Schama explains that “one can hardly think of a natural system that has not been considerably altered, for better or worse, by human activities. This is not the work of the industrial centuries. It is coeval with the entirety of our social existence. And it is this irreversibly modified world, from the polar caps to the equatorial forests, that is all the nature we have” (7). Human activities are in a direct way responsible for the deteriorating condition of biodiversity, many times or often times slowly or impossible to see or notice steps of flora and fauna get greatly reduced or devoured over time.

This disruption of the ecosystem processes by human activities, and over exploitation give rise to massive destruction of plants and animals. In the environment, animals serve as sources of fabrics, refuge, food, power, medicine, creative, trade and industry and religious attitude. Truly speaking, human behaviours such as using toxic chemical in agriculture, dumping of refuse, toxic chemicals in illegal fishing, over harvesting of wildlife, logging, tree felling, mining, gas flaring, etc have had a terrible impact on the biodiversity (Ekpenyong 136). In his primitive life, man readily made use of the available “natural resources only to sustain life i.e. only to satisfy his basic needs for air, water, food and shelter. However, with the dawn of industrial revolution, man started utilizing his ability to gather resources from beyond his immediate surroundings and process these resources into different versatile forms in order to satisfy acquired needs i.e. other needs beyond those associated with survival” (Dhameja 30). Dhameja further posits that “rapid industrialization, development, consumerism and population explosion has (sic) upset the ecological balance. Affluent sections of the population increase pollution levels in the process of raising their living standards whereas the poor destroy their immediate environment in order to survive by cutting down forests and letting their livestock to overgraze the grasslands” (1).

These problems have become contemporary issues that cause earnest worry which breed realization that the world in which we live and labour in is step by step losing its aptitude and vigor to sustain life. Discussing in this line, Ekpenyong observes that “ours is a period when the human community is in search of new and sustaining relationship to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very

existence of all life-forms on the planet earth” (1591). In the journey of man’s desire to meet these acquired needs, he is prompted to overgraze the green lands and over-exploit the natural resources with no careful thought to the astronomical or very great harm being caused. Some other factor that is fast reducing and devouring the natural resources is the accelerating and escalating human population that causes over-exploitation of the existing natural resources, by that means serving as a cause or begetting catastrophic and devastating repercussion due to the environmental imbalance. Thus, genetic resources and the biological diversity are lost as the ecosystems are degraded. It is in this vein that this work seeks to find out what role African Traditional Religion plays in shaping humans’ mind-set to the natural world most specially, in this twenty-first century when the special effects of environmental problems and climate change have turned out to be very noticeable than ever before in mankind history on earth. Some of the existing literature on the authority of religious beliefs on a person’s attitude towards the natural environment emphasize the richness of classic religion such as Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Buddhism and Judeo-Christianity on care and protection of the natural order, but the viewpoint of African Traditional Religion in this regard is often ignored.

The Powerful Effect of Human Activities on Environment

The problem the world is facing today is the environmental degradation crisis. The biblical order to suppress the earth is what mankind has completely acknowledged. Forests and fields are being converted completely into buildings and arterials, the earth dynamism exchange systems have been changed into the harmful condition of biodiversity, toxication of the environment, and contaminable soil and water systems of the world. Ecologists in their numbers have put the blame on Christian religion as the very serious cause of the ecological wreckage. Humankind has misconstrued the authority to subdue and have power over the earth as a theological backup used for ecological destruction (Ekpenyong 138). Affirming the assertion, Bebia posits thus: “the world is faced with an unprecedented loss of biodiversity as we experience the largest wave of extinction, and this threatens to undermine environmental, economic and social goals. The impact of human ecological footprints on the planet has culminated in climate change with its concomitant global warming which have altered the geophysical support systems of the world” (130). This means that the impact of global environmental catastrophe is a brother to no adherent

of any religion as its effect is felt by all. Since the global environmental catastrophe is a friend or a brother to no religion, it is the conviction of this work therefore that as a matter of urgency, the world religious and spiritual traditions should take immediate action to protect the biodiversity with their unusual and tremendous power to persuade and to inculcate in their adherents' behaviour, an attitude that can serve as a tool to protect biodiversity. If this is done, the resultant effect will be that it will fast-track the progression in the direction of a safer and better world as the adherents of each religion will encourage one another in the task of becoming aware of and carefully look out for new methods or systems that can be used to advocate and foster nature conservation for global environmental sustainability.

Human activities have unchangingly exerted very large or great impact on the environment, resulting in the depletion of both biological species and climate change. Becoming a threat to life on this environment as well as to the nature itself, is our development processes and technological practices. Commenting on this threat to life, Ignacimuthu writes thus: "The threat is constituted by large-scale devastation of the environment, damage to water, air and soil, and to genetic diversity; by destruction of rain forests, extensive soil erosion and desertification, by massive use of pesticides, insecticides and herbicides which deplete and poison the soil, by the squander and destruction of sea resources, mangrove swamps and coral reefs, by anarchic and profligate industrial production and overconsumption as well as overuse and waste of nature's scarce and non-renewable treasures; by the ambiguities of nuclear technology, the horrors of nuclear weaponry and the hazards of radioactive waste" (22).

These environmental crises caused by human activities are many times depicted or delineated in terms of the depletion of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, acid rains, loss of biodiversity, death of rivers and lakes, extinction of species, diseases and death from chemically and radioactively contaminated food, water and air, extinction of water resources, global warming, and denuding of rain forests. There is no doubt that today environment is quite different from what our environment was twenty or thirty years ago. And it is in this that species of both plants and animals go into extinction and never to be recovered. The rate of loss at which this happens is forecastable to go faster 10 fold by 2050. The "millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report of United Nation released in January 2006 attests that many mammals and plants population have declined in numbers, geographical spread

or both” (Bebia 130). Accordingly, or as a result of this, human activities and their results on the earth have hastened loss in species of both in type and number, in environmental degradation and climatic change just to mention a few.

African Traditional Religion and Ecology

African Traditional Religion (ATR) “is called ‘African’ due to certain reasons. First, it is called ‘African’ because it is indigenous, aboriginal, and foundational or handed down from generation to generation” (Ekeopara and Ekpenyong 19). Forming the most major influence in the life of a good number of Africans is religion. This is so because in a typical African man religion penetrates into each aspect of the African’s life and it cannot in isolation be studied. It goes closely connected with the study of the people who put the religion into practice. When we speak of African Traditional Religion, we have in our mind or intend to express the indigenous African religious beliefs and practices. ATR is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in a diversity of shades and intensities by a very great number of Africans, including persons who claim to be Muslims or Christian (Awolahu 1; Kanu 15). We can briefly state or express our observation that African Traditional Religion is entrenched in the African world view and in the people’s norms and values.

One of the major crises of the contemporary world today is the environmental crisis which without any form of doubt produces an effect upon the health of individuals and society of large. Despite the fact that environmental crisis is commonly held to be majorly caused by scientific and technological misdeed and misapplication of natural resources, in his work, “*The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*”, Lynn White alleges for the first time that “World religions are the root cause of environmental problems. In his work, he stresses that what people think about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny, that is, by religion” (Deuraseh 524). White still argues again that “the dualistic nature of monotheistic religions has caused the separation of human beings from the rest of nature and thereby paved a way for the beginning of environmental crisis” (Ekeopara and Ekpenyong 1593). Supporting this assertion, Arnold Toynbee in his work: “*The Religion Background of the Present Environmental Crisis*” argues thus:

Some of the major maladies of the present day world-for instance the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured can be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause and that this cause is the rise of monotheism (144).

From the foregoing, it is very obvious that: that which communities and individuals do to their environment to a great extent or degree hinges on how they see themselves in relation to nature. We can conclude from here that, the conventional environmental crisis is not completely but mostly as a proceed or arises as a consequence or effect of man's way of thinking about life and his attitude towards nature, these have strong roots in his culture and religion. The ecological crisis that faces or challenges the world today is not undoable or impossible to overcome. But regrettably, the work done to find a way to deal with and end the problem of ecological crisis is majorly through modifying the existing institutional mechanisms through laws and public policy and not to make a radical difference in or transform man's attitude and beliefs. All the efforts put forward by the government are not turning out to be producing a result that is wanted, that is the decided, decisive or desired effect; as religion is the only institution with the institutional power and moral authority that are well situated to effect a change in attitudes, practices and public policies in respect to environmental sustainability. It is to this end that ATR and non ATR scholars after carefully watching and noticing the retard or lacking in readiness effect in finding a way to deal with and end the current ecological crisis, come to be more and more involved in religious teaching with the intention of finding out the solution to ecological crisis.

Human beings are a component of the environment in African religious thought and philosophy. African Religion scholars like J. S. Mbiti, P. a. Dopamu, E. I. Ifesieh, E. I. Metuh, J. O. Awolalu and others have made it very obvious and free from doubt in their several different writes up that God created the environment and it consists of two balancing worlds namely the physical and spiritual worlds. This physical world is made up of the earth, populated by humans, animals, birds, reptiles and material surroundings. Others include: forests, land, valleys, rivers, lakes, oceans, grasses, seas, mountains and so on. The spiritual world on the other hand, is consists of the ontological beings like the Almighty God or Being, the divinities, deities, ancestors, and spirits (Gbenda 16). God made available all the natural resources as provisions for mankind's benefit. Man's obligation is to discover, build up and raise

with moderation all available natural resources to enhance well being. Giving credence to this, Apenda and Adega opine thus: "Nature is created on the principles of balance and all the systems in nature must exist and function in harmony with their balance" (387). The understanding of every traditional African is that all that exists or all that is related to the ecosystem and the environment is very strongly felt or deeply-seated religious; and multifold things on earth are seen to have as a mark of distinction or are kept back in high esteem from use for religious reasons; specially, while or during the time that they are thought to be spirits' dwelling places. Deeply rooted in African's attitude toward environment is the belief that God created all things. In addition everything in the environment is assumed or required to canorously work for the interest and betterment of man now and hereafter.

The recent years' theses on this area have shown that African Religion across-the-board, attaches huge or agreeably importance to the protection of the environment and wildlife. Lending credence to this viewpoint, African theologians like John Smith Mbiti, E. I. Metuh, P. A. Dopamu and E. I. Ifesieh just to mention a few have argued as is to be expected or ineluctably that African indigenous religions' main traits are set firmly or entrenched in environmental and cultural feelings or interests. For instance, Mbiti in his thesis title: "African Religion and the World Order" attests thus:

Another basic element of African religion concerns human relations with the world of nature. Humans are not masters over nature to exploit it without feeling or treat it without respect. Instead people are one with nature, responsible toward nature, able to communicate with nature, and the chief priests of nature (368).

This is to say that the worldview for a normal African religious person entails and approves of or endorses a positive environmental ethic. This Africans' worldview is anthropocentric, which shows that all things are seen in terms of its relation to mankind. Mbiti has carefully classified this African viewpoint into five sections, namely, God, Spirits, man, animals and non-biological life (166). In African religions almost all parts of nature are seen as family, blessed with consciousness as well as the ancestral spirits' power. To Africans life force passes or spreads through the universe that is, interpenetrates every area of the universe. In African worldview mankind and environment are fastened together

by one moral order. This moral order is man-centred, even though it has connection with the sacred powers, to ancestors and to nature.

We can contentedly infer that in African indigenous religions, nature is sacred by the reason that it is God's creation. Thus, in African Indigenous religion human being is a vital fraction of the environment, because it is part of God's creation.

African Tradition Religion and Eco-theology

Before now, "local people have developed a variety of source management practices that continues to exist in tropical Africa, Asia, South America and other parts of the world" as Appiah-Opoku had said (93-99). In the same vein, Shastri et al attest thus: "Traditional African Societies also go after ethics so as to often help them regulate interactions with their natural environment(cited in Ekepopara and Ekpenyong 22).

The symbol of sacredness is depicted mainly in proverbs which are transmitted down from generation to generation. Echoing this in their work "Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays" Getui and Obeng write thus: "in African religiosity creation represents the works of God in his architectural being. If an individual violated nature in any form or practice, that could endanger the livelihood of the whole community. Taboos and proverbs, are formulated to reinforce god's (sic) power and greatness" (19-21). The taboos and proverbs within indigenous African societies are a set of rules followed by the African people(s) in order to enhance their relationship with nature and thereby preventing exploitation of species, rivers, forests, streams, medicinal plants, mountains and overgrazing of the grassland. Kanu has this to say, "the sacred trees are used particularly in covenant making between individuals, also it can be used as the place to gather for meetings/settling disputes and also for the demarcation of land between families, the purification and fortification of community leaders" (40). Hence, it becomes abomination to cut down any sacred trees used as demarcation or covenant. The main source from African indigenous people's perspective of all things alive and dead that wields a significant role in influencing the behaviours of beings towards the natural and wild world amidst African peoples is the concept of God.

It is widely held in African traditional religion that human spirits inhabit trees. This is because in certain African societies, trees like Iroko, Mahogany, silk cotton, afara and so on are considered as having taken

spirits and are respected and venerated. This is why in African religious thought man is seen as one of the components of the environment “As a result of the importance attached to trees and adjoining biodiversity, African communities used to designate certain forests as sacred. The religious or cultural designation of an area as sacred, especially those which are relatively natural, may either intentionally or coincidentally promote the conservation of its associated biodiversity” (Bebia 135). It is in this vein that Asante posits thus: among the Asantis, forests were highly revered because they were considered as places of abode of the gods and felling of trees, and other anthropogenic were considered as taboos and forbidden. Any abuse of the forest ecosystem attracted punishment from spiritual deities” (1). In this way, forest resources were successfully conserved. Many people in African traditional societies believed that forests and trees were the sign that shows or one of the forms in which the power of the Supreme Being was being manifested. These things were seen as exactly right places to contact or to come face-to-face with their Supreme Being. Traditional African Societies had multifold shrines, which were being associated with trees like Mahogany, minosop, silk cotton trees, iroko, afara, fig trees baobabs and so on. These trees were preserved together with the vegetation that surrounded them as sacred places for worship and consultation of the gods. In Biase and Boki, there are evil forests at Okpara in Ikot Abiom and Iruan and Arangha, these evil forests are where bad or evil people in the community are sent to go and die. Here, no activity of human in any form is carried out as it is seen as the abode of the spirit and the spirit will not take it kindly with anybody that disturbs their peace. In Bateriko, some area of the forest is strictly kept back or set aside as the dwelling of the gods, no one is allowed entrance into that part of the forest.

Among the Shona there is a strong belief in sacred forests and mountain forests. Lending credence to this, Gelfand who carried out research work among the korekore Shona authenticates this belief when he posits:

So strong is the feeling among the Shona that one entering a strange area in a forest, a mountain or a beautiful spot is not allowed to comment on it least he upsets the ancestral spirits (vadzimu) of the region (54).

Traditionally, such sacred forests are called *rambatemwa*, meaning woodlands that cannot be cut (Mvududu 152). Infact it is morally

wrong in Shona to cut down any tree in these areas. Building materials and firewood are gotten from areas other than these sacred places. Multifold plant and animal lives are secure in this way.

In traditional African societies, high premium is placed on most sacred trees. For instance among the Yala people of Cross River State of Nigeria, it is believed that there are certain number of trees that are sacred and should never be cut down by any person. These trees include silk cotton trees, iroko trees, and mahogany, just to mention but few. These trees are often known as totem trees and are revered and venerated. They are attributed to or endowed with broad symbolic and spiritual significance. Sacred groves are found throughout traditional African societies which originally had religious and cultural bases. These sacred grove areas in indigenous African societies were usually protected and secured by the customary laws and rules as they were contemplated or perceived to be the home of the gods. Thus, sacred groves were places designated and revered in most African societies. These sacred places help protect watershed resources like springs, soil fertility and moisture and ecosystem processes such as nutrient cycling.

It is in this vein that Onah posits thus:

Among the Ekprinyi community of Yala LGA of Cross River State, it is also believed that there is a sacred river called Okpuoole; no one is ever allowed to fish in that river. It is believed from time immemorial that if by chance any fish is harvested from that river, it automatically means the death of a son or daughter of that community. This sanctity and sacredness are still maintained till date (129).

Groves and shrines of Akombo (mystical forces) located in the forests or rivers were forbidden. They constitute natural reserve whose vegetation has not been disturbed by human interference. From ecological point of view, restricted land and areas of the natural world retain their original flora and fauna. The forests set aside for religious purposes, constitute natural reserves, in which vegetation is primary and where the ecosystem has not been disturbed by human interference. Rare and threatened plant and animal species of the ecology could be found (Gbenda 67-68).

Rivers and streams in traditional African society are considered as hallowed by those who dwell in that area. Since their faith is that the river gods dwell in the forests and rivers, the surrounding

environments are conserved, and logging and cultivation are prohibited. Citing an example, Gbenda writes thus:

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 venerate such formations if evidence of curative property is associated with the water e.g Ikogosi spring in Ikogosi Ekiti (55-56).

Obviously speaking, sacred groves have made reputable impact in contributing to conservation of wildlife, forest and other biological resources. They also serve as watersheds for protection of sources of drinking water in catchment areas.

Conclusion

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) can supply or make available the chemistry or any of the fundamentals for a current environmental model of living in harmony with the natural world. A.T.R acknowledges the value or significance of all life, including the life of all biological and biodiversity on the earth. In ATR there is no cutting of the human being from the natural world. Environment is not perceived as raw material for mankind use which has to be used or changed by artful or unfair means so as to serve their purpose or exploited in whatever manner people choose. On the contrary, it is filled with spirits' presence and therefore must be revered and respected.

It is in this stand that Ignaumuthu writes: "their relationships with the natural world tend to preserve biological integrity within natural communities. These are engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity and caring with an urge to consider fellow beings as alive and self conscious as human beings" (45). Such relationships were made known and eternalized by the traditional African cultural elements and religious belief and ceremonial ritual. A very central belief which appears consistent through multifold traditional African religion is that the earth is a living conscious being that should be handled with respect and reverence as well as loving care. The stewardship position given to man therefore positions him in accord with the environment, thereby making him in the end answerable to God for their running and controlling of human and environmental affairs. Hence ATR has all it takes to shape our attitude towards the natural world and to situate human-earth relations in a more balanced mode, most especially in this

21st century when the effects of environmental crises and climate change have become more glaring and alarming today than any other period in the history of the world or mankind.

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