

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN AFRICA: A STUDY OF IGALA TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Israel Yunisa Akoh, Ph.D

Department Of Religious Studies
Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State

Email: israelakoh3@gmail.com

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Abstract

A level of consciousness is observable with regards to environmental sustainability in the Igala religion of Africa. 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 with her religion as well as to investigate the level of consciousness of the Igala religion to its environment, and suggest ways of reducing the frequent global warming, climate disaster and destruction of environmental deposits. The methods adopted are descriptive, historical and phenomenological. Data collections are done through interview and visitation. It is observed that 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

Introduction

The Igala people's religion like any African religion is not a Religion of the Holy books like the Koran or the Holy Bible but written on the hearts of *Igalas* and can be noticed through songs, myths/legends, Idioms, wise sayings and arts/symbols. This religion 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 cited the Berlin Journal to say;

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 could 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 these supernatural beings as agents of reaching the Supreme Being.

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 one these biblical scholars, Fretheim, “we have a lot of catching up to do” (16). In affirmation of Lynn White’s Theory of ecology, Eneji says:

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. “Things formerly held sacrosanct have been destroyed and thee 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 question is, 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 without the preservation of seedlings? Following the question above, Chidozie and Ufele comment, "More science and more technology are not going our old one" (4). Because of these over exploitations as observed by Chidozie and Ufele observed to say; "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 tainted with so called orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature so that no solution for our crises can be expected from them alone", Chidozie and Ufele (5).

Judging from the above, the researcher wishes to state that humanity and all religious institutions should strive to respect, protect and preserve the natural environment for continuity and harmonious co-existence and relationship among all the sectors of the cosmos.

Human Relationship with the Natural Environment as seen in Igala Religious system

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 religion 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 in Igaka culture. 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 the heaven and the earth and other heavenly bodies were created. Man is regarded among *Igalas* as the head of all things, but that God is the most powerful and the source of all power.

The Igala people regarded this 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, to the Igala people are sometimes in a hierarchical order: Miachi (114). They belief in the earth and material life created, they also have belief in a multitude of gods and other spirits; the foundation of the religion of Igala people is faith in a dogmatic style, in that as one's fore fathers did shall continue to be and that is why nothing is taken for granted when it relates to religion. As such any member of the society that wishes to challenge the gods does so at his/her own risk. Chidozie and Ufele (54).

Important factors associated with are 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 over looked in anyway. These rituals are performed through dance, music, liberation or art. Some of these rituals have been retained in one foem 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 Gboda, "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 Gbenda’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, everything that 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 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 world in that they both interlock 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 well being. According to Apendad and Adegas as cited by Gbenda, “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 their settlement. 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 custodian of such sacred forests could enter at specified time. The researcher’s quest to know why the surrounding of Ofu river remain bushy from Ojofu Anyigba to the lower part after Okogba in Ibaji continues as Momoh Omata (Gago Ajetachi) responded thus: “Rivers and streams in Igala religious setting are treated as sacred by people who lives in its forest”. To confirm this was the fact that between 1979-1984 while the researcher was schooling at CMMML Secondary School Anyigba, there used to be strange noise within the source of the River Ofu between 11:00am-1:00pm. It is then believed that the water spirits are celebrating at that period. Consequent upon these we were not allowed to go to the stream within the same time to avoid wrath of these spirits. Towards the middle of the river at Ofokopi near Ugwolawo, there is as point in the river called Ulokoamo. Tis place is said to be an 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) within this point was a cave where some spirit were said to have lived. History has it that a priestess, serahagali, a traditional doctor had shrine ther. Still on the spirit living in or within the river is also a case of *maboloeganein* olamaboro local government area of kogi state, 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 thy even jump into the dreaded area of the river *maboloall* in the name of getting more power and inspirations from the spirits dwelling within. Because of such religious importance to such rivers or particular spots of vegetation becomes sacrosanct and the ecosystem is believed, should not be disturbed by humans.

In line with the above, most of the people that live along river banks ion 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 build shrines and veneration centers along the banks and mysterious parts of the rivers.

In Igala religious system as it were, there are absolute protections for totems. Here, there is an intrinsic relationship of friendship and protection between a person or group 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 *Ewolois* neither to be kelled nor eaten. Some group in Igala land e.g. some clans in 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 danger of being killed during war. Among the decendants of Ogbajele in Ofakaga, Ajetachi and Agala in Igala land, they are forbidden from using *Okopitree* for fire wood because it was used to save their forefather from a dreaded disease.

The Igala people believe in the power of spirit 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 or perceives 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 important it occupies. Specific locations are set aside where the earth divinities are venerated (*Ereane*). There and then cleansing extends to the whole community (*Anę-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 human dwelling 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 were said to ever flourish in life because they have defiled the earth goddess and so they are under a course.

Effect of Man, Science and Technology on the Natural Environmental Resources

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. This had resulted in wanton destruction of natural vegetation, leaching, disruption of biogeochemical circle among other negative effects of land used for farming.

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. Though bush burning so many microbes are destroyed as well as soil macro organisms in the likes of earthworm, snails, rodents, insects, etc. and his had led to their reduction as well as some going into extinction, the ecology is also interrupted when man uses pesticides and herbicides which have led to the death of many pests and herbs thus affecting the food chain and the biological importance to the study of man's environment. Similarly, human activities have threatened the peace and stability of the natural environment of many of which Obasola cited Asiodu as saying:

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 attitude 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.

The revering areas which used to be home of fish is no more because of man's inordinate desires to get rich quickly. To do this the rivers and streams are chemicalized thereby killing both the grown and fingerlings or growing species of fish and other aquatic habitats.

In view of man's negative interaction with the natural environment, Schumacher as quoted by Obasola State; "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.

Because the forest by the sides of some rivers and streams in Igala land have been destroyed, the streams are gradually drying up and the spirits there in are roaming round looking for who to devour or even make their new place of abode.

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).

This has gone a long way to confirm the stand of Lynn White that the dominating role given by the Christians in Gen.1:28 to man has gone into his head and thus to be blamed for all the environmental disorders and crisis experienced in our world today.

Ways of Reducing 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 expressed deep moral obligation to promote ecological justice. The inability of putting relevant strategies in their proper place would amount to guilt on the part of humanity. Similarly, religious traditions should question any economic progress that allegedly could not afford the costly good of a clean environment since alternatives of such is more costly.

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

Because the care of the environment is part of our responsible living by which we honour God, the knowledge of how to manage and preserve the environment should be imbibed in all human.

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 Igalaland should be stopped if the wildlife and trees and herbs used in traditional medicine is to flourish. An observation of Odolu area in Igalaland where Hippo Nigeria limited had deforested is an example of the menace. _Many of the wildlife in Igala land are no more because the forest they inhabited have been destroyed.

Similarly, bush burning should be discouraged so that there will be normal life in our natural environment.

The acts of striping naked within our streams and rivers should be stopped hence, so as to allow the spirit therein dwell in their secluded abode and thus stop hunting humanity.

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.

Since the use of chemicals is an interruption of organisms in the natural environment, its use for fishing should be discouraged and even stopped so that the species could be allowed to live for generations yet unborn to enjoy.

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 created.

Recommendations

In the light of the above discussion, the researcher makes the following recommendations: there is an urgent need for the people within the range of study and beyond to improve their living conditions and to maintain a healthy environment in relationship with other creatures.

Efforts should be made to protect the environment from over exploitation of its resources. Our people should also cultivate the attitude of supporting life of humans as well as those of the species around man. Similarly our people should develop the attitude to preserving the productive natural system to avoid extinction. To do this well the people at the local communities should be enlightened on the means and usefulness of making our environment a place to dwell alongside be educated on the necessity of preserving the land and waters on which all livelihoods depend. This paper also recommends a change in man's values, attitude and practice from being unfriendly to being friendly. Man should also develop an awesome responsibility for the survival of God's creation.

Sacred places should be protected because of their socio-cultural and socio-religious significance to the people in the preservation of their environment.

Deforestation should be checked because of its negative impact on the environments. In this respect, relevant laws against deforestation should be enforced by those concerned.

The government on her part should help to develop the sports, sacred places and religion to meet up with those of other parts of the world. The government should also put some measures in place to promote the ecosystem of the environment. On the other hand, communities that play host to these sacred places should by emphasis on the importance of these places as well as their socio-cultural benefits. Remember if you do not blow your trumpet yourself, who else would you expect to blow it well as you would wish?

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 as inspirations to the Supreme Being (*OjoChamachala*). 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*). I could therefore be deduced that because man is not lording or claiming total dominion as in Genesis 1:28 over the created beings, but that there are transcendental power in them, man protects them since their livelihood somehow depends on these agents of the universal creator.

We submit that Igala people should be friendlier so as to adequately protect the natural environment they live in become their socio-cultural and religious practices.

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