



Religion, environment and climate change in kolo creek clan

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Abstract

This study examines religion particularly African traditional religious practices in Africa as it affects the environment and climate change. It adopted empirical, expository and analytical method. The objectives of this work is to critically analyze and evaluate the place of African traditional religious practices vis-à-vis Christianity as it affects the environment and climate change in Kolo Creek Clan, Ogbia, Bayelsa State. The findings of the study revealed that African traditional religious practices specifically the worship of divinities, spirits, totems, ancestral worship, etc. leads to the improvement of the environment and climatic condition through conservation of forests, fishes, animals, etc. Therefore it concluded that African traditional religious practices and the worship of divinities and spirits lead to the improvement of the natural environment and reduction in the depletion of the ozone layer thereby improving climate change condition for man's survival and existence.

Keywords: climate change, divinities, environment, religion, spirits

Introduction

Religion is such a diffused word that means different things to different people, and that is why religion is a fluid concept. Religion can be used positively or negatively, religion could be used to build the character of people and society either positively or negatively in form of dogmas or indoctrination. Religion brings growth and development to the society and in another perspective; it brings retardation and underdevelopment to the society. Religion is closely related to growth and maturation of the individual and his passage through the various ages grading which are recognized or identified by the society ^[1]. Psychologists have said that individual development goes through a series of encounters from infancy to death. Also, religion may also provide a standard of values in terms of which the established norms, rules and values may be critically examined and found seriously wanting or lacking. This is especially likely to be true in respect of religions which emphasize the transcendence of God and his consequent superiority over and independent of the established authorities in the society ^[2]. That apart, religion helps man to identify himself. And when individuals accept religious values and the beliefs about human nature and destiny associated with them, they develop important aspects of their own self-understanding and self-definition. Secondly, as they participate in religious rituals and worship, they openly dramatize the significant elements of their own identity.

Further, religion gives sacred backing or support to the customs, norms and values of an established society and maintaining or upholding the dominance of group goals or values or needs of the generality of the society over individual wishes and needs and thereby suppressing the individual impulses for the general good of the society ^[3]. Religion by its dealing with the divine beings which are concerned with human destiny and welfare, and to whom men may respond and relate themselves, provides support, consolation and reconciliation. Every man needs moral and spiritual support in the face of uncertainty, he needs consolation when he is disappointed and reconciliation with

society when he is alienated from its goals and norms. Thus, religion provides important spiritual and emotional comfort and consolation in the face of failures and disappointment in life. And in addition, religion makes relationship between man and the divine possible through cult and the ceremonial ritual and thereby gives man assurance for a new security and feels more confident in the midst of the uncertainties and impossibilities of the vicissitudes of life. Through authoritative teaching in beliefs and values or dogmas, it also provides solutions to conflicts and ambiguities of human opinions and points of views. The functions of the priests and dogmatic theologians contribute to stability, order, peace and harmony in the society and thereby help to maintain the status quo ^[4].

Despite all the above views about religion, some of the contrary views are that which deals with biased comparison for other people's religion with one's religion as well as the misconception between appearance and reality. That apart, it also deals with the relationship between culture and religion.

The Environment of Kolo Creek Clan

Kolo Creek Clan is in Bayelsa State of Nigeria within latitudes 4⁰ 151 North and 15⁰ 231 South and longitude 5⁰ 221 West and 6⁰ 451 East. Kolo Creek is one of the Oil and Gas producing areas well known in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large. It houses Oil well I at Itokopiri, Otagiri near Oloibiri where oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in 1956 by Shell B. P. It is in the South East of Bayelsa State which is the southernmost state in the country and the Southern shores are less than five degrees of latitude north of the Equator. Kolo Creek is criss-crossed by several lakes, rivers and creeks in addition to the swampy that constitutes about 75 percent land mass covering an area of about 11,109 square kilometers.

Kolo Creek is located in the South East of Bayelsa state, Nigeria in the Niger Delta. It has fresh water habitat. It has an equatorial climate with more of rainy season than dry season. It is covered with swamps with thick forests and greenish vegetation all through the year. It is criss-crossed with rivers, creeks, streams and rivulets. During the flood period,

inhabitants can transport into the hinterlands and the bushes with canoes. The main means of transportation is dugout canoes to farms and the interior of the forests. Kolo Creek is bounded in the East by Akani, Ogboloman and Emago communities in Rivers state, North East with Amirikpoko also in Rivers state. In the North, it shares boundaries with Okarki in Rivers state, in the North West with Agudama-Epie, Edepie, Opolo and Kpansia communities all in Yenagoa local government area, in the West with Azikoro and Agbura communities also in Yenagoa local government area. Kolo Creek shares boundaries with Otuokpoti, Otuogori and Onuebum, along the Ekole River. Kolo Creek also shares boundaries with Otuoke, Otuaba, Akoloman communities. In the South, it shares with Ogbia town, Otuabo, Opume and Iduma communities. This area is swampy with thick forest and equatorial region. And it is largely fresh water but the Southern part of the creek is salt water with mangrove swamps.

Etymology of Religion

However, not to digress from our main discourse on the topic, it is necessary for us to first delve into the etymology of religion. What is religion in the first case? Religion originated from the Latin word *Religio* which is a European word. It has come to embrace a reference to the transcendental reality of faith, the inner reality of faith as well as the rituals ceremonies which basically are means of communion and communication with deity ^[5]. Thus, it carries the unmistakable reference to faith and “the way of worship” which may aptly be described as divine service. Religion in Latin is known as *Religare*, which means to link man with God; literally, it means to bind. The term religion as implying “a great objective something” is phenomenological. It is a working handle for taking hold of a universal phenomenon which however different its forms may be, gives a more or less commonly recognized structure and identity of elements. Religion is a human activity; the tendencies of human spirit to express and manifest itself, which give rise to different faiths and belief systems, which came into being within a strong cultural area are usually influenced by their environments.

The English word religion or its Latin root *Religio* or *Religare* may not appeal so much to our mind as much as the word used for such acts in our own mother tongue.

Religion and African Traditional Practices

That notwithstanding, however, our study is concerned in the area of African Traditional Religion (ATR). The role that ATR plays in Afforestation and the improvement of the climatic condition of the environment by reducing the depletion of the ozone layer and maintaining the Ecology of the habitat for the good of man as the survival and continued existence of man and its life is based on interdependence of man and the natural environment especially in the area of belief in divinities and the spirits. In a traditional African society, it is strongly believed that the wellbeing of the community depends upon the goodwill of God, the divinities, spirits and the ancestors. Therefore, before any venture is embarked upon in the society, these spiritual powers are first consulted and taken into confidence. At the beginning of the farming, hunting and fishing seasons, the divine forces are called upon to assist for successful ventures and at harvest seasons they are also given the first fruit of the harvest. They are as well not left out during

festivals, and when serious decisions are to be taken, these same spiritual beings are also consulted for divine guidance. In fact, think of anything done by an African be it birth, marriage, farming, trading, fishing, hunting, travelling, holding of meetings or conferences, learning, examinations, looking for employment, and eating, others are: drinking, going out, jubilating and mourning; religion is involved, hence, it is often said that in every African community, religion permeates life. For the Africans, they believed that everything in the world is dual; it has both spiritual and physical parts, and it is the spiritual that controls the physical ^[6]. Therefore, to enjoy fully the benefits of this life, Africans take the spiritual into confidence. This is one of the reasons why religion is not all an individual affair; rather it is a communal activity in which man takes part as a segment of the community.

Traditional believers in Africa have the feeling that religion inculcates a strong sense of oneness with common destiny in a group of people who are divide into distinct small groups so that they can always work together primarily for the realization of their ultimate goals which binds them together into a nation, while at the same time they pursue their individual and discrete group goals. This is one of the reasons why everybody in the traditional society is required to take active part in religious acts meant to bring peace and harmony into the society, this also partly explains why there are no atheists in traditional Africa. The African view of the universe is one that is physical and metaphysical, visible and invisible to them in Aristotle’s metaphysics, the world is matter and spiritual, the world of matter and that of ideas, the profane and the sacred. To the African, life is realized only if the division between the sacred and the profane is removed. In other words, to them matter per se is not real but it is the sacred that is real. Therefore, the profane must always seek union with it is to have meaning at all. Hence in the various African communities, it is the sacred that is always controlling the profane. Every traditional society is governed by selected personalities and the selections of these rulers are usually religiously and ritually sanctioned. The belief is that without such religious backing such leader or leaders may not be regarded as the true sacred head of the people. The society would be plagued because of a leader not sanctioned by the spiritual guardians of the society ^[7].

Divinities and Spirits

In Africa, religion particularly African Traditional Religion contributes immensely to the improvement of climate change through largely to afforestation encouraged by belief in divinities and spirits, though divinities and spirits are of different categories.

For divinities we have the primordial divinities, they are the ones referred to as the divinities of heaven. These are the spiritual beings that were in existence and living with God in the spiritual realm or heaven before the creation of the universe and the physical world.

The second category of divinities is the ones who are actually deified personalities or ancestors. These were ordinary human beings who were once lived and died a lot to improve their various communities, brought enlightenment, fame and greatness to their people ^[8].

The next category of divinities is the one that originated from the personification of natural forces and phenomena. There are many divinities under this category in Africa. Some of these divinities are associated with or related to

hills, rivers, rocks, seas, oceans, lagoons, caves, trees, brooks or thick forests. Whatever and wherever people believe to be the abode of a spirit is usually set apart as a holy place and there people offer worship and sacrifices to that particular spirit of their realization.

The other one is the one that result from the practice of magic or medicine. Africans have the knowledge of compounding herbs with other natural elements and backed their productivity, medicine are also prepared to ensure victories in wars. Such medicines could be prepared by individuals, family units, wards and jointly by the community. Each divinity has a name and appellations which are sometimes descriptive of its functions, nature, origin and characteristics.

Further, on the area of belief in spirits, Africans acknowledge many kinds of spirits. Spirits are apparitional entities and ancestors which could be described as “domesticated spirits”. Spirits in this category are the common spiritual beings that are below the status of divinities and above the status of men ^[9]; they are the common group of spiritual beings. It should be realized that divinities and ancestors or living dead are also spirits but they are spirits with difference because they have shrines or temples set aside for them. Once a shrine with a temple or a permanent place of worship is set aside for a particular spirit, it will become enshrined and domesticated and it could be regarded as a divinity or an ancestor.

Spirits are also believed to be invisible but may make themselves visible to human beings. In view of the facts that spirits are invisible, they are thought to be ubiquitous, so that a person is never sure of where they are or are not. The general belief is that spirits are more powerful than men. They could be so regarded because as they are invisible, men cannot assess their power; yet, in many ways human beings especially ritual specialists can manipulate or control the spirits as they like. Men paradoxically may fear or dread the spirits, yet they can drive the same spirit away or use them to human advantage ^[10]. Although spirits are said to be ubiquitous, people still designate different places as their places of abode. Some people think that spirits dwell in the underground, neither world nor the subterranean regions.

J. S. Mbiti says: “The idea of the subterranean region is suggested, obviously by the fact that the bodies of the dead are buried and the ground points to or symbolizes the new human land of the departed” ^[11].

Some groups of Africans believe that abode of the spirits is above the earth, in the air, the sun, the moon or stars. In many African communities, it is strongly believed that spirits and divinities lived in the forests, trees, rivers, oceans, streams, etc.

This is attested to by Nabofa when he says:

In many African communities, it is strongly held that spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, lakes, streams, oceans, mountains in lonely places in and just around the towns and villages. That is, the spirits are believed to be in the same geographical regions as men ^[12].

It is because spirits live around men and in designated abode accessible to man that explain why human beings seek self-protection from their evil machinations by means of magic medicine with specially designed sacrifices and cultic

activities. In many places of Africa, it is strongly believed that the world of the spirits, wherever it might be situated is very much like the carbon copy of the countries where they lived in this life. It has rivers, valleys, mountains, forests and deserts. The activities of the spirits are similar to those of the human life here; in addition to whatever other activities of which men may not know anything ^[13].

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of the spiritual world that differ from the human world. Spirit world is invisible to the eyes of the ordinary men. People only know or believe that it is here, but not actually “see” it with their physical eyes. More importantly, spirits are nearer to God not ethnically, but in terms of communication with him, it is believed that whereas men use or require intermediaries who convey human sacrifices and prayers to God and they relay his reply to men. The ontological transcendence of God is bridged by the spirit mode of existence.

Mbiti says

Man is forever a creature, but he does not remain forever man and these are his polarities of existence. Individual spirits may or may not remain forever, but the class of spirits is an essential and integral part of African ontology ^[14].

Again, spirits are also of various categories like divinities. The major categories of spirits are the ghosts, spirits of born-to-die children, nature spirits, spirits of witchcraft and guardian spirits or man’s double.

Ghosts

These are spirits of the dead human beings which have not been reposed for one reason or the other. They feel very disgruntled against the living because as they have not been reposed, they are very restless and go about causing havoc among the living.

Spirits of born-to-die children

Such children are known as Abiku among the Yoruba, Ogbanje among the Igbo, and Otibra-oru among the Agholo people, etc. The traditional explanation is that there is a company of spirits whose members are under an agreement to undertake in turn this errand of mischief. Before those who are thus assigned such job leave the group temporarily, they enter into an agreement that they will return, that is, die at certain named dates and times, and when such time comes something will happen which will make them die.

Spirits of witchcraft

These are spirits of witches; the witch with her perverted strong will power always operates psychological and psychically to cause, first psychical and then physical disaster to human beings.

Nature spirits

These are spirits that are associated with trees, flowers, hills, mountains, valleys, and portions of water, wind and animals.

In addition to divinities and spirits, the worship of animals, birds, trees, etc. which is to either protect, guard, etc. on the people of a particular area in Africa is viewed as a god. However, we will now x-ray into the main crux of our discussion which is “Religion, Environment and Climate Change in Kolo Creek Clan”.

Religion, Environment and Climate Change in Kolo Creek Clan

Here, we have come to the main crux of the matter in our study. In looking at religion, our focus is mainly on spirits and divinities as well as totems that dwell in trees, forests, bushes, creeks, streams, oceans, mountains, rivers, rocks, valleys, lakes, lagoons, islands, etc. The belief and worship of divinities and spirits as well as animals and plants in Africa is of tremendous significance to the people and the environment thereby improving the climate change. The main religions practiced in Kolo Creek Clan are African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. With the advent of Christianity, thick and virgin forests and juju shrines that were highly forbidden which unknown to the inhabitants are those that conserve and preserve the habitat and improve the climate for the survival of man were destroyed. Christian faithfuls were bold and brave to clear the thick virgin forests in the land. Related to this is the deforestation of these virgin forests for commercial purposes thereby encouraging erosion. Wild animals inhabiting in these areas are killed for consumption and others migrated to unknown areas. With these practices, animals become extinct. E.g. A vast virgin forest called *Eghalaghala* forbidden from time immemorial covered with wild mango trees called *Omira Edum* in Agholo language – *Omira Edum* is used for preparing soup. This plant has nutritional, medicinal and economic values. During its season, everybody was free to go and pick it for sale. Little do the people realize that this vast virgin thick forest was for the conservation and preservation of the habitat thereby improving the climate for man since man has interdependence with the environment. With the clearing of this vast land not considering the nutritional, medicinal and economic values of the plants but only taking into consideration that the virgin land is detrimental to the people spiritually, it now made the environment vulnerable to erosion, unfavorable climate change, disappearance of animals and birds and other creatures of different species. All these creatures now become extinct and endangered species. Again, ponds, rivers and streams that are navigable but the fishes in them are forbidden to be consumed by man as a result of some ancient beliefs were desecrated and eaten by the people as a result of the need found religion. That apart, the African Traditional Religion which is the African Religion and inherent in our lifestyle was seen by Christianity as devilish, harmful and inimical to the life of the individuals and the community at large. With this orientation, all forbidden forests, virgin forests, rivers, creeks, streams, mounts were frowned against and the target to the converts was to deforest the forests, eat the fishes in the streams etc. so they could be liberated. But African Traditional Religion is a religion that is geared towards preserving and conserving the habitat. It encourages the continuity of the various animal and plant species and above all the improvement of the life span of man through improvement of the environment and the climate thereby reducing the depletion of the ozone layer that adversely affects man. African Traditional Religion has high respect and value for nature. It treats nature with respect as its God with respect. African Traditional Religion treats the environment, its surroundings and what it contains therein as partners in survival. Without the environment, man would never live a fruitful and meaningful life because its survival and existence depends on it. Man and religion is

naturally for the good of the environment and man in Africa. The African man and its religion are pro-improvement and maintenance of climate changes from time immemorial and is inherent in an African. So in the area of discourse, the religion of Christianity encourages the destruction of the ecosystem, habitat, forbidden virgin forests, rivers, creeks, streams and ponds thereby encouraging the depletion of the ozone layer etc. which is tantamount to tilting the environmental and climate change balance against man and its survival. African Traditional Religion is a religion that brings faith, the environment and the supernatural (God) and the survival and wellbeing of man together. African Traditional Religion is metaphysical, environmentalistic, God fearing, utilitarianistic and pragmatic in nature. African Traditional Religion is environmental friendly. The worship of divinities like war god, the god of protection, the god of harvests, the god of love, the god of rain located in a particular abode. That abode, if it is a forest is forbidden; the trees in the whole forest are forbidden for anyone to cut down thereby encouraging afforestation. If the spirit is a fish in the river, the fish is forbidden by the people from consuming it. This restriction leads to an increase in the population of that species of fish or fishes. All the various shrines located in the bush, that particular bush become sacred thereby making the bush a reserved forest. When a particular forest or bush, river, ocean, stream, lagoon, creek, etc. is forbidden because a divinity or spirit is believed to reside there by the people, the place becomes a sacred place. If it is a bush or forest it becomes a reserved forest or bush. If it is a creek, river, ocean, lake, lagoon, it becomes sacred and it becomes a reserved area. The reservation and conservation of these areas as a result of the belief that the people's gods resides there makes the habitat undisturbed. This habitat has a complete ecosystem and the food chain is maintained naturally. Since man depends on the environment for survival and existence, the belief in divinities and spirits as well as totem worship preserves the habitat and makes man enjoy the continued ecological benefits created by nature. The belief in spirits and divinities in Africa encourages the preservation of forests and the habitat thereby improving climate change for the betterment of man. African belief and worship of divinities and spirits brings the natural environment back thereby reducing the depletion of the ozone layer by man in the exploitation of nature. These reserved forests, creeks, lagoons, oceans, lakes; etc. through African belief and worship in divinities and spirits serves as a means to improving the depletion of the ozone layer and improving climate change for the survival and existence of man. This practice by Africans is in line with the United Nations policy on the improvement of climate change by encouraging afforestation and preservation of animals of different species that are going to extinctions.

Conclusion

African belief and worship in divinities and spirits makes man to conserve and preserve the natural habitat and the environment thereby maintaining the depletion of the ozone layer, this indirectly improves climate change for the survival of man. The African myths, religious system in taboos, totems and spirituality in plants and animals which forms its environmental ethics has given rise to the conservation and preservation of the habitat thereby encouraging and maintaining the climate change and a

reduction in the depletion of the ozone layer. African Traditional Religion is ecocentric and biocentric in nature. It is an environmentally-friendly and climate change maintenance friendly religious system. The religious belief systems form the culture and tradition of the African people and in this context, the Kolo Creek people.

The African belief and worship of divinities and spirits encourages man in afforestation and the preservation of animal and plant species which is the main goals of the United Nations Organization. The United Nations is preaching loud and clear that man should encourage afforestation and preservation of the ozone layer, preservation of animals and plants which almost all of the species are becoming extinct due to man's activities and exploitation.

Though some scholars see African Traditional Religious practices as devilish and archaic but this study is of the view that African traditional practices especially belief in divinities and spirits preserve the life of man and improves climate change.

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