

AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 3 (1), S/No 9, January, 2014: 49-65

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

**Religion and Sustainable Environment in the Niger
Delta: The Ogoni Experience**

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Abstract

What relates religion and environment, whether social or physical is ethics. This study examines major African ethical principles and methods towards sustainable environment in the Niger Delta, using the Ogoni case as example. The paper adopts both the sociological and anthropological approaches. Findings of the study reveal that both the earth and human beings are believed to be God's own property. These properties are indigenous inheritance in Ogoni land. It is a common belief among Ogoni people that man's life is bound up in his environment. In the belief of the people whatever happens to their land happens to their existence and whatever happens to their lives equally affect their land. In other words, for Ogoni people, land

and life are inseparable entities. There exists a symbiotic relationship between religion and environment. The religion of the people abhors desecralization of the environment because some religious symbols are embedded in the environment. When the Ogonis complain of life extinction and genocide, they are showing concern for the security of their God given land. The expressions “Our land is our life” and the “Spirit of Ogoni says No” are based on the belief of the people that God who gave them land as indigenous inheritance would not support any form of environmental degradation. The paper argues that the ethical concerns of religion for sustainable environment would mean its concerns for healthy human lives in the Ogoni region of Nigeria. The study recommends among others that the Ogoni ecological space should be respected and preserved as well as their worldview.

Introduction

The philosophical foundation of religion as God’s revealed principles, values and commandments for human conduct, and for the survival of environment persists in Africa. The idea dependent on the belief that something or some powers – the divine and man are connected to God provides the three ethical aspects of faith, morality, and worship in religion.

The communion or relationship that exists between God, man and his neighbour in African tradition is facilitated through the presence of cultus. In African traditional religion, ethical principles are fundamentally religious and social. The dimensions include humanistic ethics, aesthetic or naturalistic ethics. Thus, in the Ogoni indigenous religion we can talk of the following ethical principles:

1. The principle of natural interdependence that informs the goal of conservation of all living and non-living things in their very natural forms.
2. The principle of love to God and love for one’s neighbour.

3. The principle of venerating some inanimate objects with deep historical and spiritual significance such as sacred forest, groove and shrine.

The aim of this paper is to show that contrary to the enlightenment and western medianistic view of nature, and the dominance of western philosophy and theological notion that people were all that counted in ethics; the African considers the natural world as a focus of ethical concern.

The “Golden Rule” in the understanding and interpretation of Africans would mean “whatsoever you would that others should do to you and your environment, do even so to them.” This being that, in African religious ethics, man’s life is bound up in his environment and whatever happens to man’s life happens to his environment. In the opinion of this paper, western man compartmentalizes life into “sacred” and mundane, whereby the ‘sacred’ is distinctive of religion which deserves human respect. Whereas, the mundane thing like environment is meant for man’s utility, Hence, his destructive attitude towards natural environment in Africa.

Man’s adherence to the above ethical concept as well as of his concern for the environment as his neighbour forms the very first-step to be taken by any individual or group towards sustainable environment.

Background

The Ogoni people are an indigenous ethnic group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ogoni land is located on the northeast fringe of the Niger Delta. Ogoni consists of four district kingdoms, namely, Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme. Each has a dialectic classification of the main Ogoni language of the volta-congo language family. Thus, we can talk of Khana, Gokana Tai and Eleme dialects respectively. Her neighbours are the Ndoki of the Igbo stock on the north, the Efik/Ibibios and Andoni/Opobo on the west. Bonny and Okirika groups on the southeast and the Ikwerre group on the north-west. At the time of this study Ogoni is in Rivers State, with a land area of

approximately 650 square kilometers and an estimated population of 700,000.

Tones et al (1994) describes Ogoni as a region located in the lowland equatorial tropical monsoon rainforest of the Niger Delta region. The soils of the terrace plateau of the Ogoni countryside range from dark grayish to deep reddish brown, well loosely structured uniform profiles of sandy soil with the clay increasing with depth.

Pyagbara (2005) observes that the Ogoni soils are deep, easy to tilt and well drained except in valley bottoms and low-lying depressions. These have a loamy-sand surface layer underlain by a sandy-clay-loam sub-surface layer. Before, Ogoni ecosystem came under intense pressure by the operations of the national and multinational of companies, there were abundant animal and plant resources due to high soil fertility rate, high diversity of vegetation and animal species, high humid mangrove forest. The process of photosynthesis for plants productivity was rapid, other microbial organisms such as bacteria responsible for the breaking down process of organic materials have high survival rate, hence, a healthy food chain existed. Invertebrates including Annelids e.g. earthworm, molluscs – called African snail, arthropods – insects, vertebrates such as rodents, grass cutters, rabbits have high survival rate.

At the marine environment, group of aquatic animals that can survive under conditions of submergence and exposure, including fishes, mudskippers, seabirds, oysters, periwinkles and other sea snails, crustaceans like lobsters and crabs were in abundance.

Moreso, medicinal plants and shrubs, sacred groves and shrines were respected, preserved and venerated by communities because of the deep spiritual significance these carried for the survival of the social environment.

The once healthy and productive Ogoni environment, both physical and social was uttered from 1958 following the discovery of crude oil in some Ogoni communities. Fish once a common source of protein is

now rare owing to the constant and continual pollution of streams and creeks. Fish can only be caught in deeper and offshore waters for which the Ogoni are not equipped. All wildlife are dead; the ecology is changing fast. The mangrove trees, the aerial roofs of which normally provide a natural and welcome habitat for many sea foods – crabs, periwinkles, mudskippers, cockies, mussels, shrimps and all are now being gradually replaced by unknown and otherwise useless palms. The health hazards generated by an atmosphere charged with hydrocarbon vapour, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are innumerable.

According to MOSOP (1991), the once beautiful Ogoni countryside is no more a source of fresh air and green vegetation. All one sees and feels around is death. Ogoni people, culture, animals, Ogoni fish are dying because of hazardous environmental pollution and resulting to food scarcity. Many Ogoni villages experience the internal quacking of the wrath of gas flares which have been burning for many years; acid rain, oil spillages and blow outs are common. Ogoni land has suffered and continues to suffer the degrading effects of oil exploration and exploitation.

Ogoni Worldview: The Sacred Egg

Ogoni people like most African societies before the advent of colonialism, foreign religions such as (Christianity, Islam) National and multinational oil companies are religious.

Religion pervades all the spheres that make life meaningful for them. It is a ritualistic society in which everything that moulded life of the individual and the community is religious. Religion influences the value system of the society with its sacred imprint, thereby providing the main focus for the integration and cohesion of the society in general.

The people believed in the existence of a feminine, supreme and all-powerful being called Kawaabari, who is the creator of the universe.

The name Kawaabari meaning mother of creation is given in view of her nature and functions.

Ogoni social environment is controlled by what Robin Horton identifies as “forces of society”, while the natural environment is under the influence of “forces of the wild”.

Ancestral spirits were deified and venerated by the people because these formed the “forces of society” responsible for the solidarity, cohesion and orderliness of their society. Also included in the forces of society were divinities responsible for the maintenance, defence, protection and governance of the communities. These divinities were venerated as founders of Ogoni communities. Prominent among them are “Yor-Agu-Lorre” whose symbol is located in Nyo-Khana District and the ‘Gbenebeka’ located in Babbe District both in Khana Local Government Area.

Natural environment were under the control of the “forces of the wild”, divinities called “Yor will” – goddess of the earth fertility and the “Yor maa” – river goddess believed to be responsible for the fortune of fisherman and activities at sea.

This belief system identifies the people with the practice of:

Animism: man’s belief in the spirits that dwell in rocks and trees, which is an aspect of Ogoni indigenous religion.

Totemism: The belief in an object or animal as the symbol of the tribe.

Pantheism: Man’s recognition of a spirit or beings indwelling the whole of nature.

Polytheism: Man’s idea that there are many spiritual beings, each one with a specific function or location.

Monothelism: Man’s idea of one Supreme Being as the highest point of his religious development.

The belief in the existence of feminine Supreme Being who creates all things in the universe, both the forces of society and forces of the wild explain not only the Ogoni tradition and custom that were deeply rooted in nature, but the symbiotic relationship between religion and environment. The people belief helped them to protect and preserve the environment for future generations. Land as shorthand term for environment had deep spiritual significance. It is believed to be God's own property given as indigenous inheritance in Ogoni land. The land, on which the people live, the rivers and forests which surround them are not mere natural resources for exploration and exploitation but entities bound with man's life and are sacrosanct.

The Relationship between Religion and Environment

Religion:

Imaekhai in Isiramen (2010:53) observes that the fundamental point about religion is that it has to do with how an individual perceives his/her existence and how that existence relate with the supernatural powers that he/she believes he/she needs to relates to in order to live meaningfully. According to him, religion can be summed up as the relationship between a human being and his or her creator; an attempt by man to attain a sort of communication or communion with God. This explains why Isiramen states that religion is an experience of the union of the human persons with the supernatural power in order to ultimately realize themselves. Religion therefore deals with the belief in some supernatural powers or powers that the believers accept as having influence on their existence. It is this conviction that enables the believers "comport themselves in their socio-cultural life in a manner they believe will please the object of their worship". This forms the basis of their moral and ethical behavior, and their coming together to express their faith and total dependence on this Supernatural Being forms the aspect of worship.

Accordingly, Imaekhai views religion sociologically as intended to give man shared goals, thus reducing the sharpness of his competitive goals; it promises later rewards; that of softening the anguish of

present frustration, helps to define the meaning of suffering, thus reducing the threat of chaos. Religion thus, is a functional prerequisite of society.

Durkheim (1965) defines religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose, by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing and supernatural.

Duneier et al (2000:528) identify three key elements in Durkheim's definition as follows:

1. Religion is seen as a form of culture that consists of shared beliefs, values, norms, and ideas that create a common identity among a group of people.
2. Religion involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices, that is, a form of behavioural aspect – special activities in which believers take part and that identify themselves as members of the religious community.
3. Religion provides a sense of purpose, a feeling that life is ultimately meaningful. Doing so by explaining coherently and compellingly what transcends or overshadows everyday life.

Isiramen (2010) examining what constitutes the aspirations of the religious person, describes the religious person as that person who undermines every aspect of his personal aspiration and clings to the feelings and thoughts to which he or she is devoted simply because of their supernatural content.

Imaekhai (2010) states that religion aims to ensure communion between deity and man. This is ensured through the presence of the cultus. Cultus is an essential phenomenon in religion as it is through it that this communion is facilitated. Cultus should be used to include all those religious exercises, which form the established means employed by any social group of securing right relations with the realm of what is sacred or holy, and thus enjoying those benefits including guidance

in the various crises of life, which the realm is thought capable of bestowing upon mankind.

Cultus is at the very essence of morality and ethics. This explains the relationship between religion, ethics and morality.

Idowu E. B. in Nabofa (1988) states that religion embrace a reference to the transcendental reality of faith, the inner reality of faith as well as the rituals and ceremonies which basically are means of communion and communication with deity. Thus, it carries the unmistakable reference to faith and “the way of worship” which may aptly be described as divine service.

Looking at religion from the point of view of ensuring communion between the deity and man will leave out the natural environment unless one considers those things the deity has created along with man to ensure his survival on planet earth. The natural environment can equally be left out in any definition which sees religion as a form of culture and beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices without considering those material aspect of a culture and what the believers use in performing their rituals.

One would say that the definition of religion that is relevant is one in which the author is willing to consider all that provides man with a sense of purpose, a feeling that life is ultimately meaningful. Emile Durkheim’s work in which he uses totems, a creature in the natural environment as symbols to explain Aboriginal Australian religion is exceptionally relevant for a study on the relationship between religion and environment.

Environment

Horby (2000) defines environment as the natural world in which people, animals and plants live. From the above definition, one can consider environment to mean earth which consists of

1. The vast system of land with its resources, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystem.

2. All man-made social systems and organisations – (family, community, other social institutions such as school, church, mosque, market etc.) Therefore, one can talk of both the physical and social environment.

The physical environment consists of

1. The lithosphere, that is, the outer layer of the earth crust, which comprises the land forms with properties like soils, mineral resources, land and its space where man's special economic, cultural and political activities take place.
2. The hydrosphere comprises various water bodies, oceans, seas, rivers and lakes.
3. The atmosphere is a mass of gases comprising oxygen, about 21%, nitrogen, about 78%, argon and neon, about 1%, carbon dioxide, about 0.033%, water vapour, about 3%.
4. The biosphere: This sphere of life lies at the interface between the lithosphere, the hydrosphere and the atmosphere. The biosphere exists to aid the survival of living things on the earth surface. It is of special importance to the human life and activities because it is the primary source of air, water, food, energy and shelter (Ogedegbe, 2010).

Geo (2003) considers the environment as a biodiversity, consisting of the variability among living organisms from all sources including terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystem, and ecological complexes of which they are part.

Oyeshola (2007) defines environment as the unit from which resources needed for human sustenance and development are directed. This study examines African indigenous principles and some ethical methods towards a sustainable environment in Ogoni land where “biodiversity is under intense and severe pressure due to man's use.

Indigenous Ethical Principles/Methods towards Sustainable Environment in Ogoni Land

The Ogoni people have a tradition which is deeply rooted in nature. Therefore, they help to protect and preserve their environment for future generations through the principles and methods of keeping and venerating forbidden bush. The forbidden bush is a sacred place such as forest, rivers, stream and pond earmarked for religious and cultural purposes, mostly located in non-human dwelling places in all Ogoni communities. Forbidden bush has both social and spiritual significance to the Ogoni people. It serves as a reserve habitat for all types of living and non-living things that underpin the social and spiritual life of the people.

Complex interactions take place in forbidden bush between animals, birds, reptiles, insects and other living organisms, that dwell in it. Also, it serves as the abode of ancestors and store place for historical and cultural relics and artifacts. Forbidden bush is believed to be the dwelling place for both the spirit of the ‘forces of the wild’ and ‘forces of society’.

In fact, the tradition and custom of the forbidden bush supports the principle of natural interdependence that informs the goal of natural conservation. Apart from the complex interaction which occurs between the flora and fauna in the forbidden bush, human beings also form part of the whole. For instance, forbidden bush is safe haven for medicinal herbs used by traditional medicine practitioners and sacred animals venerated as totems by the people.

The importance attached to nature in the tradition and custom of the Ogoni people explain why the environment is considered as one’s neighbour, respected, protected and preserved as such. For the Ogoni people the environment is not just natural resource for exploitation but it is bound up with human life. Therefore, showing concern for the environment means showing concern for human life and vice-versa. The people understand that their love for their neighbour is well demonstrated in the respect and care they have for the environment

that support human life. In the people's world view, respect and care for natural environment is as well the respect for the creator who created it for his own purpose. Hence, the environment is more intrinsically, a sacred possession that should not be poisoned by man wantonly slaughtered and conspicuously consumed but rather to be prudently and reasonably managed by man.

Ogoni Environmental Ethics

The nexus between religion and environment is ethics. Kirby (1973) defines ethics as the science which enquires into the meaning and purpose of life and of conduct. It represents a systematic attempt to consider the purposeful actions of mankind, to determine their rightness or wrongness, their tendency to good or evil.

Okwueze (2003) observes that what links religion with ethics is its social relevance, the regulation of conduct in the form of regarding as right and good or bad and evil certain conducts of individuals in society.

According to Okwueze,

Sound ethics must be based on sound metaphysics. Sound ethics, therefore, must start by recognizing especially the existence of one God, Omnipotent, Creator, infinitely wise and to deny the existence of God would be to deny the binding force of all law upon the will of man. The finite nature of man composed of animal body and rational soul, which form one person. To deny man's finite composite nature would be to deny him to be what he is and hence to deny the purpose of ethics ... It is not necessary to prove in many words that religious ethics is, by its nature, bound to exercise a wholesome influence on man and on society (2003:12-13).

This concept of religion as God revealed principles, values and commandments for human conduct and survival of environment persists in the African (Ogoni) society. The idea of being dependent upon something or some powers – the divine and the concept of man being connected to God provides the three major pillars of religion; faith, morality and worship.

Again, what relate religion with environment are the services they render to each other. Environment, especially, the biosphere serves as the primary source of air, water, food, energy and shelter for man's survival, while religion ensures communion between deity and man and his environment. The communion or relationship is facilitated through the presence of cultus. Commenting on cultus as an essential phenomenon in religion, Imaekhai (2010) opines that cultus should be used to include all those religious exercises which form the established means employed by any social group of securing right relationship with the realm of what is sacred or holy and thus enjoying those benefits including guidance in the various crises of life when this realm is thought capable of bestowing upon mankind.

To ensure strict compliance to some universal ethical principles towards sustainable environment, certain attitude and sanctions are deployed as Ogoni environmental ethics.

- (a) Because of the spiritual and cultural potency, entering into the sacred bush for normal daily businesses such as hunting, games, cutting of trees, etc. were restricted.
- (b) All animals, birds, reptiles, insects and other organisms found within forbidden bush were not tempered with unless these animals and fishes etc. were seen outside it. This is because these animals, fishes, reptiles were believed to be properties of the gods and spirits that dwell in forbidden bush. In some instances, where these animals and reptiles were recognized because of their sizes and age indicate that they cannot be found ordinary in bush, priests incharge of forbidden bush were consulted and sacrifices were made before they were

killed and eaten by the people. Sometimes, such animals and reptiles were not allowed to be eaten when they were killed because they are found to be totems. In such cases the affected animals and reptiles were buried, accompanied with some sacrifices performed by the person who killed them.

- (c) Trees in the forbidden bush were not cut down indiscriminately to check flooding and erosion.
- (d) Farming, harvesting of crops, fishing in rivers, streams and ponds were also not allowed to be carried out by the people indiscriminately. In most instances these activities were carried out seasonably to allow time for crops, plants, seeds, fishes to mature. The people understood that animals, reptiles, fishes, and plants can only reproduce their kinds when they are allowed to mature.
- (e) The use of certain chemical, feeds and insecticide were unacceptable to the farmers. This is because the people believe they would kill the natural medicinal potency of plants, vegetables, fishes etc. which provides for good health.
- (f) Reckless burning of bush by farmers were forbidden as such action destroys microbial organisms in the food chain.
- (g) To avoid flooding in the villages, digging of gutters were encouraged and the gutters were periodically kept clean on individual and community basis. Designated areas in the villages, especially slopping and low land areas, canals were forbidden by people habitation and all running water during rainy season was channelled to such areas.

Pyagbara (2005) observes that grave consequences follow any erring human conduct or action desecrating the environment and failure by the custodian community to take action to protect it from desecration attracts the wrath of the gods, which visits the community with disaster. Ogoni tradition and custom in pre-colonial, pre-Christian, pre-national and pre-multinational oil companies was that upheld.

Recommendations

Ogoni people were nationality that respected their environment. So we would recommend firstly, that the environment of Ogoni people should be respected and preserved as well as their Religion.

Secondly, the Federal Government of Nigeria, multinational oil companies and individual should adhere to indigenous religious ethical concept which teaches man's concern for environment as his neighbour.

Thirdly, efforts should be made to educate users of the environment, whether physical, social and sacred to know that degrading environment is a form of degrading human personality and values.

Fourthly, falling of trees and building of living houses on canal should be discouraged to avoid recent coastal erosion in Ogoni land. It is of interest to note that the negative effects of acid rain on roofing sheaths, making building in Ogoni land expensive is due to indiscriminate falling of trees which naturally serve as wind breaker.

Finally, the ethical concerns of religion for sustainable environment should mean its concerns for a healthy human personality and not merely for some religious symbols that are embedded in the environment.

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined how the ethical concerns of religion for sustainable environment led to the principle and practice of the forbidden forest among the people of the Ogoni region of Nigeria. It has been noted that indigenous people never compartmentalized life into 'sacred' and mundane; whereby, the 'sacred' are distinctive of religion while the mundane – the environment is meant for man's utility. Instead, they believed that man's life is bound up in his environment. The symbiotic relationship that exists between religion and environment explains why African religious ethics teaches the inclusion of the environment in the concept of man's neighbourliness.

Thus, the religion of the people abhors desecralization of the environment because whatever happens to their environment happens to their existence and whatever happens to their lives equally happens to their environment.

The study contends that the cause of western man hostility and destructive attitude towards natural environment in Africa lies in their lack of respect and disregard to environmental ethics.

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