

**ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: THE
INVOLVEMENT OF RELIGION**

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ABSTRACT

An attempt has been made in this paper to analyze the environmental problems and ecological crisis generally and with particular reference to Nigeria. The paper argues that since the solution to the problem require changes in values; behaviour and way of life, government policy, sciences and technology are necessary component for conservation of the environment but are insufficient. The values and spiritual dimensions needed are found in religions which in the context of Nigeria are the Indigenous Religion, Islam and Christianity. The paper concludes that religious traditions need to dialogue with public policy of government in seeking comprehensive solutions to both global and local environment problems. By the same token, the paper spells out the task government and religious leaders in the formulation of environmental policy as well as ethics.

INTRODUCTION

From the outset, two important concepts are very important to the understanding of this paper. They are Environment and Ecology. The former is simply our surrounding. Environment is made up of living and non-living things. The living components of the environment include animals, microbes and plants. Animals include man and lives stock such as cattle, pig, goat, sheep etc. Poultry such as fowl, chick, turkey etc. Fishes such as carp, mud fish etc; wide life species of animals such as antelope, deer and so on. In the living components too, we have microbes e.g tiny living things also known as germs.

The plants include the grasses, the natural vegetation of the forest savanna wood lands, savanna grass land; the crops such as yams, cassava, maize, and the ornamentals such as sun flower, the amenity plants such as pines and the weeds such as goat weed, water leaf and so on.

The non-living things of the environment include the air around also known as the atmosphere, the weather, the soil, and the lands. The topography or surface features of the surrounding land, the rocks, and water bodies.

With reference to human environment, the surrounding of man in the place where he lives is ecology. Ecology is “the study of organisms in relation to their environment” (Fatubarin, 2009:1), with reference to man, ecology is the study of man in relation to and interaction with the environment and a philosophy in which human life is interpreted in terms of natural processes. Those things in nature seen and unseen have a profound influence on man.

From the foregoing, Environment is broader than Ecology. However, the natural resources in an environment are very important to man. Among other things, they are sources of energy, transportation, warfare, defense, shelter, medicine, recreation, Aesthetics, solid minerals electricity, agriculture, trade, water and money. The immense benefits of natural resources demand carefully planned scientific management. When the resources are misused, destroyed or exploited in wasteful manner, they become endangered or exterminated.

Human life today is endangered by a lot of problem or increasing human population, drought famine, inadequate of food, diseases, held fires and unregulated burning, loss of biodiversity, problems associated with urbanization, industrialization and mining; problems associated and gas, illegal dumping of toxic materials, bomb explosion among others. These problems are caused by man.

We also have natural hazards of the human environment which disastrous consequences on humankind. They include over flooding, erosion hazards, land slides, thunderstorms, hurricanes, tornados, desertification and volcanic eruptions and earth quakes.

Our study is concerned with interest in the human environment and to other physical components of the surrounding or man, in the place where he is living. The latter include the buildings, the vehicles, the markets, and the industries among others. They also include things like pollutant materials, refuse, garbage and sewage.

An ecology crisis occurs when the environment of a species or a population changes in such a way that destabilizes the continued survival (en.wikipedia.org). In the content of human environment, the environment is becoming unfavorable for the survival of man. There are abnormal changes in whether climate among others affecting the lives of humans and agriculture. There are equally pollutions of various kinds affecting the health of humans and breeding disease for both human, plants and animals.

THE GLOBAL PROBLEMS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Human activities are responsible for the loss of biodiversity which is the gradual reduction of the number of species of plants and animals in the ecosystem. There is the disruption of ecosystem processes which result from the massive destruction of plants or over exploitation. Plants and animals are very important in the environment where they are found. They are sources of food,

cloths, shelter, medicine, energy, aesthetic, economic and religious beliefs. Some aspects of human activities have made terrible impact on the biodiversity of a region. They include environmental pollution of air, land, and water, wild fire, massive land clearing practices, tree selling, logging, mining, gas flaring, over harvesting of wild life, toxic chemicals in illegal fishing, toxic chemical used in agriculture, unregulated building in farmlands, dumping of refuse, disposal of garbage and sewage and uncontrolled grazing.

Besides, certain activities of man such as, industrialization and combustion of fossil fuels can lead to increase in the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Man-made gases such as the chlorofluorocarbon, and the gases used in spray cans, refrigerators, and insulators, and the methane from sewage and landfills, all form a blanket in the atmosphere, which helps in tapping energy from sunlight by so doing warm up the earth (Fatubarin 2009:13). The above mentioned gases namely carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbons, carbon tetrachloride, nitrous oxide, among others are known as green house gases. They produce green house effect, when released into the atmosphere. One dangerous effect of such gases in the atmosphere is the heating up of the immediate environment.

There is a layer of pure of oxygen in the atmosphere known as ozone layer. Scientific estimate that, it is found at a distance of between ten and fifty Kilometers over the earth's surface, where it forms a very big barrier or what we may canopy or an umbrella covering someone. This protects the earth from dangerous rays of the as well as limiting the amount of the ultra-violet radiation that gets into the earth's surface.

According to Gasu and Gasu in Fatubarin the evidence of ozone depletion emerged in the 1980s, where a hole discovered in the ozone layer over the Antarctica. This discovery was later confirms by scientists in 1994. According to Fatubarin (2009:17) Ozone layer depletion has attracted global attention because its effects are felt in all countries of the world, irrespective of their

stage of development and level of urbanization and industrialization. This is because virtually all countries of the world are guilty of their roles in contributing to the production of the ozone layer depleting gases and the green house gases.

The depletion of ozone layer is very dangerous to all forms of life on earth-humans, plants animals etc. Scientists have observed increase in the incidence of eye diseases, skin diseases, sun born and cancer, low production of agriculture and disruption of aquatic life.

There is now what is commonly called global warming, which is the warming up effect of some gases released into atmosphere. It is the result of some combination of green house gases, ozone layer depletion are all implicated in global warming. In other words, the green house gases are responsible for the rising temperatures. If not, the temperature of the atmosphere would have been far lower than it is at present. It should be noted that global warming now has become a very serious problem because of the rate at which green house gases are building in the atmosphere. It is global warming that is largely responsible for the changes in the global climate. Climate change is the ultimate result of the effects of green house effect, we shall adopt the United Nations Framework Convention on climate Change (UNFCCC) which defines climate change as a change

...of climate is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability over comparable time.

Fatubarin (2009:22) views climate change as “a phenomenon manifesting in the world, in a number of recognizable changes in the features of climate from their usual pattern over the years”. The two definitions point to the fact that climate change is attributed to the effect of man’s activities. There are changes in climate over a long period. Changes in climate usually occur in the areas of temperature, evaporation, rainfall, humidity, wind, speed and direction,

solar radiation, etc. These manifest in melting of polar ice, melting of glaciers, rise in sea levels, oceans, coastal water areas, heavy rainfall, drought, hurricane, tornadoes, earthquake, landslides, volcanic eruptions, etc.

As earlier mentioned ecological crisis has become a topical issue with people realizing that the earth is gradually losing its capacity to sustain life. The environment is experiencing great threats which are [partly consequences of human activities. Evidence abounds of the steady deterioration of the earth as manifested in atmospheric changes, land, air and water pollution. Dangers of climate change of unimaginable proportions have been observed in Americas, Asia, Europe, Australia, and Africa. These are manifested in the form of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, unprecedented rainfall floods, erosion, and farmland loss, top soil, loss of natural resources, hurricanes, and drought.

Climate change had been known for about hundred years now. As a result the world is getting hotter, stormier, unequal, crowded, more violent and less bio diverse. Climate change is very much with us and we have the obligation to reduce green house emissions. This has become one of the most important policies in the global system. Experts have observed that natural disasters will become more frequent due to climate change. In just few months in 2009 and the opening months of 2010 this writer observed the following disaster through watching of Al Jazeera, Euro News and CNN. They include Philippines typhoon, the worst in more than forty years, floods in Southern India, South Pacific Tsunami, Vietnam flood, Italy mudslides, over flooding in Australia, Australia wild fires, wild in Athens, underground pollution and mines fires in Eastern India, earthquake in Sumatra island and Padang, Central Japan typhoon, American Samoa typhoon, mudslide in Brazil, earthquake in Haiti, earthquake in Chile, sandstorm and earthquake in China, landslide in Pakistan, Iceland Volcano and Volcanic ash that spread to countries in Europe and beyond etc. There is also loss of species and endangered species like polar bears, corals,

bulfin tuna African elephants; desertification, deforestation, declining soil fertility, food crisis among other.

MANIFESTATIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN NIGERIA

The impacts of climate change are global, though Africa contributes least to the emissions responsible for climate change. Africa as a continent pollutes the environment with its green house gas emission of less than about 30 percent. But the impact that would have on Africa will be so enormous and overwhelming. Research around Africa has shown that the continent is already facing the consequence of climate change – a drop in rainfall has led to a history five year drought across East Africa which Aid Agencies said could see more than 23 million people face hunger and destitution.

Expert says, sub-Saharan African is one of the regions most affected by global warming and climate change. The World Bank estimates that the developing world will suffer about 80 percent of the damage of climate change, despite accounting for only around one-third of green house gases in the atmosphere (Heien, 2009:52).

In Nigeria, the climate change phenomenon can be seen in persistence drought. The Sahara desert is fast extending into the country. As Nigerians experience desert encroachment and water stress in the North; there is rising sea level and inundation of coastal lands by sea water in the Southern part of the country. The coastal areas of the Niger Delta and Lagos are at the risk in case of persistence rise in sea level e.g Warri, Bonny, Brass, Yenogoa, Degema, Ahoada, and Okrika. With above average daily minimum and maximum temperature, increasing floods and erosion are being experienced all over the country. Since the whether patterns are changing, changing rainfall patterns have the potential to devastate the rain-fed agriculture on which so much of the population of Nigeria depends to survive; occurrences of drought will eventually lead to a serious decline in agricultural yield and diminished food

security. Crop failure in some parts of Nigeria has made many young men to abandon farming for Okada (commercial vehicle) business. Other areas of serious adverse consequences of climate change include biodiversity conservation, human health, diseases, and migration of humans, birds and mammals. There is forced migration of nomadic societies in response to annual and seasonal rainfall variation, lowering down of the level of water in River Niger resulting to low electricity generation from the Dam. Wide spread loss of human life and livestock.

It is clear that environmental problems and ecological crisis are already affecting Nigeria as a result of global warming and climate change. Effect of climate change could be seen in extreme weather events and rising temperature in Makurdi, capital of Benue state, over-flooding in Lagos and other parts of the country. Lagos is one of the cities with very high population density, increased industrialization, urbanization and commercialization. It is the 5th city on the global list of countries that are threatened by climate change. There is need to put in place projects to control tidal waves at the bar beach. In Sokoto State, more than 64 communities faced over-flooding in August and September 2009. (The Nation, Monday September 2, 2009).

In Abeokuta South and North local government areas of Ogun State, erosion has done much damage. There were heavy downpours floods in Lafia, Nasarawa State capital particularly the many slum settlement, the heavy rain collected storm waters from areas located on hill, and flooded areas on low land. The flood swelled and overflowed the banks of the stream thereby pouring into homes. Many housing structures were soaked to window level.

There is an indication that Lake Chad is drying up as a result of climate change. The portion of Lake Chad in Nigeria has completely dried up. Millions of people in Nigeria, Niger, and Chad Republic depend on water from the Lake for fishing, livestock and agricultural activities.

The South Eastern part of Nigeria is at the mercy of gully erosion. Individual governments in the zone have taken many bold steps to prevent it but dwindling finances could not match the enormous funds needed to fight the menace. In Enugu alone, three hundred and seventeen critical erosion sites had been identified. Villages are being washed away while lives are being lost due to the menace of erosion. The entire water system in Onisha has also been washed away leading to scarcity of water in the area. The Federal Government had declared Anambra State, a disaster zone.

Researcher at the National Space Research and Development Agency (NARSDA) said they have seen the possibility of an earthquake in Nigeria, especially South Western Region. This is sequel to a tremor in Abeokuta Ogun State in September 11 2009. This affected major parts of the region and it is a clear indication that Nigeria is no longer safe, as far as earthquake is concerned (Muhammed, 2009:9).

Deforestation and forest land degradation in the country has been estimated to be between 350,000 and 400,000 hectares of productive forest areas annually. Enumerated factors responsible include rapid population growth, agricultural land expansion, dependency on the forest food, construction materials and domestic energy, and poor forest management among other. (Sunday Independent, October 25, 2009). The gas flaring in the Niger Delta is a serious issue of concern. There is much devastation in the Niger Delta. The quantum of crude oil that had seeped into the underground, surface and sea waters is difficult to be cleared. There is much consequences on the fauna and flora of the region.

Consider the fumes from generators alone could render sixty percent of children born in the cities mentally retarded, apart from contributing to green house gas in the environment. Such practices like refuse burning, indiscriminate dumping of refuse, well digging and unplanned utilization of water resources,

unplanned urban development and even patterns of farming and agriculture-all have grave implication for the environment, especially human health.

Climate change is a reality that is already affecting the lives of millions of Africans and will have a profound impact on the programming of public expenditures and public receipts in every African country. If left unchecked it threatens to undo some of the progress made in recent years and will jeopardize countries ability to generate sustained economic growth, create employment and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Climate change will affect the revenue and expenditure side of African budgets. Tax receipts may decline sharply from the projected fall in agricultural output, which accounts for some 60 percent of employment and 50 percent of GDP in many countries. Importantly, countries that depend largely on agriculture will experience more frequent and severe macroeconomic shocks.

On the upside, the world's response to climate change offers opportunities for individuals and private sector to tap into new financial source and access improved technologies, including the clean Development mechanisms.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF RELIGION

The above problems posed by global warning and climate change and its attendant effects are so alarming that it is the concern of every human and nations of the world. According to Fohz (2003:9) scientists worldwide are virtually unanimous in warning s that these changes will affect future generations of humans and all other living species in ways we cannot even predict. This is because the ecological crisis has threatened our common future and the very basis of life on earth. Various attempts continue to be made by governments scientifically, economically and politically to contain the alarming ecological crisis. The areas are constantly faced with increasing assault under pressures of land, hunger and development initiatives. There is need to explore

other areas of conserving the natural environment and biological heritage especially cultural landscapes, seascapes and sacred places.

Since the problem requires major changes in values, behaviour and way of life, science, technology economy and government are necessary components for the conservation of the environment but they are insufficient. Religious scholars and theologians are taking up the common theme that environmental crisis is merely a symptom of a deeper spiritual crisis. The implication in the words of Fohz (2003:9) is that “whatever may occur within the realms of technology and politics, the environmental crisis cannot and will not be resolved unless its spiritual dimensions are addressed”. In the words of Iranian-American philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr “the environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values” (Religion and environmentalism, from Wikipedia the free encyclopaedia). The values and spiritual dimensions needed are found most in religion namely, the Indigenous African Religion, Islam and Christianity; Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Shintoism among others. If the environmental crisis were purely or even primarily, a problem demanding scientific or technological solutions, it must have been accomplished by now. Religious traditions of the world need to dialogue with other disciplines and public policy in seeking comprehensive solutions to both global and local environmental problems.

From this stand point, religious values and world views are found in every human society. They should be involved in the decision humans make regarding the environment. In this regard, scholars of religion cannot sit on the fence but to act fast. Since the problem the world is facing is a moral crisis, which is essentially a spiritual crisis, an ethical and spiritual awakening is imperative. Again the following questions have engaged the attention of people over the years. What is the use of religion in tackling such problems as the protection of the environment? What role does religion play in shaping our attitude and value towards the natural world? Many conferences on sustainable

development have persistently failed and even refused to acknowledge the role of religion in conservation and environmental protection, thus, alienating votaries from the fight to save the environment. This is partly due to colonial mentality. Until recently traditional religious practices, for example, were seen by our colonial masters as hindrances to development. The early missionaries and colonial masters discourage the traditional religiosity of worship, respect and veneration of nature. It is against this background that we not only investigate traditional ways of caring and preserving the environment but other religious traditions of the world. The traditional or customary institutions are promoting biodiversity, conservation and sustainable development.

Hamilton (1993:5) challenges everyone in the care of the environment which has been neglected but the most concern of the twenty-first century man in the following words “We put our monetary wealth in safes, in banks with guards, or even in fortresses to prevent theft. We often protect our cultural treasures in museums, again with guards. Yet we allow our wonderful biological wealth to be pilfered or destroyed with little concern”. He further noted that almost 7,000 areas have been carved as parks and nature reserves worldwide for the protection and conservation of biological diversity. Despite these efforts, there are very serious problems. These areas are constantly faced with pressures of land hunger and development initiatives. The religious approach becomes imperative.

Tucker and Grim in their various writings on the subject spell out the task before all religions. Clearly religions need to be involved with the development of a more comprehensive world view and ethics to assist in reversing this trend. Whether, from anthropocentric values need to be formulated and linked to areas of public policy. Scholars of religion can be key players in this articulation process. Moreover, calls from other concerned parties to participate in a broader alliance to halt the loss of species top soil and natural resources.

Climate change is a serious matter that will drastically impact every facet of life in Nigeria as it aggravates. That explains why there are various calls and urge of stakeholders in the country to supports sensitization campaign on climate change and the need to live in a clean environment. It will go a long way to ensure the success of the campaign as well as create cross-understanding implication of climate change and how to manage some by Nigerians. All hands should be on the deck to proactively stem the tide and prepare Nigerians to cope, adopt and to mitigate climate change consequences. This is against the backdrop that climate change is a serious threat to poverty alleviation and sustainable development globally and Nigeria in particular.

TASKS BEFORE VOTARIES OF WORLD RELIGIONS

It is not enough to examine and extol the world religions for environmental and sustainable practices embedded in them but to offer a way of bridging the gap and essential link between secular, scientific and religious traditions. This is now our focal point but it must be remembered that in our reflections all the religions of the world have traditionally expressed some ethical concern for the environment and its creatures, and proposed some ethical responsibilities on the part of humans, although these ethical dimensions are usually secondary, or inferior, relative to responsibilities to other humans. Throughout history, the world's religions have understood the earth to have some kind of religious significance, or religious value, and that humans have some religious obligations to care for its creatures. These shared ethical concerns are found in historical teachings, and not necessarily in actual religious practices. Greed and destructiveness are condemned, while restraint and protection are affirmed by most religious traditions. For reasons that are complex, controversial, and poorly understood, these religious concerns for the environment faded with the rise of modern society. The development of modern scientific, economic and political institutions have taken the place historically

accorded to religion, and traditional religious attitudes towards nature have largely disappeared in modern societies, but not in Africa. Over the past few decades, however, some leaders of every religion in the world have returned to their origins to recover their pre-modern religious environmental teaching to present them as religious ethics.

Religions of the world are necessary partners in the current ecological movement, they are not sufficient without the indispensable contribution of science, economics, education and policy to the varied challenges of current environmental problems. Therefore, this is an interdisciplinary effort in which religions can play a part.

Religions traditions should become effective advocates and practitioners of eco care and sustainability. Religious leaders should take the initiative and help secular institutions with pieces of information or advice to fulfillment of refers duties.

THE TASK BEFORE LEADERS

African leaders and other world leaders should take more radical measures against climate change. What is required now is action and less talk less paper work. Natural resources such as land, plants, animals, water and water resources, atmosphere, and minerals are valuable to man directly or could be turned into materials that are valuable to man. Conservation practices are common knowledge and government policies, programmes are being put in place, but here is an attempt to suggest ways on how best to improve on these practices and change of behaviour and way of life. In the first place, the widely acclaimed principles of conservation such as investigation, protection, repairing, maximizing and upgrading should be applied not only in the management of forests, but other spheres where necessary. Agree on a more fair, just and action oriented agreement adopted from consultations of various stakeholders including religious group and implementation.

- ❖ Have strict laws and enforcement against those who pollute and degrade the environment, coupled with education and incentives to protect the environment. Traditional leaders should be part and parcel of the deal.
- ❖ Development and implement clearly defined carbon action plans and climate response strategies, which can be monitored and reviewed by an independent multi-national climate facility.
- ❖ Transition toward a green economy based on renewable energies and offer more incentives for people to buy affordable energy efficient products.
- ❖ Remove faulty vehicles on our roads, including improved and affordable public and pedestrian transport systems.
- ❖ Make engaging environmental education mandatory in schools and universities and promote community environmental awareness – an informed public is a powerful public. Make it mandatory for all primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, government establishments, and homes to have strips of suitable forest trees, planted around them.
- ❖ Make it mandatory for churches, mosques, play grounds, and all religious places and praying grounds to plant suitable species of trees and flowers.
- ❖ Make it mandatory to include carbon and ecological footprint information in products.
- ❖ Implement green energy and industry, including sustainable food production.
- ❖ Support youth efforts to make a change in the world.
- ❖ To enact more strict laws and surveillance forbidding killing of many wildlife species for food in the form of bush meat common in many African countries. The same goes to laws to protect over harvesting of fishes and other water animals.

What is needed is a legislation that will enforce stringent punishment against indiscriminate felling of trees. There is also the need to control the

growth of pollution rather than eliminate entirely. Hence they emanate and a function of the country's level of economic development, legislations on polluters and compulsory registration of businesses.

Above all government should build environmental and ecological polices on traditional religious practices of sustainability and should draw inputs from other religions present thereby forming a strong interfaith relations.

RELIGION, NATURE AND CULTURE: A CASE FOR TOURISM

The focal point of this unit is the interaction between African Indigenous Religion, nature and culture in Africa. These interactions can manifest in the form of environmental protection and preservation of the ecosystems, hence nature is viewed as sacred. In this regard certain natural formations like forests, hills, mountains, rivers, streams, waterfalls, among others are revered and preserved in the name of religion and culture. Since the indigenous cultures are alive despite the intervention of western culture and are dynamic, arising from a continuous synthesis of the interactions of the life of the people, their aspirations and expectations – with their immediate environment. This writer is convinced that it will serve a useful purpose in tourism. This work therefore calls for more research in Africa not to only protect and restore places of ecological, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual significance but above all, for the development and management as tourist centres.

These proposals are based on the fact that there is increased focus on tourism the world over. Tourism is contributing to the development of nations, hence, the demands for leisure, recreation and holidays. Religious tourism has played its part especially when one considers that Buddhists, and Hindus regard India as the most spiritual country on earth, that Saudi Arabia is home of the two holiest sties in Islam and Israel and Palestine comprise the holy land, a destination of immense importance to Christians, Jews, and Muslims throughout the world.

The dense forest of Osun sacred grove on the outskirts of the city of Osogbo, is one of the last remnants of primary high forest in Southern Nigeria, regarded as the abode of the goddess of fertility. Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods, the landscape of the grove and its meandering river is dotted with sanctuaries and shrines, sculptures and works for art honour of Osun and other deities. In 2005 UNESCO named the sacred Osun grove a world heritage. The development of the Movement of New Sacred Artists and the absorption of Susanne Wenger, an Austrian artist, into the Yoruba culture have proved a fertile exchange of ideas that revives the sacred grove. The annual celebration is therefore, held in reverence and appreciation of the goddess of fertility, love, beauty, order, protection, blessings, and prosperity. The goddess possessed the ability to give children to barren women, power to heal the sick and the afflicted by means of her medicinal water from the river.

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