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Igala Religion and Ecosystem: A Nexus

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Abstract:

The research topic is Igala Religion and Ecology: A Nexus with particular focus on man's relationship with ecology. Ecology is an important aspect of Igala Religion in that both of them inter relate with each other for sustainability and livelihood. The aim of the study is to investigate into the relationship between Igala religion and its immediate environment. To achieve this, the following objectives are set out; to state ecology and their relevance and inter relationship with Igala religion, to investigate the effect of science and technology on the natural environment, to find out ways of reducing environmental crises. The methods used are historical and phenomenological approach along side with site visitation/interview for data collection. It is discovered that the ecosystem plays an important role in Igala religion and that Igala religion relates well with the natural environment because of the roles they play in her religion. It is recommended that the ecosystem should be well protected to foster the existing relationship of ecosystem with Igala religion.

1. Introduction

Ecology which is the study of the relationship of organisms to one another and to their surroundings is viewed as an integral part of Igala religious system. The study which is aimed at researching into the relevance and relationship in Igala Religion is targeted at unveiling the topic so as to evaluate the basis of Igala religious system. Igala religion like any African religion is not a Religion of the books like the Koran or the Holy Bible but written on the hearts of the Igala people and can be seen in sources such as songs, myths/legends, idioms, wise sayings and in arts/symbols. The religion is part and parcel of life in Igala traditional society. "Religion permeates all aspects of life be it politics, economics, education, etc. Thus to be an effective member of the community, one must belong to the religion of the land" (2).

Igalaland is ecologically blessed in the sense that it has abundant landmarks full of rivers, forests, mountains, hills, valleys and lots of natural resources. These in no small way contributed to Igala rich religious system as a result of their close and cordial relationship with the natural environment.

The Igala people are the ninth most populous ethnic group in Nigeria. They constitute more than half of the population of the present day Kogi State (Ainoko 2005). They occupy the eastern part of Kogi State and share boundary with the Idoma people of Benue State at the north eastern part, the Igbo people of Anambra and Enugu States, at southern flank and Edo State at the western part.

The Igala people are predominantly farmers with some civil servants and others who engage in self employments. Igalaland is full of religious organizations and practices that give rise to their strong belief system. Igala people are known to be both cheerful and environmental friendly. As a people they had the concept of God long before the introduction of other religions as the most high to be highly worshipped, and veneration of other ecological features through whom their worship reaches the Supreme God on high contrary to the Eurocentric view of African religion, as idolatrous or paganistic.

2. Igala Religious System

The idea held by Eurocentric authors, as stated by Idowu, is that, "the African people (Igala inclusive) had no idea of God and were held sway by the devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete" (87). Idowu thus cited the Berlin Journal as stating;

- Before the introduction of genuine faith and higher standards of culture by the Arabs, the natives had neither political organization nor 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 home (87).

The research disagrees with the above statement because there could be no people all over the world who are totally devoid of culture and religion as it relates to the knowledge of the living God. What Igala religion does is 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 for 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 only an emerging subject in

biblical studies, thus in the words of one of these biblical scholars, Fretheim says, 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 on the use of any part of God’s Creation? We must exploit these resources to our satisfaction. God was not a fool because He knows we were going to need these resources (50).

With the above, one would accept Lynn White’s theory that Christianity has played a crucial role in the erosion of former traditional belief systems. “Things formerly held sacrosanct have been destroyed and the ascription of psychic power to these objects of worship has been completely removed, hence traditional Igala religion is seen as an evil thing to believe but 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 crisis we experience in our world today. Furthermore, religion without etiquette is bad and that we can not dwell in harmony when the rights of members of the ecosystem are not respected. How could there be harmonious relationship when animals (land or sea) are killed with wreckless abandon even to using chemicals developed through technology and science to destroy them without the preservation of siblings. In line with the above, Chiedozie and Ufele comment, “More science and more technology, are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (4). Because of these over exploitations as observed by Lynn White, “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen because it gave man the right to dominate and exploit nature” Chiedozie and Ufele (5). As to what Christianity contributes to this emerging technological world view, Lynn White as cited by Chiedozie and Ufele further adds that “Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with so called orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature so that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone”, (5).

Judging from the above, the researcher wishes to state that humanity and all religious institution 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.

3. Human Relationship with the Natural Environment in Igala Religious System

The Igala people believe 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 Chamanchala*) 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 the 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 religions things started changing from what they used to be. In line with Lynn White’s theory, what used to be the traditional method of environmental preservation collapsed and sustainability even disappeared, (32). Nevertheless, religion still played a major role in Igala 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 the Igala as the head of all things but that God is the most powerful and the source of all power.

The Igala people regard 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 by some divine beings. These beings to the Igala people are sometimes in a hierarchical order. Miachi (114). They believe in the earth and material life as 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. Chiedozie and Ufele (54).

An important aspect of Igala religious system is that spirits are everywhere in persons, trees, rivers, animals, rocks, mountains, forests and other sacred personal effects. Interestingly, Igala people believe that God could be at work in any of the above since religion permeates all aspects of human life in Igala society and hence it is abnormal to be involved in crimes such as adultery, stealing, cheating and suicide. The priests and custodian of the people communicate the wishes of the spirits to the people. In Igala religion system, all events have their proper rituals that could not be over looked in anyway. These rituals are performed through dance, music, libation or art. Some of these rituals had been retained in one form or the other in various communities involved. In Gbenda’s view “part of God’s self disclosure to human is in nature” (43).

The *Igala* in their religious question pondered on the mysteries of the universe such as mountains, rivers, streams, lakes, forests, animals, plants, season, weather and climatic change. They then ask themselves question such as “who could be the author of this well patterned universe, and what are the mysteries behind them”. Usually they conclude that it must be the hand work of a supersensible intelligent being. According to Gbenda, “Man’s responsibility is 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 a unitary view with common orientations, religious thought and philosophy” (27).

Another action for Man’s relationship with nature is from the fact that the universe and everything therein are creatures of the Supreme Being. Therefore, everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has strong spiritual meaning for man. Hence the traditional Igala’s view is profoundly religious and it forms the basic attitudes that characterize most, if not all spheres of life, that

is why there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane, material and immaterial. To the Igala people many of the things in his environment are held in high esteem for religious reasons.

Furthermore, the attitude of Igala people is rooted in the belief that things were created by the Supreme Being and for continuity of harmony with nature; there must be a relationship of mutual obligation between all the things created by the same 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 modelled after the spiritual world. The Igala people believe that the cosmos is representation of an organic unity thus the environment is seen as a nurturing mother, sensitive and alive, and it's 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 Apenda 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 in 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 Igala have always collected food, medicine, and other materials from the nature, the wild animals also depend on these natural resources for their livelihood. "Consequently if these natural resources are used up as a result of over exploitation, or lack of protection or even due to our change of attitude towards them, their number would be 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 cares, reveres, protects and respects things in his natural environment.

In Igala religion, lands are often set at the out sketch of their settlement. In this land such as "Ayabi" in Affa-Ibaji, both rivers and streams, *Okwula* forest, *Egbe* forest in *Egume*, *Ojaina* (Royal Cemetery at Idah), farming and other human activities such as hunting, felling of trees, fetching of fire woods etc are not allowed. These forests retain their original flora and fauna. To signify their importance, shrines of some deities are located therein with this singular action. The forest becomes a sacred forest or forest of the spirits as they are called. Example of such 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 found out why the surrounding of Ofu river remain bushy from Ojofu Anyigba to the lower part after Okogbo in Ibaji, Omata. According to (Gago Ajetachi) responded thus: "Rivers and streams in Igala religious setting are treated as sacred by people who live there thus the sides are protected because it is believed that the river gods live in its forest". To confirm this is the fact that between 1979-1984, during the night, there used to be strange noise within the source of river Ofu. It is then believed that the water spirits were celebrating at that period.

Consequent upon these people were not allowed to go to the stream within the same time in the night to avoid the wrath of these spirits. Towards the middle of the river at Ofokopi near Ugwolawo, there is a point in the river called Ulokoamo. This place is said to be an abode of a spirit living in the river. Similarly at Ugwolawo opposite the local government secretariat there is a place called *Ejuliomimamo* (the eyes see water but cannot drink). Within this point was cave where some spirits are said to have lived. A priestess, Serah Agali, a traditional doctor has a shrine on that spot. There are also spirits living in the river *Mabolo* of *Egane* in Olamaboro Local Government, a place said to be the home of *aligenu* (water spirit). Most of the priests or priestesses of *aligenu* visit the site regularly, at times even jump into the dreaded rea of river *Mabolo* all in the name of getting more power and inspirations from the spirits dwelling within. Because of such religious importance attached to such rivers or particular spots the forest there about constitute natural reserves whose vegetation is sacrosanct and the ecosystem not disturbed by humans.

In line with the above most of the people that live along river banks in Igalaland mostly revere or venerate water spirits which to them gives them fortune in fishing, farming, prevention of water accidents, even believe that the barren could be given children through some prescribed sacrifices and rituals. As a result people build shrines and veneration centers along banks and mysterious parts of the rivers.

In Igala religious system there are absolute protections for totems. Here there is an intrinsic relationship of friendship and protection between a person or group of persons and a particular animal or a natural object. Both parties keep to mutual close bond of life. Among the *Egwu Afia* (Long Masquerade) people in Igalaland, the animal called *Ewolo* is neither to be killed nor eaten. Some group in Igalaland 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 is said to have saved their forefathers from danger of being killed during war. Among the descendants of Ogbajele in Ofakaga, Ajetachi and Agala in Igalaland, they are forbidden from using *Okopi* tree for fire wood because it was used to save their forefathers from a dreaded disease.

The Igala people believe in the power of spirit behind lightning and thunder. It is believed to be the avenger of wrong dealings and as such when properties are stolen, the thunder spirit is consulted through a 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 Igala hear or perceive the sound of thunder, expression like this is made; "*Tukpara, Tukpara, Ojo mudubanwu mi*" (I recant, I recant, may God forgive me). Therefore with the fear of the wrath of thunder evil actions are curbed in Igala communities.

In another development, the earth is revered so much in Igalaland because of the religious importance it occupies. Specific locations are set aside where the earth divinities are venerated (*Ere ane*). There and then cleansing extends to the whole community (*Ane-efa*). To the Igala people, this cleansing brings about good rain, soil fertility, good fortunes and the likes. The *Ere ane* 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 Ajetachi-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 not to ever flourish in life because they have defiled the earth goddess and so they are under a curse.

4. Effect of Man, Science and Technology on the National 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 location which of course has its ecological consequences on the natural environment 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 in Igala is the act of bush burning. This act destroys the potentials of the soil, soil structure and the ecology is arbitrarily destroyed. Through bush burning so many microbes are destroyed as well as soil macro organisms in the likes of earthworm, snails, rodents, insects, etc and this 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 of 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 by 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 it has brought on the environment. The motivation, orientation and goal modern civilization have been overwhelming. Materialism is one of the major causes of wanton destruction of beasts and their habitats as well as the earth and its beauty (205).

Other agent of disrupting the continuity of natural environmental resources is the issue of urbanization and industrialization. When land is cleared in large quantity for housing, construction of roads, industries, educational and social reasons, it results in the destruction of many economical plants, ponds, lakes, etc. The above action of man brought about by science and technology also led to the destruction of wildlife habitats a species living among the vegetation of the affected areas.

Man's action on the ecosystem in Igala 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 than 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 in a gradual desertification of Igalaland. The trees of religious importance in the land had been cut off thus depriving the spirits of their abode which has resulted to these 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 Igalaland 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 and the ecosystem.

The riverine 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 siblings or growing species of fish and other aquatic habitants. In view of man's negative interaction with the natural environment, Schumacher as quoted by Obasola states; "we are at war with nature and if by chance we win the war, we shall be the loser" (199). By this he may have 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 Igalaland have been destroyed, the streams are gradually drying up and the spirits there in are roaming round looking for those to devour or even make their new place of abode.

To conclude this section, the words of Hoffman as quoted by Obasola are 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 how he unleashes his boundless hedonistic consumer passion on nature as if it had 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 crises experienced in our world today.

5. Ways of Reducing Environmental Crisis

The simple fact that each of the world religions has acknowledged the care for the earth and all therein, the adherents of traditional religion 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 the rediscovery of the ecological sensitivity, above all, to 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.

6. Recommendations

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 what we are saying. Currently logging and woodwork companies in Igalaland had push some operators from Ejule to devastate the land by disrupting normal life in the ecosystem. Many of the wildlife in Igalaland are no more because the forest they inhabited have been destroyed.

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

The act of nuding our streams and rivers should be stopped henceforth so as to allow the spirits therein dwells in security and thus stops hunting humanity.

Furthermore, the issue of grazing by Fulani herdsmen should be addressed since they also contribute to the 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 fishing should be discouraged and even stopped so that the species could be allowed to live for generations yet unborn to enjoy.

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 conducive place to dwell. They should also be educated on the necessity of preserving the land and waters on which all livelihoods depends. It 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.

The government on her part should help to develop the spots, sacred places and religion to meet up with those from 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 emphasize the importance of these places as well as their socio-cultural benefits. Remember if you do not blow your trumpet, who else would you expect to blow it well as you would wish?

7. 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 aspirations to the Supreme Being (*Ojo Chamachala*). 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 (*Ojoochamachala*). Therefore it could be deduced that because man is not lording or claiming total dominion as in (Gen. 1:28) over the created beings but that there are transcendent powers in them, man protects them since their livelihood somehow depends on these agents of the universal creator.

We submit that Igala people, because of their socio-cultural and religious practices should be more friendly so as to adequately protect the natural environment they live in.

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Annexure**Interviews**

S/NO	NAME	PROFESSION	PLACE	DATE
1.	Agbali Sarah	Priestess	Ugwolawo	28/6/2015
2.	Agumu, Akpai	Community Elder	Akpagidigbo	29/6/2015
3.	Odinewu Ilai	Diviner	Ajetachi-Anyigba	28/8/2015
4.	Omata, Momoh	Gago	Ajetachi-Anyigba	23/6/2015