



## ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION IN NIGERIA: AN EXAMINATION OF SACRED TEXTS IN AFRICAN RELIGION AND ISLAM

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### Abstract

*Nigeria, a West African country, is characterised by a pluralistic society with three dominant faiths: African Religion, Christianity and Islam. Despite being richly endowed with natural resources, the country faces severe environmental degradation. This study explores sacred excerpts from African and Islamic religions to examine their ecological positions in the face of contemporary environmental threats in Nigeria. Using an interdisciplinary research approach, data were collected through focus group discussions and literature review. The findings reveal that human activities, driven by scientific and technological advancements, have led to environmental degradation, contradicting the ecological teachings of the two religions on preservation and judicious use of nature for posterity. The research advocates for a return to environmental conservation and responsible resource management, as emphasised by the teachings of African Religion and Islam. It recommends that traditional, religious, and political leaders promote environmental stewardship among their followers. Ultimately, this study emphasises the need for collective action to safeguard the environment for future generations, recognising it as a sacred entity created by a supreme being.*

**Keywords:** African Religion, ecology, degradation, Islam, Nigeria

### Introduction

Nigeria, a heterogeneous state that gained independence from British colonial rule in 1960, is characterized by its pluralistic nature, comprising over 240 ethnic groups and three dominant religions. African Religion and Islam acknowledge God as the creator of heaven and earth, emphasising the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment. However, human activities have severely threatened the earth, prompting concerns from both African and Islamic perspectives.

The degradation of the environment, caused by practices such as the use of herbicides and pesticides, mining, deforestation, and pollution, has disrupted the natural balance and safety of the ecosystem. African Religion views the physical universe as a reflection of the metaphysical one, emphasising the interrelatedness of all things. Similarly, Islam's environmental ethics, based on the principles of Tawhid (unity), Khilafah (trusteeship), and Akhirah (accountability), condemn humanity's destructive actions.



In Islamic teachings, humans are considered trustees of the environment, with a responsibility to maintain sustainability and avoid excessive resource consumption. The Quran emphasizes the importance of preserving nature, stating, "Eat and drink, but do not waste" (Al-A'raf 7:31). African Religion also emphasizes the sacredness of the environment, believing that natural elements, such as forests and rivers, are inhabited by spiritual beings.

The consequences of environmental degradation are far-reaching, affecting both human well-being and the ecosystem. Despite the warnings from African and Islamic traditions, humanity's reckless attitude towards the environment persists, threatening the delicate balance of nature. As the Quran states, "The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification" (Hadith), emphasizing the importance of preserving the natural world.

In conclusion, the degradation of the environment poses a significant threat to human existence and the ecosystem. African Religion and Islam offer valuable insights into the importance of preserving nature and promoting sustainability. By embracing these principles, humanity can work towards mitigating the effects of environmental degradation and promoting a more harmonious relationship with the natural world.

### **African Religion**

Kanu rightly observed, in Africa, there is a widespread belief in a Supreme Being with profound sense of sacred mystery (1). African Religion has been defined as the term that is used to describe the religion that was founded by the forebears of Africans (Anyacho, *Essential Themes...* 242). African Religion is also viewed as an institutionalised system of symbols, belief, values, practices which are focus on the questions of ultimate meaning to different African societies (Gaiya 2). Sarwuan in a lucid definition posits thus "the indigenous religion that is a native to the Africans" (1).

**Ecology:** The concept Ecology was first used in 1858 and later 1865 by the German biologist-H.Reiter. From believed that the term Ecology was coined by German biologist Ernest Haeckel in 1866 (Gbenda, *Religion and Ecology*, 22). As further posits "Ecology designates one of the basic dimensions of biology. The term comes from the Greek root "oikos" that means house or dwelling" (Adah 16-17). Furthermore, Asante defines ecology to mean "the study of the relations of organisms and environment in the subtly balanced networks that forms the web of life" (290). Fairchild succinctly also captured ecology to mean "the study of a partia- functions areal patterns that arise and change through processes of ecological interaction"(101).

### **Islam**

Islam is from the root 'slm' from Arabic it means to be in peace; to be an integral whole from this root Islam came to mean to surrender to God's law and this to an integral whole (Ogwuche et al 28). Islam began in Arabia at the beginning of the 7th Century to 9th of the Christian era in Pagan Jahiliya Arab environment and later spread to other parts of the world (Jomier5).

Nigeria is a heterogeneous State which got her independence from the British colonial masters in 1960. The country is pluralistic in nature with three viral religions been practice



and with over 240 ethnic groups. African Religion and Islam recognised God as creator of heaven and earth. The earth is seriously under threat due to man's degradation activities as lamented by African and Islamic religions respectively. It is not a hidden scene that, environmental degradation is a nagging phenomena been caused by man, and whose dreadful impact is been lamented and exposed by excerpts of African and Islamic religions in Nigeria. African and Islam religions see man as kin to the environment, and they condemned environmental degradation affecting the ecosystem.

The use of herbicides and pesticides on farm lands, increase land, water and air pollution which disrupt natural state and safety of the environment. Also, mining of minerals increases disruption of soil profile leading to land slide, gully erosion and loss of habitations for other living creatures are among man's activities that posed risk to the survival of abiotic and biotic factors. Other activities like deforestation in search for energy, urbanisation and sitting of industries have contributed to environmental safety affecting the ecosystem, which is been considered and revered sacred entity of the Creator -Animator.

It is an undisputed assertion view held in African belief that, the physical universe is the carbon copy of the metaphysical one. This chain of relationship sees everything is inter-related, and devastation of the environment is condemnable by excerpts of African Religion and Islam as destabilisation of the ontological order. Mumuye Religion like any other African, punitive sanctions are meted on people using spirits attacks or by the ancestors themselves when people tempered with natural bodies or sacred objects like forest or groves, streams, mountains, animals and river, which are considered and he Habitations of spiritual beings. There is always fear attached to any environmental degradation in the society because such actions are considered working contrary to the orderliness of nature created by God. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, indigenous religion revolves around elements from the Igbo ecosystem- sky, sin, thunder, water bodies, land hill trees and animals. Again, while the gods bear names that are Kin to natural elements, the rituals celebrate the seasons and other rhythms of natural life (Nwanchor57).

The *Tawhid* (unity), *Khilafa* (trusteeship) and *akhirah* (accountability or literary the hereafter) are pillars of Islam' environmental ethics which condemns man's unabated activities. This, man's understanding of God is strongly coloured by the universe of which man himself is part (Nwanchor56). As similarly enshrined in Islamic Ethics that, mankind is given the role of trustee of the environment. Islam emphasised sustainability, prohibit wastage of resources and excessive use. Thus, this is evident in the verse "and eat and drink, but not excessive indeed, Allah likes not those who commit excess" (Al A'raf:7:31).

In another succinct observation, God sends down rainfall from the sky and the earth becomes green. The colour green is seen by scholars as the most blessed of all colours. For Muslims and together with a profound sense of the value of nature and God's perfect and most truthful plan. Green jihad is an appropriate forum for addressing the global environmental crises because Allah forbids devastation of the environment (Denny 1-3).

The Holy Qur'an and Hadith as maintained, "they are extremely rich in proverbs and precepts that speak of the Almighty Allah's design for creation and humanity's responsibility for preserving it" (Gbenda, *Religion and Ecology*...109). These environmental excerpts reiterate further that, man is at risk from environmental crises created by the industrial



revolution which unleashed many pollutants, leaving dreadful impact on lives and the environment today (Otuibe, 94).

This nagging environmental disaster been faced by man in his relation to nature which is kin to him are necessitated by overgrazing, bush burning, deforestation, indiscriminate poaching, discharge of industrial and chemicals waste and mining of natural resources amongst other related activities (Asante289). It is sad looking at how man conducts himself with absolute impunity in relation to other things on earth that really makes the earth what it should not be but decryable. Despite the glaring negative consequences of his activities, as lament the duo religions, man has never relaxed his reckless attitude towards the earth and everything in it (Otuibe 86).

African Religion as maintained, God created the universe and other spiritual beings which is considered sacred, and which man is expected to treat as having living force active, but failed.

The, Holy Al-Qur'an (2:201) further says that, "our Lord give us the good in this world and the good in the Hereafter. Thus, the full appreciation of this would and it is no way a handicap for our spiritual endeavours" (Asad10). Islam is against deforestation and prohibits unnecessary cutting trees. It is evident in following Hadith which was narrated by Abdullah Ibn Habshi that Prophet Muhammed (SAW) said "He who cuts a lot of tree [justification], Allah will send him to he'll fire (Abu Dawud).

In African Religion, man thinks about and feels as in the image of a living force interacting with the living forces which needs to be protected but under persistent devastation today, which is contrary to the relation of man and other forces in nature. It is an indispensable aspect connotations of the African worldview who h is regarded as only man-centred, which response to cahllebgges posed by society and changing human behaviours (Gaiya 8). Environmental degradation has become a contemporary trending and lamentable predicament leading to global warming.

Qur'an (55:6) confirmed also that, "the plants, trees bow in adoration to God the Almighty" Allah is the source of the earth and its fullness, which clearly shows that nature must be protected". It is a responsibility on men that, care of the natural environment would be seem as training for thereafter life in the company of God and angels in an environment that is perfect balance, perfect and surviving (Gbenda, *Religion and Ecology*...110).

From the excerpts of the duo religions in Nigeria, there is romance in appreciating nature as created by God. Hence, the two religions admonished total reverence and care for it by man irrespective of their faiths. Alook at the sacred universe which is created by God shows that, man's destructive activities have continued unabated, leaving dreadful impact on the practice of the trio religions which uses the environment as a centre for reflection and worship which is under degradation by man.

There is a constant interaction between man and the cosmos. Hence, there is reason that in the African worldview there is no clear dichotomy or opposition between the visible world and the invisible world( Gaiya9). It has been observed sadlky that, due to man's conspicuous and reckless altitude towards the environment, which is been carried out with absolute impunity the earth has been destroyed persistently affecting man and nature alike in their



eco-spirituality. When one takes an in-depth survey of the beautiful scenery on earth, one is left now to decry the extinction of the nature's gift to the nation. Hence, some adherents of these three religions condemned in totality the ecological degradation bedeviling contemporary Nigeria.

In view of the above, both religions uphold to the fact that, the earth is sacred, orderly and friendly as created by God, who placed man to be in control it, but due to man's incessant activities, in the earth is under a brim of collapse. It has been asserts sadly that " the ecosystem is sacred, and taboos are used to prohibit poaching, over grazing, deforestation and even offering excavation of mineral s in order for the tranquility of the ontological order of the ecosystem to be protected from man' incessant destructions(Martins, 264).

### **Man, an Agent of Ecological Degradation: Perspectives from African Religion and Islam**

African and Islamic religions consider humans as granted existence to control nature, which they have failed to do, leaving it in a state of degradation (274). Humans are created by God to be in control of the universe. Since the creation of the world, humans have been in control of what God has ordained, and they are not seen in isolation from nature, which they must conserve for an ontological relationship, but are instead in antagonism today (Asante 292).

Throughout the world, humans are appraised for their technological and scientific advancements. They are considered rational controllers, conquerors, and exploiters of the earth, whose activities are detrimental to the survival of the ecosystem. Currently, humans have not relaxed their reckless and impunity attitude towards the earth and everything in it. The root of this ecological degradation lies in the quest for energy, modernization, and improvement and maintenance of the quality of life, which has imprisoned humans to treat the environment without regard, destroying the natural foundation of life. No wonder Mbiti reiterates that " man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God, they not only originate from Him but also bear witness to him"(48).

The use of herbicides and pesticides on farmlands increases land, water, and air pollution, disrupting the natural state and safety of the environment. Mining of minerals disrupts soil profiles, leading to landslides, gully erosion, and loss of habitats for other living creatures. These human activities pose risks to the survival of abiotic and biotic factors. Other activities, such as deforestation in search of energy, urbanisation, and industrialization, have contributed to environmental degradation, affecting the ecosystem, which is considered a sacred entity created by God.

In African Religion, humans believe in the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical worlds. The degradation of the environment is considered a crime against the ontological order. Similarly, Islam's environmental ethics, based on the principles of Tawhid (unity), Khilafah (trusteeship), and Akhirah (accountability), condemn humanity's destructive actions.

The Quran emphasises the importance of preserving nature, stating, "Eat and drink, but do not waste" (Al-A'raf 7:31). African Religion also emphasises the sacredness of the environment, believing that natural elements, such as forests and rivers, are inhabited by





spiritual beings. Any one who involves in actions capable of endangering the environment and its nature is creating a problem that can affect one's prospective generation (Afunugo 84). Mbiti went further to say that, majority of peoples hold that the spirits dwell in woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains or just around the village (80). This belief instilled fears in people on the need to desist from degrading the natural environment for fear of these Spirits.

The consequences of environmental degradation are far-reaching, affecting both human well-being and the ecosystem. Despite the warnings from African and Islamic traditions, humanity's reckless attitude towards the environment persists, threatening the delicate balance of nature. Hence in traditional African societies, taboos are used to prohibit poaching, overgrazing, deforestation, and excavation of minerals to protect the ecosystem. Nature is considered sacred, and certain religious prohibitions are put in place to curtail reckless ecological mismanagement by humans.

The teachings of African Religion and Islam are geared towards loving, protecting, and making judicious use of nature, rather than destroying it incessantly and recklessly. The Quran reiterates that "God is the creator of everything in the universe" (40:57). Both religions advocate for the protection and preservation of nature, rather than its destruction.

### **Recommendations**

Amidst the unabated activities of man in the ecosystem which African Religion and Islam in their excerpts condemned, the paper has the following recommendations:

1. The two religious leaders from African and Islamic religions should have it as a point of duty to educate, sensitize and enlighten their followers on the danger of ecological disaster and even the effects such acts have on the two religions.
2. Government, traditional, religious leaders as well as other relevant stakeholders should team up and revive back the green of revolution and conservation policies of tree planting, wildlife reserved laws to protect the ecosystem from man's continuous and rampant destructions.
3. Punitive measures should also be reinvigorated and financed by relevant authorities in order to safeguard the environment from total degradation.
4. Environmental protection agencies and workers should be re-activated and well financed in order to be proactive in safeguarding nature from wanton degradation.
5. There is need to re-awake the attitude of love and appreciation of nature and environment in our world today.

### **Conclusion**

Ecological degradation in contemporary Nigeria is a lamentable phenomenon fostered by humanity's reckless attitude towards nature, which both African and Islamic religions lament. Due to humanity's continued heinous activities, which pose dangers to lives and the entire ecosystem, the excerpts of these religions condemn degradation and emphasize the need for nature preservation.

Since environmental degradation is a nagging issue, it is a concern not only for natural sciences but also for theological excerpts of African and Islamic religions. There is a need to



condemn ecosystem degradation in Nigeria to conserve the environment from total collapse. Every freedom must correspond with responsibility, as gleaned from the excerpts of the duo religions in Nigeria.

There is a need for all to imbibe the attitude of love, preservation, and appreciation of nature now and in the future. Nature is beautiful, friendly, and life-sustaining, and humans must guard it jealously from wanton and reckless destruction to foster a friendly relationship between humans and nature and eco-theology for future use.

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