



## **African Religion and Environmental Dynamics: Implications for Human and Sustainable Development**

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**Abstract.** The environmental crisis now encompasses the entire earth. Strangely enough, although the destruction of the sacred quality of nature by modern man dominated by a secularist perspective is directly responsible for this catastrophe, the vast majority of the human species, whether participating directly or indirectly in the havoc wreaked upon the natural environment, still lives within a worldview dominated by religion. The role of religion in the solution of the existing crisis between man and nature is therefore crucial. Furthermore, any discussion of religion and the order of nature, which is interested in healing the wounds of the earth and ameliorating the existing crisis now threatening man's terrestrial existence, cannot but take place on a global scale. In the same vein, there is the recognition that the earth is in danger from human activity and use and changes need to be made in order to sustain life on the earth. Most if not all of the environmental crises are caused by "human carelessness and greed". It is expedient to state that the environmental issue has a dimension which often times have been neglected and that by virtue of the fact that there are no enabling laws or affirmative actions by both the government and the people. If the issue of human right is taken seriously, it has a way it can impact positively on the environment and this will engender positive development.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The world today is witnessing a change in the atmospheric conditions which humans are used to at the global level and these changes are having negative impact on both aquatic and terrestrial lives to the intent that if urgent steps are not taken to ameliorate these conditions, humanity may be at the brink of extinction. It is in this perspective that we intend to look at the issue of the environment from the African religious perspective with the view to ascertaining the orientation of the people to environmental preservation and conservation and

how this understanding could engender human and social development. Consequently, this paper will examine the relationship between the environment and the forces that affect its growth. This becomes paramount in view of the accelerated growth man has experience in the last century and the effect of that growth on the environment. In addition, the paper will beam its searchlight on the growth and development of the environment and the consequence of such growth on the environment. The effort of man to seek solution to the problems arising from the growth shall also be examined.

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

To begin a thorough discourse of this paper, it is necessary to make some clarifications that would facilitate easy understanding of our subject of discussion. This begins by defining what the word 'environment' connotes. According to the New Penguin English Dictionary; an environment is 'the natural surroundings of or the complex of external factors that acts upon an organism, an ecological community, or plants and animals life in general'. In another perspective, the environment could be regarded as 'the sum total of all external conditions which may act upon an organism or community to influence its development or existence: the surrounding air, light, moisture, wind, soil and other organism are part of the environment or environmental factors' (Dictionary of Geological Terms cited in Faniran, (1997:62). Daura (2007) simply defines the environment as "the sum of all external conditions affecting the life, development and survival of an organism. The external conditions in this context refer to living organisms or non-living such as plants, animals, water, air, land, etc". All these organisms and their environment; according to Daura 'do constantly interact and both are changed by this interaction.

Faniran (1997) explains organism or community as a central element in the definition of environment and goes further to say that it exists in the 'midst of various living and non-living objects, happenings and influence (both natural and artificial, the aggregate of which forms its environment and on which it depends for life and survival of life.

Since the environment does not exist in isolation, the need for interaction between it and the community or organism with which it interacts become

imperative. Thus the environment of citizen of a country, according to Faniran, generally includes:

- (a) Individuals (men, women and 'children) variously related to one another as members of families, societies, group e.t.c.
- (b) Artificial (man-made) objects such as clothing, furniture, utensils, decorative materials, tools, machines, e.t.c.
- (c) Plants and animals domestic and wild;
- (d) Natural (cosmic) object such as the sun, the moon, rivers, in mountains, water, air e.t.c. and
- (e) Events and happenings such as rising and setting of the sun, and the moon, rainfall, changing weather etc

Faniran goes further to itemize the two specific parts by which the environment is customarily categorized. These are:

- (a) The natural environment which comprises of
  - i. physical or a biotic environment
  - ii Lithosphere rock, minerals, land forms, and form processes
  - iii. Atmosphere - gases, moisture, weather climate atmospheric processes and elements
  - iv. Hydrosphere – water vapour, liquid, solid (ice)
  - v. Biological or biotic environment
  - vi Plant
  - vii. Animals
- (b) The sociological environment that is made up of everything around us which is developed by mankind through tools, skills e.t.c. These include building, roads; bridges, cities, villages, irrigation, canals factories, transport e.t.c

It is necessary to note three basic features, of these two types of environment. One is that they are not mutually exclusive, second; they interact closely between and among themselves and finally, the sociological environment has assumed a complicated dimension of social activities originating from culture or civilization. The consequence of these social activities which has great positive

and negative impacts on the relationship between it and the natural environment are the basic problems facing mankind today.

Adegoroye (1997) identifies two definitions of the environment. Situating the first definition within the context of environmental management, he sees it as “the aggregate of the physical and biological entities outside of man and supporting the existence of man whether on land, in water or air”. This definition undoubtedly depicts that man is a separate entity even though he is a component of the environment. It also highlights the supportive nature of the environment to man. Adegoroye provides the second definition which apparently sees environment from its dynamic nature, According to him,

The environment as a community of organisms is a dynamic nature at complex levels of interactions unfolding in drama sketches, stretching between the remotest past at creation and the unforeseeable future. A drama whose curtain raiser, time and grand-finale, if any, are lost to us mortals.

He was able to elucidate this definition further when he stated that the result of this drama of interaction between the community of organisms are various problems which he categorises into natural hazards and man-made or man-provoked problems. Natural hazards in his view are those usually refer to as disasters when they result in human and economic losses as well as social misery The man made or man-provoked problem on the other hand arises as a result of bad planning, poor management, excessive consumption pattern, resources depletion e.t.c. (Adegoroye 1997: 12).

Dynamics, within the context of this paper is also defined in the New Penguin English Dictionary as 'a pattern of change or growth, or the forces that produce it. If these definitions are anything to go by, one may conclude that the change in the environment is characterized by the force that produced that change.

To this extent, man is focused as the major force of change or growth in the environment. For the discussion of this paper therefore, how the man has

influenced the nature shall be examined so as to know how far his activities gone in pursuance of a virile society.

### **AFRICAN RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Traditionally, religion plays an integral role in linking people to the natural world, imbuing them with the knowledge and values that make caring for the environment a priority. As such religion occupies a unique place in ascertaining environmental friendliness and at the same time, it is a major instrument that has been used to cause environmental problems. However, among the Africans or the indigenous people, religion has been a source of environmental preservation and protection even though, abuses also exist. The Indigenous people recognize and understand their place in the local environment bearing in mind that nature or the environment has a spiritual dimension attached to it. By virtue of the fact that the Africans recognize that spirits inhabit nature, there is the tendency to nurture and take care of it. According to Grim, in indigenous beliefs, “to analyze religion as a separate system of beliefs and ritual practices apart from subsistence, kinship, language, governance, and landscape is to misunderstand indigenous religion”. Therefore, the respect for the environment still subsists among the African people. Hence, Grim asserts that “what is evident, however, is wherever indigenous peoples have endured, they have maintained a loving experience of place and an understanding that spiritual forces capable of leading humans into both utilitarian and self-understandings abide in all of these places”.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL DYNAMICS AND VIRILE SOCIETY**

Industrial revolution marked a rapid phase in the history of man development. Within that period and now man has made giant stride due to the advancement in technology. Up till the 19th century when the industrial revolution took place, there was relative peace in the world due to balance in the emission of green house gases and what the earth could naturally cope with. But since this period and the spread of industrialization, the use of mechanical device in agriculture, transportation, communication, medicine and automobiles, the earth's existence has become endangered

This man-made environmental degradation which primarily is due to wastes generation resulting from industrialization particularly in Europe and America, and increasingly in Asia and Latin America also include emission of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon dioxide through the burning of fossil fuel for energy particularly through the internal combustion engines of motor vehicles.

There is therefore, a general concern that the unbridled and uncontrolled emission of green house gases particularly CO<sub>2</sub> could lead to rapid warming up of the Earth to such an extent that our planet could eventually become another Venus where the heat may become so unbearable that human life may literally burn out (Oshuntokun: 1998).

Schumacher could not have been more right when he said that we are at war with nature and if by chance we win the war, we shall be the loser'. In other words, our civilizations are at risk because we are misusing natural resources and disturbing natural systems. We are pressing the earth to the limits of its capacity. Since the industrial production revolution, human numbers have grown eight-fold. Industrial production has risen by more than 100 times in the past 100 years. This unprecedented increase in human numbers and activity has had major impacts on the environment.

The capacity of the earth to support human and other life has been significantly diminished. In less than 200 years the planet has lost six million square kilometers of forest; the sediment load from soil erosion has risen three-fold major river basins and by eight times in smaller, more intensively used ones; water withdrawals have grown from 100 to 3600 cubic kilometers a year.

Atmosphere systems have been disturbed threatening the climate regime to which we and other forms of life have long been adapted. Since the mid-eighteenth century, human activities have more than doubled the methane in the atmosphere; increased the concentration of carbon dioxide by 27%; and significantly damaged the stratospheric ozone layer.

Pollution of air, soil, fresh waters and the oceans has become a serious and continuing threat to the health of humans and other species. Humanity is causing emissions of arsenic, mercury, nickel, and vanadium that are now

double those from natural sources; zinc emissions are triple and those from cadmium and lead respectively five and eighteen times higher than natural rates.

Most astonishing of all, the 5.3 billion people now on Earth are already using 40% of our most elemental resources the energy form the sun made available by green plants on land.

Yet despite this vast takeover of nature, hundreds of millions of people struggle in poverty, lacking a tolerate quality of life. One quarter of the world's people is without safe drinking water. Every year million of children die from malnutrition and preventable disease. Such conditions are grossly unjust. They also threaten the peace and stability of many countries now and of the whole eventually.

According to Asiodu:

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 of modern civilization have been overwhelmingly materialism is one of the major causes of wanton destruction of beasts and their habitats as well as the earth and its beauty (p.30)

Further describing the alarming rate by which man has degraded his environment, Butzler and Armstrong (1997) said:

... our relationship with the earth is changing at an unprecedented rate. The pace of change is accelerating not only from our advancing technology, but from world population growth, economic growth and increasingly frequently collisions between expanding human demands and the limits of the earth's natural system.

Hoffman (1999) has unequivocally explained this further by saying that:

The true cause of the catastrophic environmental destruction is the hubris of modern man who has become godless, who believes himself to be unlimited master of his environment and who unleashes his boundless hedonistic consumer passion on nature as if it had no right of its own to exist intact.

The situation becomes so alarming that no political party in Western Europe today and to a certain extent in the U.S. and Canada can survive without championing environmental causes. Oshuntokun (1998) sounds a note of warning that:

The discovery of the hole in the atmosphere ozone layer which protects human, combined with global warming have led to the conclusion that the system with which the earth protects itself are being overburdened and that they will fail if we continue as if every thing was alright without embarking on abatement measures.

Concerned with this global crisis coupled with the fact that although abuse of the environment has global implications, about 170 countries met in Rio De Janeiro in 1992 to discuss the world common crisis in what is called the Earth summit. They were convinced that the world faced a common crisis-global warming and that it is in the interest of everyone to join hands to combat that crisis in particular and other forms of environmental decline in general.

Many of such seminars have come up since then both at the international, national and local levels. The need for these conferences emanated from the call by the Rio De Janeiro conference to seek grass root and ethical solution to environmental degradation as contained in their report called Agenda 21.



These global efforts led to serious contemplation to seek alternative means to the ways by which man has handled and is still handling nature. Environmental Ethics therefore became a field of inquiry that addresses the ethical responsibilities of human beings for the natural environment.

Apart from Agenda 21 (1993); the Assisi declaration (1986) and Brundtland Report (1987) and other important documents; all of which have realized an indispensable role of religions and cultural imperatives in the field of ecology; there have been some contributions from the aspect of religion.

This can be found in the pioneering works of Arne Naess, H. Paul Santimire and E. F. Schumacher around 1973, the thinkers of Christian background led the religious response to the environmental crisis gradually followed by scholars of other denominations. The contributions of Islamic scholars began to be noticed in the early eighties in the form of articles of Mohammad Shafi (1980), Abdul Rashid (1980), Iqtidar Zaidi (1981), M. Ajmal (1984) and Mohammad Ali Mekour (1984) and others. The Declaration of Religion and Nature made at Assisi (Italy) in September 1986 is the first international attempt to bring all the religions closer in their contribution towards environmental conservation and interfaith while understanding and resolving the crisis (Agwan: 1997).

The problem of the environment, is more acute in Africa which is the most 'backward' in sustainable development. In the words of Bakat (2006:245), "the link between environmental degradation in Africa is self evident, due to the negative impact that has been experienced by African peoples".

He is quick to mention the inglorious roles of the Western powers in the conflicts that have permeated the entire continent in the area of the environment. He states further:

While global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, pollution and deforestation are global problems in nature; desertification, soil erosion and water shortage and the degradation emanating from the activities of multinational companies (MNCs) by way of exploring or exploiting are linked to conflicts in the continent. This desertification, no doubt, has had

greater, effects on land in Africa including reduction in the land available for farming and grazing. The reduction led to over cultivation which exhausts the soil and eventually results on soil erosion. This, coupled with over grazing which removes the available vegetation also makes way for soil erosion (Bakat, 2006: 246).

As a result of this also, Bakat says about 28% of Africans have no access to fresh water and about 3million Africans die annually due to water related diseases. All these coupled with rapid population growth and prolonged economic pressures have increased the demand for fuel wood building materials and other material traditionally extracted from natural vegetation. It has often been said that Africa is still bogged down by bread and butter issues that she is likely to be the last continent to rise to its environmental responsibilities. (Oshuntokun: 1998).

### **IMPLICATION FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

It should be noted that the concept of development is an all-encompassing phenomenon as it relates to the social, political, economic and religious attitudes of the people (Obasola 2003:207). It has a pervasive use and multifaceted application. It can apply to “growth” and or “progress”. In whichever way it is applied, it has the tendency of measuring the level of growth or progress of a people, socially, economically, scientifically or politically. According to Sanda (1981:121), development conceived as multi-dimensional, referring to positive change which affect the majority and which lie in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of societal life. He posits that development entails progress in both economic and non-economic components of societal life (Sanda 1992:10). Hence, any study of development must be concerned with social change which is oriented toward making life better for all citizens. It is in consonance with this that Osagie (1985:129) describes development as:

...the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of the people which enhance not only their material well-being, but

also assures their social well-being and the restoration of human dignity.

This shows that development can only be achieved where individuals within the society imbibe the culture of inward transformation which will promote societal good. This presupposes that development should be hinged on the moral worth of the people and not only on the economic gain, for if a nation has economic potentials without developing the moral potentials of the people, such a nation will wallow in abject poverty as is the case with Nigeria. This presupposes that the issue of development is also hinged on proper understanding of the environmental needs and the care given to it by the people which will bring about wholistic development. Therefore, there is also the need for full and equal participation for all persons in environmental decision-making and development planning, and in shaping decisions and policies affecting one's community, at the local, national and international levels.

By virtue of the role of the environment to sustainable development, there should be declarations by both the Government and Non-Governmental institutions lending credence to the preservation of the environment in order to guarantee a safe and virile society for people to live in. Some of these declarations are as follows:

"[Indigenous peoples] shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control ... over their own economic, social and cultural development.... Governments shall take measures ... to protect and preserve the environment of the territories they inhabit."

--ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169), Article 7

"Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.... In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it....

--Rio Declaration, Principles 1 and 4

"Sustainable development is essential for human settlements development, and gives full consideration to the needs and necessities of achieving economic growth, social development and environmental protection.... We commit ourselves to the goal of sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world by developing societies that will make efficient use of resources within the carrying capacity of ecosystems..., and by providing all people ... with equal opportunities for a healthy, safe and productive life in harmony with nature.... We...commit ourselves to :... promoting changes in unsustainable production and consumption patterns...; population policies ... that are ... sustainable, reduce environmental stress, promote ... efficient ... use of natural resources... and meet basic needs, ... providing a healthy ... environment ... and reducing the ecological footprint of human settlements...."

--Habitat Agenda, paras. 29, 42 and 43

The bottom line of these declarations points to the fact that sustainable development cannot take place if the environment is not properly looked after by man. Therefore, there has to be the recognition of the rights of every man to protect, nurture and sustain the environment if the goal of sustainable development is not to elude us as nations. In addition, if the challenges of the present global warming and the depletion of the ozone gas layer and other negative situation affecting the environment is to be ameliorated, then man must recognize his obligation towards the preservation of the environment and

work within the scope of realizing sustainable development. Therefore, the preservation of the environment is a collective responsibility of all and sundry towards attaining the minimum standard of living for all human beings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Having examined the environmental dynamics, it is discovered that mankind has influenced it in technological development; the rate at which the environment is abused is also alarming. In this regard not until mankind look for the alternatives we shall continue to live in perpetual danger of the consequence of the abuse of our environment in our quest for development.

Religion and the environment are intertwined in that they have had a history and will continue to have a role together in the future. This may be one area where science and religion can find a common ground – both have the environment in their best interest and can work together to find a solution to the current environmental crisis. As religious traditions and beliefs have shaped human values and behaviors towards the environment in the past, this is one possibility for working toward positive environmental attitudes for the future.

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