

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACT ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Abstract

Although, climate change is a global phenomenon with impacts affecting the world over, these impacts are more deeply felt in developing countries, especially those in the continent of Africa. Climate change has caused the rise in poverty level, drought, flood and famine, with developing countries bearing the brunt of these impacts. There have been cases of droughts in the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa and the Sahel areas of Africa. To be sure, climate change has affected the socio-economic, cultural, health and political life of Africans in all ramifications. This paper seeks to critically evaluate the impacts of climate change on the African Religious and Culture with special emphasis on Nigeria.

Keywords: Climate Change, African Traditional Religion, Environment, Culture

Introduction

Religion in its simplest meaning is a fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a group of people. These set of beliefs concern the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, and involve devotional and ritual observances. The Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (2010) defines religion as the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that are connected with the worship of them. They also often contain a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. To this end, religion shapes the moral behaviour of a people who practices it and people who are born into the religion are indoctrinated in line with the tenets of the religion in order to maintain the same reasoning with the rest of the group. Thus religion has to do with a belief in a particular being. This being is known or called by different names, but one thing is clear, it guides and directs the totality of the people who believes in it.

From time immemorial, man has demonstrated a natural inclination towards faith and worship of anything he considered superior/beyond his understanding. His belief/religion consisted of trying to appease and get favours

from the Supreme Being who he feared. This resulted in performing rituals and keeping traditions or laws to earn goodness and/or everlasting life from the supreme one.

In Nigeria, we have three main religions, the African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islamic religion. The belief and practices of these religions varies but they all believe in the existence and supremacy of the Supreme Being. This Supreme Being who is believed to be everywhere and is responsible for man's mission on earth is usually appeased and respected to make a man's way smooth both here and hereafter.

Climate change on the other hand is the significant increase in the earth's temperature over a long period of time. Long-term averages of weather are called "climate" while changes in the long term average are called "climate change". Thus McLean and McMillan (2009) have described climate change as "a phenomenon whereby solar radiation that has reflected back off the surface of the earth remains trapped at atmospheric levels due to the build-up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases rather than being emitted back into space". The effect of this is the warming of the global atmosphere otherwise known as "global warming".

Although, climate change is a global phenomenon with impacts affecting the world over, these impacts are more deeply felt in developing countries, especially those in the continent of Africa. Climate change has caused the rise in poverty level, drought, flood and famine, with developing countries bearing the brunt of these impacts. There have been cases of droughts in the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa and the Sahel areas of Africa. To be sure, climate change has affected the socio-economic, cultural, health and political life of Africans in all ramifications. This paper seeks to critically evaluate the impacts of climate change on the African Religious and Culture with special emphasis on Nigeria.

The Concept of African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts and society. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the worldview of the African people. The African man have unflinching respect for his religion and always ensures that nothing comes between him and his God so as not to attract the wrath of his God. Traditional African Religions are not

stagnant but highly dynamic and constantly reacting to various shifting influences such as old age, modernity, and technological advances. According to Ogbonna (2018), five married men who conspired and raped a widow because she rejected their sexual advances was stricken by the gods for forcing the woman against her wish. Its origin is lost in antiquity. However, it is believed to have been practiced by African fore-bears who handed it down from one generation to another. Awolalu (1979) also contends that “African traditional religion is the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is a religion founded on African soil, and undoubtedly interwoven with the culture of the people, expressed in beliefs and practices, myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names, “sacred spaces, places and objects; a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities”.

African traditional religion is built on truth as going against the truth will incur the wrath of the gods. Thus, in Achebe (1958) Okonkwo was able to provide Ikemefuna for rituals and personally beheading him despite training him for years to the extent that Ikemefuna calls him father. He did this to justify the demand of the spirits who they held at high esteem.

Africans believe in the supernatural being(s) known as God and spirits which affects all aspects of their daily lives, from what they eat (or cannot eat), the way they farm, dress, do everyday chores, hunt, make tools and clothes, arrange themselves in families, marry, divide work among family members, educate their children, treat illness, and bury the dead”. In fact from the above, the life of the African man is coordinated by his religion. There are days in the week which people abstain from doing any serious work such as the eke day. This suggest a holy day for according respect to the Supreme Being and this is absolutely what the Christians observe today as Sunday.

In the words of Baum (1999), African traditional religion, like most religious systems, “focuses on the eternal questions of what it means to be human. What is the meaning of life, and what spiritual powers are with the natural world and it seeks to portray the world as operating with some degree of order and predictability”. African traditional religion places so much emphasis on the existence of ancestral spirits. Thus, lending credence to the belief in life after death. The belief in incarnation, life after death, protection of the living by the

dead and appeasing the spirits to remove illness, catastrophe and disaster upon the living is a major characteristics of the African traditional religion.

In concurring with the above assertion, Ezechi (2011) observes that African families believe that the “dead are never gone”. They believe that people continue to live through their spirits, after death. These spirits are often referred to as ancestral spirits. It is believed that spirits of the ancestors remain very interested in what happens in their families and communities. Hence, they provide protection against misfortune, drought, disaster, and disease, heal illness, and provide children, protection for livestock, rain and fertility of crops. The above assertion by Baum is buttressed by the belief in re-incarnation (ino uwa) of the dead, thus the dead comes back to the family through the birth of a new child in the family. This child somewhat takes after the re-incarnated person and sometimes behaves and act like him.

The Concept of Culture

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) defines Culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. From Taylors definition it could deduced that culture encompasses morals, laws and customs which is crucial to people living in the society. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns that is unique to the group. Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave and relate with loved ones.

Culture according to Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952) consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action.

In Nigeria, culture is held at high esteem, respected and revered, no one culture is adjudged better than the other because it is people’s way of life. Thus,

whichever way a people practices their culture, it seems nice to them. In Igbo land, a universal culture which cuts across tribes and cultures is the new yam festival. The new yam festival is commemorated by all Igbo tribes and in the diaspora as a mark of respect for the gods for keeping them alive to witness another year of harvest in the land of the living. There are other cultures practiced by the Igbos which makes them different from other ethnic nationalities in Africa. This includes, masquerade display, method of burial and marriage to mention a few.

Origin of African Traditional Religion

The origin of African indigenous religions is traced to antiquity, beginning with the origin of human civilization on the continent, perhaps as early as 200,000 B.C.E., when the species *Homo sapiens* is believed to have emerged. Because they date back to prehistoric times, little has been written about their history. These religions have evolved and spread slowly for millennia; stories about gods, spirits, and ancestors have passed from one generation to another in oral mythology. Practitioners of traditional religions understand the founders of their religions to be God or the gods themselves, the same beings who created the universe and everything in it. Thus, religious founders are described in creation stories.

For indigenous African peoples "history" often refers to accounts of events as narrated in stories, myths, legends, and songs. Myth and oral history are integral elements of their culture. Such history, however, can be difficult to cross-reference with historical world events. Nevertheless, the truths and myths conveyed through an oral culture may be as authentic as those communicated through the written word. Evidence such as archaeological findings, carbon dating, and DNA has corroborated certain elements contained in African myths, legends, and narratives, thus validating the claims of its origin and history.

Over the years African traditional religions have increased and diminished in regional importance according to social and political changes. One of the biggest influences on African traditional religions has been outside cultures. In particular, both Islam and Christianity have affected the practice of African traditional religions. Christianity, the first world religion to appear on the continent, was taken there in about the first century C.E., spreading across North Africa. It was overtaken in the region by Islam in the seventh century – frequently by military incursion, commercial trading, and the non-violent

missionary efforts of merchants. Persian and Arab merchants introduced Islam in East Africa by trading in coastal towns up and down the eastern seaboard. Islam was readily adapted in many instances because of its compatibility, or at least tolerance of, traditional African religions. By the 1700s Islam had diversified and grown popular.

In the fifteenth century Christian missionaries became the first wave of Europeans to invade and occupy African lands. They relied on the backing of European medicinal remedies and colonial military power. By using local languages and converting Africans from their ancestral religions to Christianity, missionaries paved the way for early modernization and Western colonialism. Western colonialists negotiated and drafted treaties with African leaders, stripping Africans of their lands, depopulating the countryside, destabilizing their economies, overturning political rule, and uprooting cultural and lineage continuity. By the 1900s Christianity was firmly entrenched in most of Africa.

Today Muslims worship throughout much of Africa. The success of Islam is partially a result of its continued toleration of traditional beliefs and practices – or at least its allowance of indigenous beliefs to adapt to a form compatible with Islam. At the end of the twentieth century, Islam spread into areas such as Rwanda, where the trauma of civil war, ethnic violence, and genocide implicated Christianity and left Islam with a reputation for being on a higher moral level. On the other hand, in predominantly Muslim states such as the Sudan, Islamic fundamentalists and pro-Arab Sudanese have been implicated in the oppression and slavery of millions of Sudanese Christians and ethnic minorities.

The rapid spread of Pentecostal Christianity and fundamentalist Islam has greatly affected the role of indigenous religion in African society. African traditional religions have creatively responded to this religious onslaught by formulating new ways of survival, such as developing literature, institutionalizing the traditions, establishing associations of priests, and creating schools for the training of its priests. Moreover, they have also extended outward and influenced global culture, especially in African diaspora communities. From the 1500s to the 1900s the transatlantic slave trade took African religions to the Americas and the Caribbean. Contact with Catholicism in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti produced new forms of religious syncretism called Candomblé, Santería, and Vodun. Since the 1980s the religions of African immigrants have influenced American culture. A new wave of conversion to indigenous African traditions has been noticeable in the United States, especially among African Americans.

New forms of Yoruba religion have been emerging that are quite different from the Yoruba Orisa traditions in Nigeria. These forms have introduced African healing practices among the black population of the United States. There are a number of West African babalawos (diviners) of African origin practicing in major American urban centres, such as Atlanta, Miami, and New York City.

The interaction between Western and traditional African religious traditions has influenced religious innovations in Africa, such as African Initiated Churches and Islamic mystical traditions (Sufism). As a result, Islam and Christianity have become Africanized on the continent, significantly changing the practice of the two traditions and leading to a distinct African expression of them. Thus in Nigeria we have different gods that performs different functions. They are called different names in different tribes and cultures based on the type of function they perform. We have the Sango in Yoruba land, the Ubini Ukapbi in Igbo land Fiji Oku in Delta area.

Unlike other world faiths, African traditional religions have no predominant doctrinal teachings. Rather, they have certain vital elements that function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination. African cosmology (explanation of the nature of the universe) tends to assert that there is a Supreme God who is helped by a number of lesser deities. Spirits are the connection between the living and the invisible worlds. Anyone can communicate with the spirits, but priests, priestesses, prophets, and diviners have more direct access to invisible arenas of the world.

Impact of Climate on African Traditional Religion

Basically climate impacts on African traditional religion in two distinct ways namely, direct and indirect. Direct impact of climate on African traditional religion in the area of traditional medicine has totally changed the way people view traditional medicine in Africa. Traditional medicine is no more valued by the African man as he attach more importance to western medicine both in administration, treatment and healing. Indirectly, climate change has affected virtually everything that is of spiritual importance to the African man, Christian (2014).

Ugwu and Ugwueye in Christian (2014) have observed that “the African world is suffused with religion. In other words, an African sees his world and interprets it in a religious perspective”. Africans carry their religion into their daily routine

activities such as – farming, rearing of livestock, hunting, during illness and health, what they eat and drink etc., and whatever happens to them at any time, and anywhere, is given a religious interpretation. Decrease in plant yields, high rate of death, sickness, disease, drought, flood, windstorm and even crime are all believed to have been occasioned by climate change. The impact of climate change on African traditional religion is discussed under the following subheadings.

Impact on Agriculture

Climate change no doubt has impacted much in agricultural productivity. Low yields of farm inputs occasioned by erratic, little or no rain or drought is as a result of changes in climate and is very likely to contribute substantially to food insecurity in the future, by increasing food prices, and reducing food production. Due to scarcity of rain, outbreak of pests and diseases has become rampant thereby affecting food production. Food may become more expensive as climate change mitigation efforts increase energy prices. Water required for food production may become scarce due to increased crop water use and drought. Competition for land may increase as certain areas become climatically unsuitable for production. In addition, extreme weather conditions associated with climate change may cause sudden reductions in agricultural productivity, leading to rapid price increases. The situation can be likened to the case of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, in which Okonkwo waited endlessly for rainfall after cultivating and planting his crops, but could not get a drop. This led to the loss of entire crops he planted as they died under the devastating rays of the sun. From the above, we can see that climate change affects agriculture which invariably leads to poverty and hunger.

Again, despite technological advances, such as improved varieties of crops, genetically modified organisms and irrigation systems, weather is still a key factor in agricultural productivity, as well as soil properties and natural communities. The effect of climate on agriculture is related to variability in local climates rather than in global climate patterns. Thus in Nigeria, people no longer go into agriculture because of high risk of outbreak of pests, low yield as well as high cost of agricultural inputs which is occasioned by change in climate.

Furthermore, the practice of rain making to support farming during the dry season has been relegated to the background and termed fetish. People rely on nature for rain. In the process drought claims the crops cultivated in the farms

giving rooms for poor or no yield at all which invariably results to famine in the land. The agricultural sector which is the mainstay of some countries in Africa has not been spared in this ecological onslaught. In many parts of Africa, farmers and pastoralists suffer poor yields as a result of flood and droughts and climate change is likely to further reduce the length of growing season as well as force large regions of marginal agriculture out of production.

Impact on Traditional Medicine and Healing

The impact of climate is largely felt on traditional medicine and healing. Before now, the African man relies heavily on African traditional medicine for healing. The traditional medicines appears in the form of herbs and administered by herbalists. There are also herbalist who are native doctors, but not all herbalist are native doctors. The core herbalist uses herbs to treat and cure ailments in traditional ways which was considered most effective in the treatment of an illness than the present western medicine which has been found to contain some chemicals which is harmful to the body system. The native doctor also uses both herbs and divination to treat ailment, forecast the cause of an illness and proffers solution in the African style which may include incantations, sacrifice, administration of herbs and spiritual cleansing.

Today, people view African traditional religion and culture as fetish. They see it as backward and an evil practice. They take solace in western medicine which is well packaged and better preserved. Most of them do not even know that the western medicine are made with the local herbs used by the herbalist and native doctors. The only difference is the specification and packaging. Thus, climate change has affected how an African man values what nature have packaged for his wellbeing in the African milieu.

Impact on Traditional Festivals

As a result of the negative impacts on farming and crops yields, it is common to expect or experience some changes in some ceremonies meant to celebrate bountiful farm harvests and other natural events. Particularly, the first class festivals “whose timing, nature and intent are closely associated with the cycles of the natural universe, such as festivals that commemorate planetary movements and seasonal changes, planting, harvesting, hunting and fishing”. Festivals implies acts of worship offered periodically to the supernatural, often to thank him for his blessings and benevolent acts in nature. But as a result of

climate change and its attendant implications, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that these religious festivals and ceremonies were not or have not been affected in one way or the other.

Furthermore, there are other ways through which the traditional religion of the African might have been affected by climate change. For instance, the floods that swept through many communities especially in Nigeria might have destroyed some traditional religious elements like shrines, statues and so on. Also, some displaced persons from different communities who are African traditional religious practitioners and who might have received aids from persons and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) owned by other religions like Christianity, Islam etc. might have been converted into new faiths different from that of their fore-bearers. Thus, climate change has acted as a catalyst through which African traditional religion and culture has been dislodged and rendered impotent.

Impact on our Belief System

Climate change which is a new phenomenon on the African thinking has affected the way the African man operates and how he thinks. The emergence of drought, flooding, rainstorms, pests, diseases and other disasters which is currently a nightmare has affected the belief system of the African man. All these put together have undoubtedly impacted on the religious beliefs and practices of the people. Thus they view this changes as an act of punishment from the gods for negligent on the part of the people to obey the voice of the gods. "The gods are angry" might be on the lips of traditional religious priests as the people would be praying to the spirits of their benevolent ancestors for a remedy from this array of misfortunes and ecological disasters. This does not imply that they are completely ignorant of the ecological changes; but that even the changes in the climate which has brought these misfortunes, did not occur without a cause. This 'cause' whether viewed religiously or scientifically, is largely man-made. Hence, perhaps, for the African traditionalists, a propitiatory sacrifice to the spirit of ancestors for forgiveness and remedy is not in the wrong direction, Christian (2014). This is so, because it is firmly believed that "calamities such as epidemic, famine, drought, floods, serious illness etc. are often incurred as a result of man's disobedience to the gods".

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts and society. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the worldview of the African people. Climate change has greatly affected African traditional religion and cultural practices. It is believed that disasters such as drought, epidemics, flooding, avoidable deaths, poor crop yields, harsh weather and some unfortunate human conditions are the effects of climate change.

Therefore to manage this ugly phenomenon, The African traditional religious practitioners should be made to understand the dangers of climate change as well as their roles in mitigating these dangers. Deforestation, bush burning, should be discouraged among rural dwellers as these practices contribute to climate change. There should be a collective as well as community adjustment approach to the new realities of climate change. African traditional leaders should lead their respective affected communities to embrace and adjust to the changes in the global climate and resultant ecological realities.

We also noted that climate change has affected the African traditional religion in areas such as agriculture, belief system, medicine and healing as well as traditional festivals. Indeed, our discourse is not intended to spark a conflict of interest among religions or spring surprises as other religious systems and cultures like Christianity, Islam. It however, suggests that climate change is a global challenge with effects spread across board. Hence, awareness should be created to inform all and sundry that it is not a curse or punishment from any quarter but as a result of human activities on earth. Thus all hands should be on deck in the global eco-sustainability campaign in order to achieve a sustainable environment for all.

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