Ecological Ethics and Cultures in Niger Delta from the perspective of Christianity and African Traditional Religion

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Abstract

Ecological crisis is the embodiment of man's activities, disorderliness, greed for great exploration and exploitation, and corruption on earth. Land degradation, pollution, flood, oil spillage, gas flaring, and climate change, among others, are global problems today that require ecological ethics and cultural solutions. Globally, the modern ecological crises have become worrisome and their negative consequences on nature and man, are currently a threat to our survival and common existence in the global village. The paper , therefore investigates how Christian ethics and African Traditional Religious cultures could be of use in curtailing some ecological crises in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. The study used historical and phenomenological approaches to examine ecological ethics and cultures given the Christian faith and the African indigenous religion of the Niger Delta. The paper deployed harmony and taboo theories to examine the ecological ethics and cultures in line with Christianity and African Traditional Religion as practiced in Niger Delta. The paper revealed that the Ecological ethics and cultures of Niger Deltas have curtailed some of the ecological crisis that is hazardous to nature and humans, not undermining the current denigrators of ecological values in the area.

Keywords: **Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Ecology, Ethics, Culture, Niger Delta.**

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Introduction

Niger Delta is one of the geo-social structures of Nigeria. The region is mainly inhabited by the ethnic groups that make up Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta States. It is also worth noting that the present definition of the Niger Delta by the Federal Government of Nigeria, include areas that do not fit into the cartographic and ethnographic definition of the area

(Owete and Iheanacho 2009:6). "And for the Niger Delta in this account" according to Tasie (2012:27) is the " ordinary and truly geographical Niger Delta, not the extended economic or political Niger Delta of the ester while oil Mineral Producing Arears Development Commission (OMPADEC), nor of the current Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) concept and definition. However, the interest of this paper is the ecology, ethics, and religious cultures of the Niger Delta.

The world over is faced with ecological crises. The destruction of the environment threatens our human health and common survival on earth. In order to abate this ecological problem, Pope did make the connection between abuse of the ecology and sin. "He said that this abuse is not only immoral but also grave lack of respect for human person created in the image of God and who depends on God-given natural environment for physical life and survival "(as cited in Anioke 2011:189). The Pope's "message for the world of peace" on the environment has continued to be a reference point in the ecological discourse across the globe, hence it becomes imperative in this paper's topic: Ecological Ethics and Cultures in Niger Delta from the perspective of Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The Niger Delta people have suffered ecological crises occasioned by the multinational companies in Nigeria among other factors. The air, soil, and water in Niger Delta are heavily degraded and polluted by industry / other human activities. This degradation is blamed on the carelessness of the oil managers as reported:

> The carelessness of the oil industry destroyed the incredibly well-endowed ecosystem of the nation. One notices this in a 1983 report issued by the NNPC, we witness the poisoning of the waters of this country and the destruction of vegetation and agricultural land by oil splits that occur during petroleum operations. But since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria, more than twenty-five years ago, there has been no concerned and effective effort on the part of the government, let alone the oil operators to control the environmental problems associated with the industry(Anioke 2011:185).

The above assertion exposes the level of ecological negligence of the Niger Delta environment by the Nigerian Government and oil industries. Hence, this paper is aimed at examining how Niger Delta people were able to withstand the ecological problems from the viewpoint of Christian ethics and indigenous cultures.

Concept of Ecology/Ecological, Ethics, and Culture

The term Ecology is derived from two Greek words namely "Oikos" and "Logos", which simply means house or a place to live in and "study of" (Anyacho 2004:145, Onyema 2011: 193). It is by extension, the inhabited earth, and its studies. On the other hand, it is the scientific study of the relationship of living organisms with each other and their surroundings (Onyema 2011:193). Whereas, the term ecological is defined as the art of protecting the environment. Ecological ethics and cultures could be described as those rules and regulations that are acceptable about organisms and their environment, whose defaulters are punished by man or gods.

The term ethics is often linked to morality; as asserted in Owete and Iheanacho (2009:153) Ethics and morality are concomitant in the traditional African legal system. From the Greek word ethos, is translated to mean manners in English. The term ethics refers to conduct or behavior. It is a system of moral principles governing the appropriate conduct of an individual or group. It is the study of moral conduct associated with conscious human beings, who alone can make moral decisions and judgments (Anyacho 2004:95). Ethics is morally and religiously built. It is based on reason and reflected upon the foundations and principles of behavior concerned with that which holds human society together (Owete and Iheanacho 2009:153). From the point of view of Christianity, ethics is the science that treats the source, principle, and practice of right and wrong in the light of the Holy Scripture (Anyacho 2004: 97).

Culture refers to the way of life, of a particular people. Culture is the arts, customs, lifestyles background, and habits that characterized a particular society or nation. It is the beliefs, values, behavior, and material objects that constitute a people's way of life. UNESCO defined culture to mean:

> the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group so, Culture composes of spiritualism, materialism, intellectualism, and emotionalism in a given ecosystem (Owete and Iheanacho 2013:11).

As asserted above, the UNESCO definition closes the gap between the diverse strands of culture, and the narrow, earlier conceptions, of an all-embracing conception of culture. It embodies all the values cherished by the people. The moral, religious, and spiritual values of a people are part and parcel of their culture (as cited in Ehianu 2011:32). In Niger, Delta culture is inextricably tied to the socio-economic, religious, and political life of the people.

The Concept of Christianity and Africa Traditional Religion

Christianity

Christianity is a religion that is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ and the belief that he was the son of God (Collins Dictionary www.collinsdictionary.com). The term Christian is used to describe the followers of Jesus Christ, that is, those set of people who exemplify the life and teaching of Jesus. Followers of Jesus were first referred to as Christians at Antioch (Ogbeni 2022:377).

Africa Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion has been conceptualized from different points of view which are not our interest here; rather we will describe what it means as a religion. Scholars have described African Traditional Religion as:

> the indigenous religion of the Africans is passed down orally from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is a whose historical founder is not known and it has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination of Africans, young and old (as cited in Olumati 2022:137).

In Niger Delta, there are diverse religious beliefs and practices uniquely affirmed by their forebears which are fascinating to the current generation of youths and elders in the region.

Taboos and Law of Harmony Theories

This paper anchors its theoretical framework on taboos and the law of harmony. Taboo is a universal phenomenon. Taboo is derived from the Polynesian word 'tapu' which means forbidden (Ogunbisi 2022:65, Adeyemo 2006:159). It is a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the well-being of their worshipping communities. Taboos are used in maintaining harmony between spirits (invisible world) and human beings and the rest of creation (visible world) (as cited in Ogunbisi 2022:66).

On the other hand, the law of harmony aims at placing value on what we have and trying as much as possible to create a balance in all endeavors (as cited in Lawrence-hart 2022:128). It advocates eliminating barriers that are capable of distorting the environment. Taboos and the law of harmony are religious- ethical and cultural values that enforce balance in the relationship between man and the rest of the creations in the universe.

Taboos and the law of harmony are inter-relatively a sort of social prohibition and value placement in a given ecosystem regarding certain times, places, actions, events, and people to regulate conduct in particular circumstances, in this case, handling of the ecological crisis in Niger Delta.

Christian Ethics and Indigenous Religious Cultures of the Niger Delta

The need to examine the ecological ethics and cultures in the Niger Delta from the view of two religious traditions is based on the common ground of moral responsibility. According to Pope John Paul II since the many challenges facing the world today are interdependent there is a need for carefully coordinated solutions based on a morally coherent worldview. For Christians, such a worldview is grounded in religious conviction drawn from revelation (Onyema 2011:196). Whereas Christian ethics reflects on the biblical revelation, the African indigenous religion however reflects on the traditional religious moral repositories that are essential in man's religiosity. "These are morality believed to have been handed over to them by their forebears. All these are the moral ethos that still guides their human conducts"(Wotogbe-Weneka 2011:23). Writing on the moral ethos of other religious faiths, Pope John Paul II is of the view that faith in God would not contradict the good reason of those who do not share the same beliefs but they would find common ground for reflection and action (as cited in Onyema 2011:196). Of course, religious culture is common ground, as noted, the first manifestation of culture in environmental management is the preservation of ecosystems due to religious considerations. The Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria like the Niger Delta has a sanctuary or heritage site, which the exploitation of biotic resources is considered taboo (Jaja 2017:216). Hence religious-cultures of the Niger Delta people have over the years contributed to curtailing the ecological crisis in the region as discussed below:

Ethical- cultural Justice

Christians and Christian leaders in Niger Delta have demonstrated their ethical-cultural beliefs for the social justice of their environment. For instance, Blessing C.Enyindah, the Archbishop, Province of Niger Delta, and the Bishop, Diocese of Ikwerre like other Christian leaders in the area, have spoken on environmental justice of the Niger Delta region. The Archbishop condemned the environmental injustice as a result of "illegal siphoning and refining of crude oil popularly known as bunkery or kpofire,..resulting to environmental pollution and degradation" (Enyindah 2022:32). Furthermore, Archbishop Enyindah observed that illegal refining and oil spillage are ethically and culturally wrong, its effect comes with unspeakable and unbearable health challenges in the region.

On the other hand, Ikwerre ethics and cultures like other ethnicities of the Niger Delta, are built on justice and fair play in all human, social, and economic relationships. Justice is the bedrock of social order and peace, an essential part of ecological harmony in the Niger Delta, thus, it is believed that the gods and humans play a prominent role in the dispensation of justice. The struggle of Niger Delta people like Isaac Adaka Boro, Kenule Saro Wiwa, Obi Wali, and Melford Goodhead Dokubo, was their strong belief in the emancipation of environmental injustice like poverty, absence of infrastructures and deprivations of the local Communities (Aibalgbee 2011:49). Niger Delta people have suffered ecological/environmental injustice in the hands of multinational companies and Nigeria led Federal Government. In order to curb this environmental injustice, the Niger Delta warriors invoke ethical–cultural justice, and Isaac Boro like other Niger Delta justice seekers a:

> Major goal was to remedy the Injustice that minority ethnicities in the Niger Delta suffered in a Nigerian state dominated by large ethnic groups. He believed that the people of the area deserved a fairer share of the proceeds of the oil wealth (Aibalgbee 2011:52).

Groups like Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) stated their goals as: "to localize control of Nigeria's oil, to secure reparations from the Nigerian State for pollution caused by the oil industry ... (Mukoro and Egbadju 2010:72). The ethical-cultural struggle of the Niger Delta people have resulted in remediation of Ogoniland of the region, derivative compensation of the oil-producing states in Nigeria, amnesty, among another achievement in curbing the ecological issues in the area.

Ethical -cultural management of Land degradation

The Christian Bible clearly stated thus "Do not pollute the land where you are"(Numbers 35:33a), amplifying the sacredness of the land before Almighty God, and Christians in the Niger Delta are aware of the sacredness of their land. The consciousness that the land belongs to God and all that is in it, is the essence of ethics and cultures of Niger Delta people (Psalm 24:1). In Niger Delta, Ikwerre in particular:

> the people recognize the fact that the Supreme Being is the final guardian of moral laws, violation of which is greatly punished and adherence to which is greatly rewarded. Thus, Ikwerre religion is ethical-centric as ethical issues surpass all other issues (Olumati 2022:137).

In Niger Delta, there are human's activity that pollutes the land and violates public morality and taboos such as incest, stealing, homicide, infidelity, destruction of farm crops, and unmasking a masquerade are all abominable offences directly against the Earth goddess (Owete and Iheanacho 2009:86). Affirmatively from a Christian perspective, Archbishop Enyindah (2019:52) pointed out abominable atrocities perpetrated by cult gangs, among other groups in Niger Delta, particularly Rivers State such as bloodshed, rape, hostility, violence, looting, theft, massacre, assault, abduction among other inhumane activities that pollute the land, with a negative impact on the economic, social and religious life of the people. The cult gangs' activities were ethical and culturally wrong hence, the church condemned it, and in 2015 Governor Nyesom Wike in a bid to curb the ecological crisis occasioned by occultism and cult gangs activities, granted amnesty to those that surrendered their weapons (Enyindah 2019:52).

In the same vein, Bible revealed that bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it (Num 35:33b). It was ethically wrong to commit murder as it was biblically stated: "you shall not murder "(Exodus 20:13). Like most religions of the world, the Bible defined penalty for a murderer (s) to be put to death. As "All human beings are created in God's image and no human has the right to take someone else's life. God, the resource of life, and is only Him that has the right over life, to preserve or not to take it (Adeyemo 2006:112). Hence, Life is sacred; and the shedding of innocent blood pollutes the Land (Num 35:33-34). If not atoned for, it hinders prayers or ecology (the interaction between man and God). The Bible also described how Abel's blood cried to the Lord from the land, "listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground "(Gen.4:10). Abel's blood was the first pollution of human blood to mother earth, and in reaction, God punished Cain to curtail further degradation of land. In Niger Delta indigenous cultures, shedding human blood is a taboo and it pollutes the land. As enshrined in Niger Delta religious and cultural beliefs, blood shading pollutes the Land and required elaborate and expensive propitiating sacrifices to clean the land and appease the Earth goddess (Owete and Iheanacho 2009:85). Hence, the knowledge of ethical-culturally values of the Niger Delta people have played a vital role in curbing the ecological crisis in the region.

Christian ethics and Niger Delta cultures forbid incest, and murder; stealing as such acts are punishable by death because they are ethically and culturally wrong and inimical to the ecological principles of the people. In Niger Delta, Ikwerre in particular, Ali (the Mother Earth) is the people's principal divinity and guardian of people's social morality; as such, murder, especially of a fellow kinsman, incest, suicide, sex in the bush or on the bare floor, stealing, poisoning, pregnancy of a widow during in her mourning period,

among others, are taboo and cultural abominable (Wotogbe-Weneka 2011:27). As Wotogbe-Weneka (2011:27) revealed, if any of these abominable things happens it is believed in Ikwerre culture that bond of the relationship linking humans and divinities has been broken. To forestall ecological breakdown between the divinities and mankind, and remediate the land of the abominable things, myriads of ritual sacrifices which are believed to be capable of correcting the wrong situation have evolved over the years. Hence, adherence to the ethical-cultural values of the Niger Delta people has helped to prevent, control, and remedy the ecological crisis in the region.

Ethical- Cultural Management of Climate Change

Climate change and global warming are current ecological crises in the Niger Delta and the world over. As moral duty "every Christian is to humbly acknowledge the harm humans are doing to the earth through pollution, the scandalous destruction of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, the spectra of climate change" (as cited in Ahuakagha et. al 2021:212). The refusal of humans from not harm the ecosystem, especially, the climate is itself immoral and sinful. No wonder, the Pope in 2016 called on humanity to "ask forgiveness for sins committed against the environment and human selfish system motivated by profit at any price" (as cited in Ahuakagha et. al 2021:212). Christian clergy and laity in Niger Delta as an ethical-cultural responsibility have spoken against the activities of multinational oil companies and local oil lords, whose activities had led to oil spillage, and gas flaring among other activities that are inimical to the natural environment. Archbishop Enyindah spoke against oil activities that are hazardous in the Niger Delta region and their negative impact on the environment. He acknowledged the effort of Governor Nyesom Wike and Local chairmen in fighting illegal oil operations in the Rivers State, but regrettably, he stated: " The Army, the Police, the Civil Defense and Community Vigilante groups and some Community leaders are aiding and abating the business and making their money daily from it"(Enyindah 2022:32). Hence, it is a clear indication that Christians have contributed in curbing the climate change in Niger Delta. These activities as stated above are inimical to mother earth (that is the Ali or Eli in Ikwerre terminology), because:

> Eli, the mother Earth is considered sacred and there are several acts of humans and events of the world which are equally considered as abominations before it, they are polluting, and sacrilegious to Eli (Wotogbe-Weneka 2011:28).

Hence, these human activities and events that neglect the ethical and cultural values of the Niger Delta people and mother earth, are the major causes of climate change in the region.

Yet, it will not be a gain saying, that ethical-cultural values have helped in the enforcement of environmental justice in the Niger Delta. Despite:

> the illusory oil boom brought about by oil explorations and exploitations in the land has now driven people's quest for sudden riches to the zenith... These traditional religious moral values have been thrown overboard (Wotogbe-Weneka 2011:28).

However, these traditional religious moral values were again exemplified by Rivers State Governor Nyesom Wike and all that condemn environmental degradation as an injustice against humanity. Ignatius' report in January 2022 (business day www.google.com), narrated how the Rivers State Governor Nyesom Wike, a Christian also, fought against the illegal oil refinery, which was one of the major causes of climate change in the region. This supports the fact that illegal oil refineries which were the cause of soot, were ethically - culturally wrong in the Niger Delta hence it was condemned by the majority of the people living in the region.

Deforestation and Desecration

In traditional Africa, Niger Delta in particular, some forests, rivers, and streams are treated as sacred by the people who live there. The surrounding environments are protected by the belief that the river god lives in the forest (Jaja 2017:216). Hence, logging, and cultivation are forbidden as well as oil spillages and water pollution in the Niger Delta. However, ethical and cultural aberration of the sacred forest and other natures is a major cause of deforestation. Deforestation, and erosion which is its resultant effect, were ethically - culturally managed in Niger Delta by their forebears. Ikwerre ethnic was an agrarian society in nature like other ethnicities in Niger Delta, ethics and cultural values were kept, as such:

> they maintain a bush-fallowing system to allow the soil to naturally regain its fertility, some Ikwerre communities allow land to fallow for as long as five to ten years depending on the availability of land and the population of the people (Lawrence -Hart 2022:130).

Of course, in the Niger Delta, there are defined ethics and cultures that regulate forest reservation and deforestation, and the defaulter of the rules as concerns the land for farming, among other human activities, are punished, hence ethics and cultures have helped in curtailing the ecological crisis in the region.

Furthermore, in Niger Delta, it is ethically wrong to kill or destroy sacred animals, trees, herbs, roots, and objects of worship. Hence, killing or destroying (accidentally/ intentionally) such animals or trees...mentioned above, involves quite a lot of ritual cleaning sacrifices which are often very expensive, hence most people dread anything that will ever entangle them with breaking Eli (earth-divinity) taboos (Owete and Iheanacho 2009:85-86). The ecological ethics and cultures of the Niger Delta people are used to curtail the deforestation of the forest in the region.

Christian ethics supports the preservations of nature as such:

> The dietary laws as recorded in Leviticus (11:1-23), obedience to God as concerns to animals living on land, in the sea and streams, and flying in the air are categorized as either clean or unclean. Clean animals can be eaten, and unclean animals must not be eaten. The Jewish considered the clean animals to be sacred and were used for sacrifices (Adeyemo 2006:146).

The biblical assertion on clean and unclean animals, unlike most African religious cultures, the unclean animals are considered sacred (totem), and in some localities are not to be eaten. However, dietary laws were intended to ecological symbolize ethical principles such as restraint, withdrawal, a reverence for life, and moderation in action thought, and feeling (Adeyemo 2006:119). Ecology necessitates the ethical handling of animals in human society. Exodus (22:19b) forbids cooking a kid in its mother's milk. This Bible assertion could be interpreted as saying that one must not kill both the mother goat who bore the kid and the kid at the same time. To do so would amount to ending the cycle of growth that God instituted to allow his creation to continue (Adeyemo et .al 2006:118). Of course, the break of this command has created much threat to nature and the same time causes irreparable damage to God's creation. Hence Christian and cultural understanding of the forbearance of the sacred forest, animals, and streams among others was itself a way of curbing the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta ecosystem.

Recommendations

1. Niger Delta people should reawaken their ethical-cultural values as enshrined in the Christianity and indigenous ethos, which forbids environmental injustice.
2. Niger Delta people should unite and peacefully condemn and confront the unprofessional activities of oil operators and illegal oil refineries in the region.
3. Christian /Indigenous leaders should ethically and culturally condemn Ecological crises like rape, kidnapping, looting, and killing, among others, as unethical and inimical to environmental justice of the Niger Delta region.

4. Ethically the Niger Delta States should unite and build modular refineries, and subsequently, train the illegal oil operators in the region to curb the environmental degradations arising from illegal oil activities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we described ecological ethics and cultures as those rules and regulations that are acceptable among organisms, man inclusive, and their environment, whose defaulters are punished by man or gods. We established the causes of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta such as land degradation, erosion, deforestation, and oil spillage among others. Apart from the above ecological issues, the denigration of cultural values and Christian ethics in the Niger Delta has also contributed to the ecological injustice in the region. The denigrators of the Niger Delta ecosystem are the Nigeria-led Federal Government, multinational companies, the local oil operators, and industrial managers among others, in the region. Despite their negative impact ecological crisis in the region, the ethical-cultural values of the Niger Delta people have helped in curbing environmental issues. However, we observed that the antics and strategies of the militant groups and illegal oil lords in the region are ethical-culturally wrong, yet what led to their agitation was a result of environmental injustice meted out against the Niger Delta people. Therefore no doubt, that peaceful agitation and remediation of the Niger Delta are necessary, and the Niger Delta people must enforce Christian ethics and indigenous cultures in curtailing the ecological crisis in the region.

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