

# THE ENVIRONMENT, INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND THE PERCEPTION OF HISTORY IN THE PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts to study the relationship between the environment, indigenous religion and the perception of history in pre-colonial Africa. The environment's vitality in forming human culture, settlement patterns, economic activities, and political institutions was crucial to the demographic profit of pre-colonial Africa. Therefore, to reconstruct the relationship between the environment and indigenous religion of pre-colonial Africa from a historical perspective, it is necessary to emphasize some of the fundamental heritages of African peoples, viz historical, cultural, and religious heritages. These centred on African beliefs, practices, ceremonies and festivals, as well as African religious objects, places of worship, values, morals, religious officials/leaders, etc. The methodology adopted in writing this paper is entirely historical. This paper discovered that the relationship between indigenous religion and the environment is inseparable and dialectical.*

**Key Words: Environment, Indigenous Religion, Human culture.**

## **Introduction**

The African environment can be seen as African terrain, i.e., lands, deserts, hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, and coasts, which have endured several millennia of modifications. Therefore, an attempt to study the history of pre-colonial Africa must pay attention to the importance and influence of the environment in forming the continent's economic, cultural, and socio-political institutions. This is contrary to some views.

<sup>1</sup>This negates the environment's vitality to the formation of human culture, settlement patterns, economic activities and political institutions. The environment was crucial in the demographic profit of pre-colonial Africa. Therefore, in an attempt to relate and reconstruct the relationship between the environment and indigenous religion of pre-colonial Africa from a historical perspective, it is perhaps necessary for some emphasis to be laid on three fundamental heritages of African peoples, viz; historical, cultural and religious heritages that holistically include; African beliefs, practices, ceremonies and festivals as well as African religious objects, places of worships, values, morals, religious official/leaders etc. This paper, therefore, discusses the nexus among environment, indigenous religion and history in the African precolonial period.

### **African Environment**

Africa is an essential entity in the world today. It is sometimes nicknamed the "Mother Continent" because it is the oldest inhabited continent on Earth. Human ancestors have lived in Africa for more than five million years.<sup>2</sup> It is the second largest continent in the world after Asia. It is divided into half and almost equally divided by the equator. Africa has eight major physical regions: the Sahara, the Sahel, the Ethiopian Highlands, the Savanna, the Swahili Coast, the Rain Forest, the African Great Lakes, and Southern Africa. Some of these regions cover large bands of the continent, such as Ethiopia Highlands and the Great Lakes. Each of these regions has unique animal-plant communities. To crown it all, Africa has five main ecosystems: coastal environments,

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<sup>1</sup>R.G. Armstrong, "State Formation in Negro-Africa". PhD Thesis, Chicago, 1952, Pp. 142-332, Cited in Idris S.J *The Environment, and Early People of the Middle Niger Basin Area, in Aspect of Niger State History*, Essays in Honour of Prof. Ibrahim Adamu Kolo.

<sup>2</sup>S. Diarra, "Historical Geography; Physical Aspects" in *General History of Africa; Vol. 1. Methodology and African Pre-history*, (J.Ki. -Zerbo-ed), Heineman, California, 1981, pp.318-324

deserts and semi-desert, mountain environments, savanna grasslands, and forests. Each ecosystem has its typical environment and climate, and people must adapt to its conditions.<sup>3</sup>

## **Man and Environment**

An environment is the natural surroundings or the complex of external factors that act upon an organism, an ecological community, or plant and animal life in general.<sup>4</sup> From another perspective, the environment could be regarded as the 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 organisms are part of the environmental factors. Faniran explains organism or community as a central element in the definition of environment and goes further to say that it exists amid various living and non-living objects, happenings and influences (both natural and artificial), the aggregate of which forms its environment and on which it depends for life and survival of life.<sup>5</sup>

Since the environment does not exist in isolation, the need for interaction between it and the community or organism it interacts with becomes imperative. Indeed, history is replete with wars and conquests by migrants fleeing from a desiccating environment to areas better endowed with food resources. For example, the Sahelian drought brought about an influx of people from the north to the south for greener fixtures. Abdullahi Smith hypothesized on the environmental desiccation and the development of *Hausaland* that:

There are some reasons to believe that the period between the desiccation and the rise of *Birane* saw the development throughout *Haussaland* of some agricultural communities known as *kauyuka* or

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<sup>3</sup>S. Diarra, "Historical Geography; Physical Aspects"...pp.318-324.

<sup>4</sup>New Penguin English Dictionary

<sup>5</sup> Faniran, A. "Land, Land Degradation and Global Environmental Change: What Every Citizen Must Know", in Osuntokun A. (eds). *Dimension of Environmental Problem in Nigeria*, Ibadan, Davidson Press, 1997.

*unguwanni*. There were nucleated hamlets organized for crops and production and consisting of farming groups whose farmland (*gona/gandu*).....to *kauyuka*.....to *sarki*, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Another analogy can be seen in the dialectical relationship between man and environment in the peoples of the Middle Niger Basin area of Nigeria. The area is generally of low relief, with an abundance of drainages formed by the influence of the River Niger and its tributaries and distributaries. The relevance of topographical factors largely influenced the history of the earlier settlers of this area. The waves of migrations and the peoples' cultural lives relate to the environment's nature. The environment determines the type of crops to be planted, the period for planting and harvesting crops, and the festivals associated with agriculture. This formed the basis for the genesis of the community and cultural formations of the area's people. Prominent cults of the early settlers, such as *ketsa* and *Ndaduma*, were linked with the River Niger and involved sacrifices for success in fishing and safety from the danger of the River.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, examples can be drawn from the economic contributions of an environment to people, such as the iron stone of *Dala Hill*, to the development of *Birnin Kano*. Also, the traditional economy of the Niger Delta area, which centred on fishing and salt making, was largely influenced by the vast low-lying region of the area.<sup>8</sup> Environment, therefore, has played a significant role in human history.

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<sup>6</sup>A Little New Light: Selected Historical Writings of Professor Abdullahi Smith, vol.1, in *Abdullahi Smith Center for Historical Research*, George Amale Kwanashie, (eds), 1987, P.68

<sup>7</sup>Nadel, S. P. 'The Kede – A Riverine State in Northern Nigeria', in *African Political Systems*, M. Fortes, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (ed.) O. A. P. , 1969, Pp. 165-7

<sup>8</sup>Reuben K. Udo, "Environments and People of Nigeria: A Geographical Introduction to the History of Nigeria", in Obaro Ikime, (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, p.1

## **African Indigenous Religion**

Africans have a vibrant heritage of what the past generations of African people thought, did, experienced, and passed on to their children, including historical, cultural, and religious heritages. Therefore, religion is part and parcel of the African heritage that goes back hundreds and thousands of years. African religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers, i.e. men and women of former generations. They formed religious ideas, formulated religious beliefs, observed religious ceremonies and rituals, and told proverbs and myths which contained religious meanings. They evolved laws and customs that safeguarded the lives of individuals and the community.<sup>9</sup> Abdullahi Smith explains African Religion as follows:

There was a first belief in a high god, *Ubangiji*, who did not intervene directly in men's affairs. This earlier belief in a high god (*Ubangiji*) is associated with supernatural forces, the *Iskoki*. *Iskoki* were natural spirits inhabiting hills, rivers, and forests, and rituals connected with their worship consisted of sacrifices to establish communion with them for oracular consultations.<sup>10</sup>

We must understand African heritage by understanding its religious part. Religion is found in all African peoples. Their different cultures have been influenced strongly by religion, as has each person. The earliest record of African history shows that ancient Egypt's Africans were very religious. Today, Africans who live according to their traditional ways are also said to be very religious.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, religion has been a standard way of viewing the world and experiencing life for Africans through the ages. For that reason, it is found wherever people are. It is integrated so much into different areas of life that, in fact, most African languages do not have a word for

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<sup>9</sup>J.S. Mbiti (1975), Introduction to African Religion,...P.4

<sup>10</sup>A Little New Light: Selected Historical Writings.....p.68

<sup>11</sup> J. Vansina, Oral Tradition, Great Britain: Penguin Book Ltd, 1965. P.19.

religion as such. They only have a word for religious ideas, practices, objects, or places.<sup>12</sup>

### **Relationships between the Environment and African Indigenous Religion**

The concept of causation in history is very relevant for easy comprehension of the relationships between the environment and African indigenous religion from the historical perspective. Causation is vital in providing a coherent and intelligible explanation of the past. History has documented that some of the world's religions, like Christianity and Islam, have founders who started them. However, this is not the case with African religion. It evolved slowly over many centuries as people responded to the situation of their lives and reflected upon their experiences. Many factors must have played a significant part in its development. These include the geographical environment (mountains, rivers, deserts and forests), the change of the seasons, the power of nature (such as earthquakes, thunderstorms and volcanoes), calamities, epidemics, diseases, birth and death, and significant historical events like wars, locust invasions, ferries, immigration and so on. To these, man's reflection on the universe, questions about its origin, the Earth and the sky, and many other problems must be added. This triggered the search for answers to these questions to make human life safer and better.

Therefore, the relationship between the environment and African indigenous religion in historical perspectives was invariably interconnected and inseparable. This was so because religion is a belief in supernatural power attached either to objects or places such as the sun, moon, rivers, trees, hills, mountains, rocks and so on, which are the environment in nature. For example, Greenberg mentioned the religious significance of the black hills of *Hausaland* and, by extension, the hills of *Turunku* and *kufaina* of Zazzau emirate, where he pointed out that:

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<sup>12</sup>J.S. Mbiti (1975), Introduction to African Religion,...P.13

They are the dwelling places of the great *iskoki* and influential centres of cultural attraction over vast areas. In this connection, the whole of *Dala Hill* undoubtedly makes Kano the centre of power and attraction. The hills of *Kufaina and Turunku* may have had this significance and, thus, provided cultural conditions for urban concentration.<sup>13</sup>

African indigenous religion has no scriptures or holy books like Islam and Christianity. It is only preserved in the heart and experience of people, which is oral tradition. Oral tradition refers to stories about the past that are passed on by word of mouth in the form of legend, myth, folktales, praises of kings, tales of migrations, arts and symbols, proverbs, riddles, wise sayings, etc., handed down from one generation to another.<sup>14</sup> Some are records of historical events and stimulate the listener's imagination, and some are commentary on people's lives in a given period. Many instances can be drawn to show the relationships between the environment and the indigenous religion. For instance, Mount Kilimanjaro in Kenya is believed to be one of the resting places for god when he visited the Earth. Prayers and sacrifices are made facing this snow-covered mountain. In Egypt, there were offerings of virgin girls to the River Nile annually, believing that without such sacrifices, there would be no sufficient water for irrigation farming. Waterfalls often marked sacred spots in River Zambezi, and religious ceremonies are conducted nearby.

Another important historical feature and legacy of African indigenous religion are their places of worship, such as shrines, sacred places and religious objects. Moreover, history records legends of Africans, which reflected a wide-ranging series of kings, queens, chiefs and other community leaders from across the African continent, including Mali, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia, Eritria and South Africa. For example, we have *the Shango* of the Oyo Empire, Shaka Zulu, King Jaja of Opobo, Askia the Great of *Timbuktu*, etc. Furthermore, rituals,

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<sup>13</sup>A Little New Light: Selected Historical Writings.....p.69

<sup>14</sup>J.S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion,...Pp.13-20



ceremonies, and festivals were essential features of the African indigenous religion, and they are still relevant to the people of Africa. Africans celebrate on the occasions of the birth of a child, naming, circumcision, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain and other initiation ceremonies.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between environment and indigenous religion in forming human culture, settlement patterns, economic activities, and socio-political and religious institutions must be considered. Pre-colonial African religion attached greater importance to places of worship such as shrines, sacred places, and religious objects. Some of these places of worship contributed to the formation of states in Africa. This paper discovered that the relationship between indigenous religion and the environment is inseparable.