

Chapter Sixteen

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS TABOOS AND THE ECO-SYSTEM: A TIV PERSPECTIVE

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Executive Summary

The study investigated African Traditional Religious Taboos and the Eco-system with reference to the Tiv people of North Central Nigeria. Although the value of Tiv traditional religious practices in natural resources management were previously regarded as inferior especially with the advent of Christianity, they are now receiving recognition as an important complement to existing conservation strategies. The eco-system has faced the challenge of degradation recently. The effects of globalization and human activities such as urbanization, mechanized agriculture, deforestation and infrastructural development have caused a lot of harm to the environment. The aim of this paper was to further re-emphasize the key role taboos play in the conservation of the eco-system. This paper argues that, the role of traditional beliefs in the protection of the environment and the eco-system has been great. This fact is reflected in a variety of religious practices including taboos. Among the Tiv, there is hardly any community without a sacred grove, forest, sacred pond, stream, or forbidden forest where some parts of the environment are

delineated for the worship of the gods and to offer sacrifices. It is valuable, therefore, to declare that some of the remaining natural forest areas and water sources in Tivland are being conserved consciously or unconsciously through the role of religious customs and beliefs. This paper calls for improvement by educating the people on the importance of preserving these natural resources and traditional knowledge-based systems of conservation.

Keywords: Religious Taboos, Tiv Religion, African Traditional Religion, Eco-system

Introduction

In African traditional society, approximately all tribes and ethnic groups acknowledged the reality of the sacred. Atungwa (2021) confirms that this understanding of the sacred is marked by identification of sacred places where men commune with their gods, offer sacrifices and receive favours. The abode of the gods carries restrictions and not every member of the community is allowed entry or contact. Orbunde (2021) affirms that in African traditional religion, the abode of the gods and goddesses are located in rocks, streams, ponds, trees, forests, grooves, hills or anywhere within the community that has the required aura.

The acknowledgement of the presence of the gods which warrants or informs the foundation for traditional religious ethics where taboos were instituted and observed. Ogunjinmi *et al.* (2009), therefore, points out that in African societies there abound various socio-cultural factors, religious beliefs, taboos and norms regulating the consumption and utilization of natural resources. Thus, the idea of taboos or traditional religious laws of preservation of the eco-system and natural resources as abodes for the gods played a huge role in the preservation of the environment overtime. According to Amonum *et al* (2017), the

records about the role of traditional beliefs in the conservation of natural resources abound and date back to creation. Traditional conservation ethics are capable of protecting natural resources as long as the local communities ultimately have a stake in it. Atungwa (2021) was of the opinion that such places are believed to have harnessed supernatural powers.

In Tiv traditional society, several taboos over time have provided for the preservation of the eco-system to the extent that members of the public who broke the laws were severely punished. Iorgyer (2021) and Atungwa (2021) corroborate that prior to the advent of Christianity in Tivland certain forests, hills, and ponds were strictly preserved as abodes for the gods. Orbunde (2021) adds that the gods vent their anger on whoever defiled such places; hence, the taboos and beliefs have backing in the rules and institutions of the communities that made and obey them. The present study investigates Tiv traditional religious taboos and the preservation of the eco-system.

Eco-System

Eco means natural habitat. The system for the existence of natural habitat of biological community (of organisms) interacting with their physical environments is the ecosystem. It includes all the living things (plants, animals, and organisms) in a given area that interact with each other, as well as with the non-living entities (weather, earth, sun, soil, climate, atmosphere, land) around them. The living and non-living (i.e. physical) components are linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows. All the plants and animals (both macro and micro) on the Earth rely on the respective ecosystems for food and habitation.

Taboo

A taboo is a prohibition or a prohibited action. In the Tiv traditional religion, breaking of a taboo is followed by supernatural penalty or punishment meted out by human beings (Kanu 2013, 2015). Taboos may be sanctioned by *akombo* through intermediaries. Some taboos are sanctioned by elders and ancestors.

The Tiv and their Religion

Tiv traditional religion is the religion of the Tiv people of North Central Nigeria. The Tiv have a complexity of traditional religious practices. These practices are anchored on three fundamental components expressed in accordance with their beliefs. The components include the belief in the existence of *Aondo* (Supreme Being), *Akombo* (divinities or deities), and the belief in *Tsav* (witchcraft or wizardry). Tiv traditional religious thought prior to the advent of Christianity was hinged on these three basic components all of which work together for stability, harmony and communal well being of the people.

The Belief in *Aondo* (Supreme Being)

Belief in *Aondo* is the greatest component of Tiv religion. Downes (1933) writes that:

Aondo is the Tiv name for the “above”, also, the firmament that has been described as the vault of heaven with its clouds and stars, its thunder and lightning, winds and rain, cold and heat and this was all that in the same terms as all phenomena as a non personal power (p.17).

This description above shows that the Tiv acknowledges, locates or associates their Supreme Being (*Aondo*) probably with the sky Being (God). Thus, all phenomena in the firmament including the movement of celestial bodies are seen as His (*Aondo*)

handiwork. He is clearly the architect of their being. Downes (1933) further states that:

This power from above was connected in the minds of the people with other powerful forces that affect the life of man, such as fire, iron and smilthy and so was superior to all other powers. The great unknown above is *Aondo*, which in popular allusions consists of iron, possibly because of meteorites. Here the sun arises, proceeds across the sky and sets; it is put in mortion by *Aondo*" (p.17).

The idea here alludes that apart from *Aondo*, the Tiv believe in the existence of lesser forces that are subjected to the supremacy of *Aondo*. *Aondo* has power over all other forces with whom they are interconnected. In the same way, everything that emanates from the sky above, on earth or under the earth is regarded as the expression of the power of *Aondo*.

Similarly, Dzurgba (2007) captures that *Aondo* is the Supreme Being. His size is indicated by the firmament and the earth. Torkula (2004) states that though *Aondo* is the Tiv word for God, the Tiv do not have a personal relationship with Him. There is, however, a deep acknowledgement of the hand of God (*Aondo*) in the physical setting as in rain (*Aondo ngu noon*), thunder (*Aondo ngukumen*) lightening (*Aondo ngu nyiar*) and sun light (*Aondo ta yange*). Atel (2004) acknowledges the patriarchal role of *Aondo* in Tiv society and further tried to identify Him as being masculine. He captures that, the Tiv believed in the existence of a Supreme Being called *Aondo* (God). *Aondo* is conceived as a male and so the Tiv refer to him as *Aondo Ter* (God Father or God the Father).

In Tiv religion also, there are various attributes to *Aondo* in spite of the uncertainties surrounding the knowledge of his real nature. For instance, Shishima and Dzurgba (2012) identifies

some of these attributes to include: *Aondo* (God) is the Creator, *Aondo* is Omnipotent, *Aondo* is Immortal, *Aondo* is Transcendent, *Aondo* is Omnipresent, and that *Aondo* is Omniscient. *Aondo* in Tiv religion is a personal being, a conscious being, who knows everything and can reason; He decides, guides and directs the universe according to His inscrutable purposes. By His divine providence, He directs the destiny of every person, even down to the least creature in the world. More than this, however, Tiv people believe that goodness, love, kindness and mercy are other essential attributes of *Aondo*. Only things, which are good, pure, and noble, can be, and are attributed to *Aondo* (God).

***Akombo* (deities)**

The second component of Tiv traditional religious worldview is the *Akombo* (deities or divinities). It is believed that while *Aondo* is at the apex on the hierarchy, *Akombo* is next. In this regard, it is regarded as intermediary gods and deities that operate or regulate between *Aondo* and men. *Akombo* is a very complex phenomenon. Rupert (2003) maintains that, the origin of the *Akombo* practices amongst the Tiv is very old. In the Tiv ontological order, *Akombo* appears to be the most interactive force that catches the glimpse of everyone. *Akombo* are the mystical forces that are found both in the animate and inanimate beings. Since they are forces in spiritual nature, their presence is only witnessed in their various manifestations in nature.

Wegh and Moti (2001) remarks that the Tiv believe that the natural order should function for the good of man, the land as well as the women should be fertile, and human beings should enjoy good health and fortune. To this end, *Aondo* has given man *Akombo* (cosmic- natural forces). *Akombo* are the mystical forces represented in cultic emblems. They are neutral force beings reproductive as well as destructive the objects that constitute these emblems are part of the material culture, and include

pieces of pottery, feathers, and bones of animals (human) or carved images. Utov and Ioritim- Uba (2008) disagree with the submission that God created *Akombo* and handed to man for regulating social order. According to them, *Akombo* was not created by God and, therefore, have no connection with him; hence for them this might be a pre-Christian belief or practice.

According to Torkula (2004), the Tiv see *Akombo* in two major categories, namely; *Akombo a kiriki* (lesser *Akombo*) and *Akombo atamen* (greater *Akombo*). Each ailment and socio-economic component in society has its *kombo* with full compliments of emblems and a structured process of “restoration” (*sorun*) when its foundation is undermined or violated by people who come into contact with it. Each *kombo* has its master whose specialty is in ensuring a viable role for the *kombo* in the community. He does this by “restoring” (*sorun*) the *kombo*’s equilibrium if and when it is violated, thus, neutralising the damage that would otherwise have been visited on the violator or even the whole community as the case may be.

Torkula (2004) adds that *Akombo* in Tiv religion is a weapon in the hands of the elders to regulate the behaviour of members of the community. It is believed to have supernatural powers, and is used to enforce decisions, ensure societal cohesion and punishment against offenders. *Akombo* or divinity as a cosmic force or power ensures peace, good health, fertility of the soil and of women. *Akombo* is believed to create wealth and its socio-political and economic importance lie in its application which ensures the stability of the society. *Akombo* also checks crime in respect of protected properties or farm produce (pp.12-13). Although this perception may neither completely convey the significance of *Akombo* in Tiv religion nor exhaustively assert its uses, it is important to note that, it can be harnessed and used for different purposes, both good and bad.

***Tsav* (Witchcraft or Wizardry)**

Tsav is a cosmic potency internalized in man as part of his personality (Torkula, 2004). Gundu (1980) admits that it manifests in people in three forms namely; the most potent form, the dwarf (*Kpum utsa*) and '*ishima i nomsoor*' (a man's heart) by the Tiv. Those who possess *tsav* are called *Mbatsav* (singular is *Ormbatsav*) and their activities are theoretically geared towards good governance (*tar soron*), personal comfort, security and communal well-being. Practically, however, the extent to which any *ormbatsav* can be beneficial to society in the context of his activities is a factor of the type of *tsav* "growing" on his heart and particular *akombo* being manipulated at the point in time. This is probably why Bohannan (1967) argues that *tsav* is morally neutral and can be deployed for either good or bad. If deployed for good, society is assured of a potent social control mechanism. On the other hand, if it is deployed for evil individuals can be bewitched leading to sicknesses and sometimes deaths. According to Orbunde (2021) other malevolent aspects include crop failure, dreadful dreams, misfortune, barrenness, and the like. He adds that, *Tsav* is also believed to be a medium through which the *Mbatsav* execute their victims.

In Tiv traditional religion, it is believed that people die as a result of evil manipulations through *tsav*. Abanyam (2016) remarks that though, death is a universal human experience, the response it elicits is shaped by the attitudes that are prevalent in a given culture. The Tiv people believe that death is caused. Every death (*ku*) is regarded as unnatural occurrence. Even when it results from accident injuries or wounds sustained in battle, the proximate cause may be clear, but the ultimate cause can be questioned? Explaining one's death in *Tiv* society requires looking for supernatural causes. Thus, Torkula (2004) explains that there is no clear theory of natural death among the Tiv people. Hence, it is believed that death results from the

intervention of an outside agent. In other words, in Tiv worldview, nobody dies unless his death is influenced by *mbatsav* (witches).

Tiv Religious Taboos and Need for a Thriving Eco-System

The importance of the eco-system to the human society cannot be overemphasized. Its relevance becomes even more glaring following the consequences of its recent continuous depletion. Atungwa (2021) admits that there is a troubling observable environmental crisis in Tivland where several species of plants are fast disappearing. Human activities leading to the mismanagement of the ecosystem constitute a potential ecological danger to life on earth. Flora and fauna and their habitats are fast vanishing. There is increasing paucity of aqua life as there is a decline in fishes in rivers, streams and ponds. Terkaa (2021) decries that even some low life creatures like crickets and edible caterpillars among many others are increasingly becoming scarce. Tondo (2021) adds that water bodies such as ponds, streams and rivers that formally preserved water all year round no longer has the capacity to do so. The climatic condition seems to have changed drastically as the scorchy sun, average temperature and dryness seems to have increased significantly.

According to Orbunde (2021), the problem observed in the eco-system is largely due to several environmental factors such as urbanisation, human population explosion, unrestrained pastoral and nomadic activities, negligent and unconstrained deforestation, hunting, fishing and bush burning as well as wasteful methods of farming that put trees and game animals to destruction. Amase (2021) corroborates that human activities in the globalized system have caused several environmental damages and degradation to the eco-system. Mining activities, deforestation and unhealthy agricultural practices in Benue State

have caused a lot of damage to the society. Thus, the weather conditions have become asymmetrical; hence, the experience of flooding and drought becomes regular. The occurrence of floods and droughts are followed by poor crops yield; and the disappearance of plants and trees creates difficulties for animal survival.

Meanwhile, prior to the advent of western civilization and Christianity, the Tiv had eco-spirituality that helped them in managing the ecosystem. This is a fundamental belief in the sacredness of nature, life, earth, and the universe. Ecological consciousness was key to the Tiv Traditional Religion which had placed taboos for environmental preservation. Amase (2021) admits that issues of ecological preservation are commonly found among Tiv ancient mythologies; hence legends and folklores have shown to be good resource materials for Tiv religious ecological studies. Among the symbols used in the narration of myths are *Aondo*, (the Supreme deity), *Akombo* (deities), spirits, *Tsav* (mystical forces) and the ancestors.

Preservation of the eco-system is at the heart of Tiv Traditional Religion. This can be observed in the manner in which the Tiv relate with nature. This can also be observed in their rituals, symbolic actions, taboos and religious practices. Efforts at preservation of the eco-system are geared towards key understanding of the vital force. The whole idea of vital force is about life, the strengthening and improvement of life. All activities are geared towards this improvement, strengthening and protection of life. Symbolic items and actions are employed to exhibit such inner human longing and struggle. The symbolic items and actions employed in this human struggle come in many forms as ritual tools of religious practice. For instance, Abya (2005) explains that it is a taboo to kill or harm the green snake, *ikyarem*. When it is mistakenly killed or found dead it is

buried with respect. The reason for this is that this snake had saved the nation during their flight from their assailants.

Atungwa (2021) affirms that, the Tiv traditional religion provides no room for the mmismangement or over exploitation of the environment. This is because; almost everything in the eco-system as it were is either divinized or protected by religious taboos. The taboos are enforced in the name of religious observance and for the reasons that such elements protected by taboos are either of historical importance, or are the dwelling places of *Ujijingi* (spirits) or mystical forces. This coincides with Mbiti who held that in many places in Africa, “it is held that the land of the departed is in the woods, forests, river banks, or hills somewhere in the country; such places are therefore often avoided” (Mbiti 1975, p.117). According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), whatever people consider as the home of spirit is usually set apart as a sacred place, and there people offer worship to the particular spirit.

Similarly, Orbunde (2021), Tondo (2021) and Terkaa (2021) agree that the Tiv forbid indiscriminate felling of trees, entrance to certain forests, and bush burning. Some trees, animals and various rivers and mountains are used as sacraments of divinities. According to Amase (2021), this was to avoid burning down medicinal plants species and destroying of animal habitats. These have shown clearly that the Tiv had strong taboos and restrictions for the preservation of the eco-system. The hanging of *Akombo* emblems meant to deter thieves is another way to preserve plants, especially crops. For Abanyam (2011), the *Tiv* people believe that men with supernatural powers that hang such emblems can afflict their victims with disease, which often are incurable through conventional therapies. Sickneses like *Igbe* (Diarrhoea) for example can be inflicted on a victim that may result to death.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed the role of Tiv Traditional religious taboos in the preservation of the eco-system. It was argued that survival requirements of both the earth's natural environment and the human community are reciprocal consequent of human interactions with and activities on the planet earth. Human unsustainable and irresponsible ecological activities on the planet earth have become increasingly troubling. The over-exploitation of the earth's resources has, among other things, put some animal and plant species at the danger of extinction. This is possible given the destruction of valuable vegetation, pollution of the hydrosphere, atmosphere and the lithosphere. The results of these as already mentioned above include desertification due to deforestation without afforestation, global warming, flooding and earthquakes which reportedly result from economic and geological activities like mining. The paper argues that Tiv traditional religious practices of preservation of the environment adequately provided cover for the eco-system and hence, should be revisited and encouraged.

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ORAL INTERVIEWS

S/N	NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	DATE	GENDER
1	ATUNGWA TORHEE	70	Farmer	12/8/2021	Male
2	TERKAA AKPERASHI	65	Veteran	14/8/2021	Male
3	TONDO ALABAA	68	Traditional Chief	17/9/2021	Male
4	AMASE ALUUMA	58	Retiree	17/8/2021	Female
5	ORBUNDE TEMIMONGO	72	Farmer	22/8/2021	Male