

Chapter Twelve

ALI DEITY AMONG THE EVO PEOPLE: TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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Executive Summary

The phenomenon of eco-spirituality is an experience of global concern. This is the reason for review on its decline in modern times. The review of the spirituality of the ecosystem in Evo indigenous religion as it concerns *Ali* deity cannot be overemphasized. This is because the influence of modernization, commercialization and industrialization has severely impacted on African religion, thereby causing a decline in the concept of the land not just as matter but a deity. There are misuses of land such that its production and sustenance of human person is fast depreciating; this is because the indigenous religious prohibitive rules that regulate the use of the environment have been abandoned. The review showed that eco-spirituality was enhanced in the pre-modern era when the indigenous religious ritualistic practices of venerating and worship of *Ali* deity was carried out. Therefore, methods for regulating land misuse were employed following the indigenous religion, and this demonstrated that the spirituality of the *Ali* was a major part of the eco-spirituality of the time. Following the different challenges on the spirituality of the ecosystem, it is recommended that the indigenous religious environmental conservatory measures should be used in modern society so as

to allow room for diversity. The cultural or traditional method can help restore a balanced of eco-spirituality for a sustainable development. Phenomenological method of research was used to discussion the challenges of the decline in eco-Spirituality in Evo.

Keywords: Evo People, *Ala* Deity, Eco-Spirituality, Conservation, Environment

Introduction

The problem of devaluation of land in Evo is a phenomenon of serious concern. Land in the indigenous religion and culture of Evo people was taken seriously. In the pre-modern era the people understood land to be an abode of a spiritual being known as *Ali*. By so doing, there were strict traditional and religious rules that guided its use. For instance, there were rules against deforestation and cultivation of land. People were not permitted to enter into any parcel of land either to deforest or start cultivate the land without first taking permission from the deity in charge through rituals. Thus, the presence of the deity abiding in land, made it spiritual.

On this note, clearing the forest and cultivating on the land, will amount to dislodgement of spirits from their natural abode.¹ Moreover, the act of using the land at will without following the trado-religious guideline of acquiring of land for either farming or building a living place may anger the spirits who is in charge of it and its anger they may bring calamity to both the land and the people. In order to restore normalcy of the environment, it is

¹ Tasie, O.H (2020) *the impact of environmental degradation on the indigenous religions of Evo, Rivers State*,
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required that the spirit is appeased with ritual sacrifices and worship.

Therefore, to pollute the land through setting fire on it, deforesting, or carelessly using it without performing the rituals of permission to *Ali* deity was seriously frowned at because it was capable of chasing away useful animals and destruction of the natural vegetation that was required for human and animal survival. By this, it is apparent that the people of Evo had serious concern for Environmental sustainability and spirituality.

Furthermore, it was not a very common practice to sell land as an individual, neither was land shared as an individual property. Land and landed properties were communally owned by kindred as inheritance from their forebears. Therefore, the living members of Evo society saw themselves as custodians of land bequeathed to them by their progenitors, which they too owe a duty to transfer to the succeeding generations.

Except for those issues that threaten the survival of the community, nobody was allowed to sell land. Since land was not sold anyhow, it is preserved. This served as a way of protecting the environment. In this wise, it was possible to assess the challenges of environmental degradation, since the people take stringent traditional measures to regulate human interaction with the physical land use.

As Port Harcourt developed into a metropolitan city, other agents of development accompanied it. Industrial change in the indigenous religious society, assisted to increase population of the people.

Evo was not left out of the increase in population in Port Harcourt. As development came in, other economic interests such as Shell BP as it was known at that time, but Shell Petroleum and Development Company came to prospect for oil, and subsequently sited their industrial on the lands. This became the genesis of land misuse and decline of eco-spirituality in Evo. Phenomenological method of research was used to discuss the challenges of the decline in eco-Spirituality in Evo.

Conceptualization of *Ali* deity (earth deity)

Evo people call Land "*Ali*" and viewed it in different perspectives. Farmland "*Ekwu*" is an uncultivated forest "*Ohia Igba*" and the swamp forest is called "*Ohia mini*". During the pre-colonial era, land in *Evo* and other natural resources were sources of economic wealth to the families or the whole community (Kanu 2015).

The people of *Evo* considered land the greatest wealth bequeathed by their ancestors to the succeeding generations. This is due to the significance of the activities carried out on land ranging from political, social, economic and religious activities. This explains why a lot of cultural sanctions are remediated for Land spirit (*Ali*).

Ali deity in *Evo* indigenous religion is the mother earth or simply referred to as the earth goddess who is symbolized by the ground or soil. The earth deity is one of the major deities in the Ikwerre cosmology on which human being survival is dependent on. For example, when a child is born, they are first placed on the floor to have contact with the earth deity (*Ali*) as well as when someone dies, they are buried in the ground. The ground in *Evo* indigenous religion is the transport vehicle to the hereafter when death occurs. This is why the earth deity is regularly offered sacrifice and offerings since it is the source of soil fertilization for a better crop yield. "The Ikwerre (*Evo*) people adore the 'mother

*Ali Deity Among The Evo People:
Towards An Indigenous Ecological Knowledge System*

earth' *Ali* so much that they see it as the basic matrix of human material and spiritual existence. This is why actions that constitute taboo to *Ali* are seriously frowned at. These abominations includes: homicide, incest, suicide, stealing, sex in the bush, etc. They constitute agents of land (*Ali*) pollution in Evo which requires elaborate placatory rites by *nye-kwali* (chief diviner of *Ali* shrine) in order to restore the ritual purity of the Community. "²

It is important to note that the ground is a symbol which represents the invincible spirit who is in charge of issues that associates human, animals and their existence/survival with land. No wonder the unbiblical cord of a human child is buried on the ground after birth. This action symbolizes the connection of human being with the earth deity who source of human existence. A gesture like pouring libation on the ground has a deep symbolic interpretation, in that it promotes cordial relationship between *Ali* deity and human adherents. This gesture when decoded symbolically simply means asking for permission that *Ali* deity may bless their ritual offerings and sacrifices. When a food is kept on the floor, it symbolizes the feeding the deity.

The spirituality of the environment according to Wopara (2019) permeates all deities, spirits and divinities like *Ali* (earth deity) who inhabits the nature elements like land, forest, trees, and water. As much as these spirits abide within the nature and the

² Olumati, Rowland (2015) The impact of Christianity and modernity on *Ali* - earth goddess of the traditional religion of the Ikwerre people, rivers state, Nigeria, *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia* Vol. 9(1), Serial No. 36,

people are religiously observing the prescribed rituals, sacrifice worship of the deities, the people are bound to enjoy the blessings of the deities.

Thus, every division of Evo has a shrine dedicated to the worship *Ali* deity. These divisions include:

<i>Ali-Esezi</i>	Family deity of the earth
<i>Ali-Mgbu</i>	Community deity
<i>Ali-Oro</i>	Clan deity

All these *Ali* shrines have specific diviners that organize worship and sacrifices at the shrine. Thus the shrine is conspicuously positioned making it central to all members of the communities and as well as the spirits.

Hence, there are rules guiding *Ali* divinity in relation with to human activities around the shrine. As long human being walk on bare foot, they are in contact with *Ali*. This gesture promotes the sanctity of *Ali*. Similarly, complementary efforts of *Elu – Igwe* with *Ali* assist eco-spirituality in maintaining order and coherence of both natural and supernatural activities in Evo.

There are different religious rituals that are associated with land spirituality in Evo; these religious rituals were for the protection and sanctity of the *Ali* deity. For instance, one of the rituals of land spirituality is **Aku-Igba** (Ritual of cultivating the forest). The ritual was performed in the rain and mangrove forest of Evo in the pre-modern era.

Aku Igba ritual was performed by the *Ojiowhor* (eldest male member of the family and the chief diviner) during deforestation of a virgin land. During the rituals sacrifice, only the male members of the family that are matured for farming activities perform the sacrifice. In the cause of the ritual sacrifice, *Ali* the

earth deity and *Alabida* the forest deity are offered sacrifice of blood of either a he-goat or a fowl. These deities are the guardian spirits that are responsible for the sustenance and growth of the forest trees and fertility of the soil. As mentioned above, the ritual items includes He goat (*Owu-Okani*), Red cock and hen (*Nwere nu oke ochichi*), native chalk (*Nzu*), snail (*ejii*), tubers of yam (*Iji*), a jar of palm wine (*Jungo maya nwgo*), lobes of Kolanut (*aji - ilu*). These ritual items are presented to the deity as appreciation for spiritual guardianship, prayers for the increase of crop yield and the safety of the people during the deforestation and cultivation on the land. This is commonly the ritual that was performed to usher in the farming season.

Okwa-Ali (Land Cleansing Ritual)

This is another religious ritual perform in honour of *Ali* the earth deity. *Okwa Ali*, as the name connotes, is a very important ritual of propitiation which is carried out for reminiscence. As mentioned above, *Ali* is the deity that facilitates the fertility of the soil for improved or better crop yield. There are a number of taboos associated with *Ali*. The people of Evo worship *Ali* deity on a sacred day called *riagbo*. *Riagbo* is the first day of the traditional calendar of Evo people. The weekly calendar consist of five days which begin with *riagbo*, *saragbo*, *nim okwu* and *Namake*. It is important to note that this traditional calendar does not follow the sequence of the Gregorian calendar of Sunday to Saturday. On a *riagbo* day when the people worship and sacrifice to *Ali*, it is a taboo for anyone to engage in a form of hardwork either farming on the land, fishing in the rivers or trading in the village square. These activities include: "digging, clearing of the bush, setting a big fire and cracking of kernel."³ On the *riagbo*

³ Ibid p 36

day, it is believed that *Ali* divinity fertilizes the soil to replenish its support for food production. Since, defaulting on cultural and religious guidelines is inevitable; defaulters are obligated to perform ritual for cleansing (*Osudielii*) to placate the earth divinity.

More so, when someone defiles the religious taboo, he or she will suffer severe punishment meted out by the deities that govern the ecosystem. On the other hand, if by default a taboo is not upheld, the person who committed the crime is expected to placate the deity with ritual sacrifice known as *Okwa Ali*.

Taboos

Taboos are generally prohibitions that are expected to maintain and conserve the environment. These taboos impact on the religious and spiritual consciousness of the people of Evo and their environmental spirituality, helping them to order their life in such a way that they will promote preservation of the environment rather than destroying it.

Each aspect of the environment has taboos that are meant to establish order and coherence in the structure and spirituality of the environment.

Taboo in Evo Indigenous religion includes death on a worship day (*riagbo*), rape, sex on the bare floor, suicide, death of a young person, death by thunder strike, and many other forms of activities that defile *Ali* deity. These taboos infringe on the religious sanctity of *Ali* (earth deity). Hence, if a taboo is committed, it is very compulsory that *Okwa Ali* (cleansing ritual) be performed. This is done to placate the deity from causing calamities to befall the land and the people involved in the taboo. The ritual items that are used to perform *Okwa Ali* follow the

prescriptions of the diviner by divination. They include goats, rams, fowls, and other items etc.

Where these deities are not placated with the adequate ritual items as prescribed by a diviner, the wrath of the deity is invoked on the defaulter and the land as well. Some of the effects of defiling *Ali* deity includes, low crop yield, infertility of the soil, drought, etc. As much as the environment suffers from the anger of the deity, the human defaulters are also severely punished with calamities like blindness, insanity, deformity or actual death.

Ali keeps watch of every person in the community in that when evil is perpetrated (witchcraft, pollution, stealing, murder, rape, suicide and adultery) defaulters do not go scot-free. This is the reason why wrongdoers are punished instantly to serve as deterrent to other people. The defaulters are punished with one form of disease or the other. More so, should offender swear with the soil which is the symbol of *Ali*, and then the guilty will suffer from harsh calamities within the months? The harsh calamities are mostly incurable diseases or instant death. In like manner, some persons suffer from protracted diseases which compel them to confess to their crime before they die.

These calamities are symbolically decoded by a diviner through divination to ascertain the actual cause. Thus, following the punishments befalls the defaulter; they are not allowed to be part of their family statutory activities like sharing of land until ritual of remediation has been duly performed (*Okwa Ali*). The period of cleansing is determined by the length of the problem. In this regard, it is a serious offense with severe consequence to violate taboo that pertains to eco-spirituality.

Other Cultural Practice that show the Spirituality of Ali Deity

There are other features of cultural practice among Evo people that supports the spirituality of *Ali* the earth deity. This cultural phenomenon shall be enumerated succinctly in this session.

Land Rest

Land in Evo culture, has religious, social and economic implications. Therefore, land is fundamental to their existence as it is the symbol of *Ali* deity. In Evo culture, after cultivating a portion of land for a particular period, it is expected that the land is allowed to rest and fallow. The period of land rest is regarded the *Ali* sanctification. This is the period *Ali* deity blesses the land thereby making it fertile.

The phenomenon land rest includes the weekly that is *riagbo* day and the Seven years rest. During the seven years rest, the land is required to be free from continuous cultivation. This is because it had been used for over some years. Evo people as mentioned above are blessed with vast portions of arable land, mangroves and rainforest, beside other numerous natural endowments. Thus, Land in Evo is a priceless and valuable asset to both human being and spirits. Moreover, it a notable phenomenon that the blessings of peak harvest is associated with land rest since spiritual fertilization is a gift of *Ali* deity.

Hence, the practice of land rest during the seven years and *riagbo* day is very important since it concerns worship of deities and conservation of the value of the environment for human survival. Not adhering to the prohibitive rules of land rest and its ritual is a taboo which has heavy consequences. More so, land rest is required as cultural and religious obligations of the people. This obligation is measured with six years of land cultivating for agricultural purposes, while on the seventh year, the land is allowed to fallow.

Murder

Similarly a death that occurs as a result murder is considered a serious defilement of *Ali* the goddess of the earth. The life of every human being is sacred and cannot be taken carelessly. Ejekwu (2019) an oral informant opined that life in Evo indigenous religion is a gift from *Ehie* the Supreme Deity. It is also the prerogative of the Supreme Being to determine how life should be lived and appreciated. Although there may be times human sacrifice is required used for placatory purposes to the Deity, was not common, it is only required in extreme cases which is determined through divination by diviner.

In this occasion, human sacrifice was required only serious offenses the community or a group of people committed against the deity. Hence, human sacrifice is considered in religious ritual, the Supreme prize. Other than the aforementioned occasion, killing of a human being is sacrilegious to *Ali* deity.

Murder most often is carried out in such a way that every of its activities, is performed on the ground, the symbol of *Ali*. Thus, the ground is the abode of *Ali* deity. It is an abomination to spill blood on the ground except during religious rituals. Spilling unrequested sacrifice of blood, defiles the sanctity of the ground where *Ali* the spiritual deity abides. In this wise, such an abomination requires proper remediation.

Therefore, when life is terminated without the knowledge or permission of *Ali* deity, it is a serious taboo. In this wise, murder is a phenomenon that defiles the sanctity of the land. Hence, *Ali* must be remediated with a ritual to avoid its wrath. The remediation ritual is performed on the ground as a cleansing rite (*Okwa Ali, Osudieli*).

Murder in Evo indigenous religion has grievous impact and implications on the survival of the community. Often times, as a result of murder, a whole community may be plagued with different types of calamities. These calamities include disastrous famine, low crop yield, insanity, deaths and diseases. Thus, in order to quell the problem, a ritual of cleansing will be performed following the diviners divination called "*Osudeli*".

Suicide

As discussed above in murder, suicide is another heinous taboo of life against the sanctity of *Ali* deity. Unlike murder, suicide is an act in which an individual terminates his or her own life. When suicide is committed, it is considered a serious offense against *Ali* deity and such an abomination. It has severe consequences on the community. This unusual mishap includes but not limited to unknown death, famine, drought and diseases etc. Suicide like many other taboos requires placatory ritual to *Ali* deity before the individual will be thrown into the sacred forest.

Deaths which occur as a result of suicide are culturally unproductive and abominable to the indigenous religion. Persons, who die as a result of suicide, are considered a curse to the people. This type of death does not qualify the individual to enjoy traditional funeral rituals and ancestral bliss. They are often thrown into the evil forest to sojourn among malevolent spirits. The spirits of these dead individuals do not enjoy blissful rest; they are tormented regularly and sent out to cause mayhem to their living relatives.

In order to avoid spirit attack, members of their family will perform ritual of cleansing and protection. The items required for the ritual of propitiation is often determined by the diviner of the shrine through divination.

Sex on the Bare Ground

Sex on the bare floor or rape is a serious abomination against *Ali* deity. In Evo, sex is a beautiful cultural and religious obligation only within marriage relationship. Hence, sex is only good, within the boundaries of marriage and performed on a bed lifted above the ground.

Following the explanation above, religio-culturally, it is fundamentally wrong to have sex indiscriminately. Engaging in sexual obligation on a bare floor, ground or in the farm, is a grave offense against *Ali* deity. Although *Ali* is not the only deity that suffers from such defilement, deities like *Ojukwu*, *Alabida* are also defiled.

When sexual activity is carried out on the floor, it defiles *Ali* deity. This act of sexual abuse is capable of attracting the wrath of *Ali* deity. In order to identify and punish defaulters, the deity inflicts on them calamities like swollen stomach, swollen scrotum in men (*ibi*) termination of menstrual flow and virginal decay for women, etc. There are so many negative effects of having sex on the bare floor, these include: infertility of the soil, poor crop yield, crop diseases, etc. This phenomenon portends danger to the survival of the people since the provision of their food for living is sourced from the goodwill and blessings of *Ali*.

Conclusion

It is very important as a matter of urgency that adherence of the indigenous religion restrain themselves from indiscriminate misuses of land because land is the abode of *Ali* spirits who is the primary instrument of environmental conservation.

In order to restore the sanctity of the land and reverence for *Ali* deity, parcels of land that are yet to be completely deforested

within Evo should be set aside as forest reserves to serve as the abode of the deities and wildlife.

Work on forbidden days like *Riagbo*: companies that operate and do business in Evo should be made to understand that work on *riagbo* is a taboo, but if work must take place, they are to make provision to placate *Ali* deity .

Religious functionaries (Diviners) within Evo should leave upright lives and not join the jamboree for land speculation. They are to strictly observe the rule that will aid a return to environmental preservation and sustainability through the inculcation of the indigenous religious beliefs and practice and its techniques in schools, and other social gatherings using the media.

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Oral Information

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