

The Roles of African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Ecosystem Preservation: A Comparison

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Abstract

Religion has continued to influence human attitudes toward nature and environmental sustainability across societies. In Nigeria, both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) possess teachings and practices that encourage environmental protection and responsible interaction with nature. Despite these religious and cultural values, the Nigerian ecosystem continues to face serious threats such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, desertification, and other forms of environmental degradation caused by unsustainable human activities. This situation raises concerns about the effectiveness of religious institutions and indigenous belief systems in promoting ecosystem preservation. This study aims to examine and compare the roles of Christianity and African Traditional Religion in ecosystem preservation in Nigeria. Specifically, the study explores the theological foundations, ethical teachings, and practical environmental conservation mechanisms embedded within both religious traditions. The study further seeks to determine how these religious approaches can contribute to sustainable environmental management in contemporary society. The study adopted a qualitative and comparative research methodology. Findings from the study reveal that Christianity promotes environmental stewardship through biblical teachings that portray humanity as caretakers of God's creation. African Traditional Religion, on the other hand, preserves ecosystems through sacred groves, taboos, totems, and community-based cultural practices that regulate human interaction with nature and conserve biodiversity. The study also found that while Christianity provides strong moral and theological motivation for environmental care, African Traditional Religion offers practical indigenous conservation systems that have historically sustained ecological balance within local communities. The study concludes that both Christianity and African Traditional Religion have significant contributions to make toward ecosystem preservation in Nigeria. It therefore recommends increased collaboration between religious leaders, environmental agencies, policymakers, and local communities to integrate religious teachings and indigenous ecological knowledge into environmental education and sustainable development strategies.

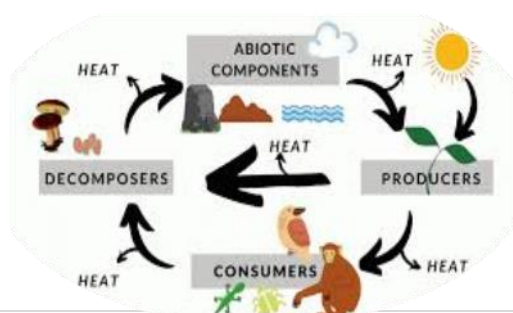
Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Ecosystem Preservation, Environmental Stewardship, Sustainability.

Introduction

The increasing rate of environmental degradation across the world has generated serious concern among scholars, governments, and international organizations. Contemporary ecological problems such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, desertification, and pollution threaten both human existence and the sustainability of ecosystems. An ecosystem refers to a community of living organisms interacting with one another and with their physical environment through complex systems of energy flow and nutrient cycles. The stability of ecosystems depends on the balance between biotic and abiotic components, as well as the capacity of ecological systems to resist and recover from environmental disturbances. However, human activities such as industrialization, urbanization, overexploitation of natural resources, and poor environmental practices have increasingly disrupted ecological balance and endangered the natural environment. In response to these environmental challenges, scholars have expanded ecological discourse beyond scientific and technological solutions to include religious and ethical perspectives. Religion plays a significant role in shaping human attitudes toward nature because it influences moral values, cultural practices, and worldviews concerning the environment. Consequently, many scholars now recognize that religious traditions possess ecological principles capable of promoting environmental sustainability and conservation.

In the African context, religion remains an essential aspect of social and cultural life. Among the major religious traditions that influence environmental attitudes are African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. African Traditional Religion promotes a worldview in which nature is understood as sacred and spiritually interconnected with human existence. This ecological consciousness is expressed through taboos, sacred forests, rituals, and communal regulations that guide human interaction with the environment. Christianity also contributes to ecological thought through its doctrine of creation and the concept of stewardship, which emphasizes humanity's responsibility to care for and preserve God's creation. Both religious traditions therefore provide important ethical foundations for environmental sustainability. This study therefore examines the ecological relevance of African Traditional Religion and Christianity with the aim of evaluating their contributions to environmental sustainability and ecological conservation in contemporary society.

The interdependence of the various components of the ecosystem remains fundamental to ecological sustainability and environmental balance. Ecosystems function through complex interactions between biotic components, such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, and abiotic components, including air, water, soil, and climate. The disruption of any



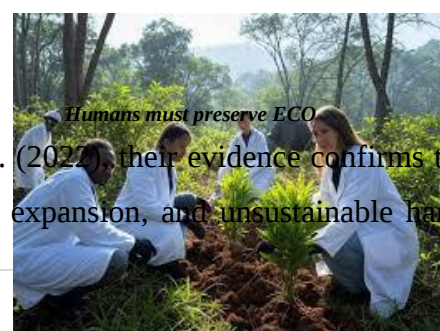
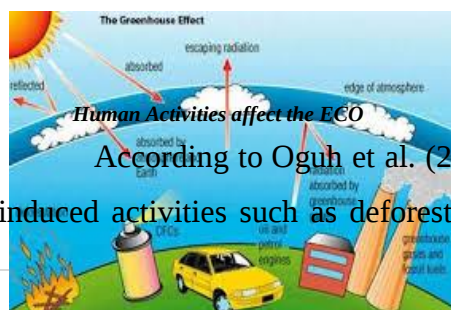
aspect of this ecological structure often produces negative consequences for environmental stability and human survival. Consequently, the preservation of biodiversity and ecological integrity has become a major concern in contemporary environmental studies.

Scholars argue that biodiversity plays a crucial role in maintaining ecosystem resilience, productivity, and sustainability. According to Naeem et al. (2016), the loss of biodiversity generates cascading ecological effects because species reduction weakens ecosystem stability, diminishes regulatory mechanisms, and threatens the continuity of natural processes under increasing anthropogenic pressures. This position demonstrates that environmental degradation extends beyond the destruction of physical resources to include the destabilization of ecological relationships necessary for sustainable existence.

Despite growing scientific awareness of environmental problems, ecological degradation continues to intensify due to deforestation, industrial pollution, urban expansion, overconsumption of natural resources, and poor environmental ethics. This situation has prompted scholars to investigate not only scientific solutions but also moral, cultural, and religious approaches to environmental sustainability. Religion has increasingly emerged as an important factor in ecological discourse because it shapes human attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns toward nature.

Within the African context, African Traditional Religion and Christianity represent two influential religious traditions with significant ecological implications. African Traditional Religion preserves ecological consciousness through sacred beliefs, taboos, rituals, and communal environmental ethics that regulate human interaction with nature. Christianity similarly promotes environmental responsibility through the doctrine of creation and stewardship theology, which emphasize humanity's obligation to protect and preserve the earth as God's creation. However, the ecological contributions of these religions have generated scholarly debate, particularly regarding the extent to which their teachings effectively address contemporary environmental crises.

It is against this background that this study critically examines the ecological perspectives of African Traditional Religion and Christianity in relation to environmental sustainability. The study investigates their environmental ethics, evaluates their contributions to ecological preservation, and analyzes their relevance in addressing modern environmental challenges.



According to Oguh et al. (2021) and Liu et al. (2022), their evidence confirms that human induced activities such as deforestation, agricultural expansion, and unsustainable harvesting of

resources are still the leading contributors to environmental degradation, thus compromising the resilience of ecosystems to deliver essential services. Issues such as deforestation, climate change, desertification, pollution, and biodiversity loss have threatened the balance of the ecosystem. Scholars and environmentalists have increasingly recognized that religion plays an important role in shaping human attitudes toward nature and environmental stewardship. In Africa, religion is deeply intertwined with culture and daily life, influencing how people relate to their environment.

African Traditional Religion emphasizes the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness between humans, spirits, ancestors, and the natural world. However, Christianity has sometimes been criticized for promoting anthropocentric views that place humans above nature. This paper examines the role of African Traditional Religion in ecosystem preservation and compares it with the ecological role of Christianity. It argues that while both religions contain teachings that encourage environmental responsibility, African Traditional Religion often promotes a stronger sense of ecological sacredness, whereas Christianity increasingly emphasizes stewardship and care for creation.

Conceptual Understanding of Ecosystem Preservation

Ecosystem preservation refers to the protection, conservation, and sustainable management of natural environments in order to maintain biodiversity, ecological balance, and the long-term sustainability of natural resources. Ecosystems comprise complex interactions between living organisms such as plants, animals, and microorganisms and their physical environment, including soil, water, atmosphere, and climate (Odum & Barrett, 2005). The stability and resilience of ecosystems depend largely on the harmonious relationship between these biotic and abiotic components.

Scholars have argued that the preservation of ecosystems extends beyond scientific and technological concerns to include moral, ethical, and cultural dimensions. White (1967) observes that human attitudes toward nature are significantly influenced by religious beliefs and cultural worldviews, which shape environmental behaviour and determine how societies utilize natural resources. Similarly, Tucker and Grim (2001) maintain that religious traditions contribute to environmental ethics by promoting values and practices that encourage respect for nature and ecological responsibility.

In many traditional African societies, environmental conservation was historically sustained not through formal governmental policies but through indigenous cultural systems and religious practices. African Traditional Religion, for instance, preserved ecological balance through taboos, sacred forests, ritual restrictions, and communal moral codes regulating human interaction with the environment (Mbiti, 1969). These indigenous ecological systems contributed significantly to biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability long before the

emergence of contemporary conservation strategies and international environmental policies (Nche, Achunike, & Okoli, 2019).

African Traditional Religion and the Ecosystem

African Traditional Religion is characterized by a holistic worldview that integrates the spiritual, social, and natural realms into a unified system of relationships. According to John Mbiti, African cosmology recognizes a hierarchical structure consisting of God, divinities, ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate elements of nature (Mbiti, 1975). This cosmological structure implies that humans are part of a broader community of existence rather than isolated rulers over nature.

African Traditional Religion presents a cosmological worldview in which humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm exist in an interconnected relationship. Within this worldview, the natural environment is not perceived merely as a material resource for human exploitation but as a sacred reality inhabited by divinities, spirits, and ancestral powers (Mbiti, 1969). This sacred understanding of nature establishes moral obligations that regulate human interaction with the environment and discourage activities capable of disrupting ecological balance.

Scholars have observed that many African communities attach religious significance to natural features such as rivers, forests, mountains, and particular animal species. According to Idowu (1973), these natural entities are often regarded as sacred because they are associated with spiritual beings or ancestral presence. Consequently, cultural and religious restrictions are imposed on the exploitation of such ecological spaces. These restrictions function as indigenous environmental management systems that contribute to conservation and sustainability.

One important ecological practice within African Traditional Religion is the preservation of sacred groves. Sacred groves are protected forest areas dedicated to deities, spirits, or ancestors and are usually governed by strict customary laws prohibiting activities such as tree felling, hunting, farming, or indiscriminate resource extraction (Sheridan & Nyamweru, 2008). The violation of these sacred regulations is traditionally believed to attract spiritual sanctions or communal punishment. As a result, sacred groves have historically functioned as indigenous conservation sites that protect biodiversity and preserve ecological resources.

In addition, scholars argue that sacred groves contribute significantly to environmental sustainability because they serve as reservoirs for rare plant species, wildlife protection, water conservation, and climate regulation (Ormsby, 2013). This demonstrates that African Traditional Religion contains ecological principles capable of supporting modern environmental conservation efforts. Therefore, indigenous religious practices should not be dismissed as merely cultural traditions but recognized as important components of environmental ethics and ecological preservation.

In the context of African Traditional Religion, there are many ways of preserving the ecosystem handed down over time from one generation to another. Many of those are seen as heritage in families and among people of different African backgrounds and race. The following are notable:

1. Sacred Forests and Groves

One of the most significant ways ATR contributes to ecosystem preservation is through sacred groves: Sacred forests are areas set aside for spiritual purposes and are protected by traditional religious laws. Because these areas are considered sacred, human activities such as logging, farming, or hunting are forbidden. These sacred groves act as reservoirs of biodiversity. Many plant and animal species that have disappeared in surrounding areas continue to survive in sacred forests due to religious protection.

2. Taboos and Moral Regulations

Taboos play an important role in regulating human interaction with nature. In many African societies, there are taboos against killing certain animals, cutting particular trees, or polluting rivers. These taboos are often associated with spiritual consequences, such as punishment from the gods or ancestors. Such cultural regulations function as indigenous conservation systems. They ensure that natural resources are used sustainably and prevent overexploitation. In some parts of Nigeria for instance; the Anambra people see killing of pythons as a Taboo, the Awka people see killing of Monkeys as taboo, In Ugwueme in Awgu, Enugu State, killing of snake is prohibited, especially during the traditional era, and many alike.

3. Rituals and Festivals

Ritual practices also contribute to environmental protection. Many African festivals celebrate agricultural cycles, rainfall, harvest, and fertility of the land. These rituals emphasize gratitude to the divine forces responsible for sustaining nature.

By recognizing the sacredness of natural resources, these rituals encourage responsible environmental behaviour and reinforce community awareness of ecological balance.

Christianity and Preservation of Ecosystem

Christianity approaches environmental ethics through its doctrine of creation and the theological understanding of humanity's role in creation. The Bible teaches that the universe is the creation of God and that humans are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for it. In Genesis 2:15, humanity is commanded to “till and keep” the Garden of Eden, which implies a duty to cultivate and protect the environment. However, the Bible term “have dominion” over the earth in Genesis 1:28 have been controversial. Some argue that this concept historically contributed to anthropocentric attitudes that justified the exploitation of nature. Lynn White famously argued that Western Christianity encouraged environmental degradation by emphasizing human superiority over nature (White 1205).

Despite such criticisms, contemporary Christian theology has increasingly emphasized ecological responsibility. Many theologians argue that dominion should be understood as stewardship rather than domination. Humans are therefore seen as caretakers of God's creation who must manage natural resources responsibly.

Christian Contributions to Environmental Conservation

1. Stewardship Theology

Stewardship theology is one of the central Christian concepts regarding environmental responsibility. Christianity teaches that the earth and everything in it belong to God, while humans are appointed as caretakers of creation rather than absolute owners (Psalm 24:1). In Genesis 2:15, humanity was commanded by God to “till and keep” the Garden of Eden, which implies the duty to cultivate, preserve, and protect the environment. This theological understanding promotes the responsible use and management of natural resources while discouraging environmental exploitation and destruction. According to Schaefer (2009), Christian stewardship emphasizes moral accountability in humanity's relationship with nature and encourages sustainable environmental practices for the benefit of present and future generations.

2. Church Environmental Initiatives

Many Christian churches and organizations have established environmental initiatives aimed at promoting ecosystem preservation and environmental sustainability. These initiatives include tree-planting campaigns, environmental sanitation exercises, climate change awareness programs, ecological education, waste management projects, and advocacy against environmental degradation. In many parts of Africa, churches participate actively in community development programs that encourage environmental cleanliness and sustainable living. Gottlieb (2006) observes that contemporary Christian organizations increasingly view environmental protection as part of their spiritual and social responsibility. Through sermons, seminars, conferences, and community outreach programs, churches educate believers on the importance of protecting the environment and preserving natural resources.

3. Ethical Teachings on Justice and Responsibility

Christian ethics emphasizes justice, compassion, love, and responsibility toward humanity and the natural environment. Environmental degradation often affects poor and vulnerable communities through flooding, famine, pollution, disease outbreaks, and displacement. As a result, Christian social teachings encourage believers to protect the environment as part of promoting social justice and human well-being. White (1967), despite criticizing aspects of Christian anthropocentrism, acknowledged the significant influence Christianity has on human attitudes toward nature. Contemporary Christian scholars therefore argue that caring for the environment is both a moral obligation and a demonstration of love for humanity and God's

creation. This ethical perspective encourages responsible environmental behavior and sustainable development for future generations.

Dissimilarities between Ecosystem in ATR and Ecosystem in Christian Theology

While both African Traditional Religion and Christianity support environmental protection, they approach ecosystem preservation differently.

African Traditional Religion tends to emphasize the sacredness of nature itself. Natural elements are believed to possess spiritual significance, which leads to strong cultural restrictions against environmental destruction. Because of this belief system, conservation practices are deeply embedded in traditional cultural life.

Christianity, on the other hand, generally emphasizes human stewardship over nature. While the environment is valued as God's creation, humans are placed in a position of authority and responsibility. This perspective can sometimes lead to anthropocentric interpretations that prioritize human needs over environmental protection.

However, contemporary Christian environmental theology increasingly recognizes the importance of ecological responsibility and encourages believers to adopt sustainable environmental practices.

Contemporary Challenges

The ecological practices associated with African Traditional Religion face significant challenges in modern Africa. Urbanization, globalization, and the spread of modern religions have weakened many traditional ecological systems. Sacred groves are increasingly threatened by deforestation, commercial agriculture, and land development.

Similarly, Christian communities have helped in teaching ecosystem preservation but sometimes struggle to integrate environmental concerns into their religious priorities. However, the growing global awareness of environmental issues has encouraged many churches to adopt more active ecological roles.

A constructive dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity could contribute to more effective environmental strategies. Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with modern environmental science and Christian stewardship ethics could provide holistic solutions to Africa's ecological challenges.

Conclusion

African Traditional Religion and Christianity both offer valuable perspectives on environmental stewardship and ecosystem preservation. African Traditional Religion promotes ecological balance through sacred cosmology, taboos, rituals, and traditional conservation practices that protect forests, wildlife, and natural resources. These indigenous systems represent a sophisticated form of environmental management rooted in cultural and spiritual values.

Christianity contributes a theological framework that emphasizes stewardship of God's creation and moral responsibility toward the environment. Although some interpretations historically encouraged anthropocentric attitudes, contemporary Christian theology increasingly promotes ecological awareness and sustainable environmental practices.

The integration of these two religious perspectives can provide a powerful ethical foundation for addressing modern environmental challenges. By combining indigenous ecological wisdom with Christian stewardship ethics, African societies can develop culturally relevant and spiritually grounded approaches to ecosystem preservation.

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