EFFECTS OF DEFORESTATION ON TRADITIONAL PRIESTHOOD OF AKPOKU ETCHE OF NIGER DELTA

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Abstract
In Akpoku, priesthood not only represents an important aspect of Akpoku traditional religion but also seen as one of the ritual practices associated with Akpoku traditional priesthood. Thus, priesthood not only makes traditional religion of Akpoku thick but also associated with the sacred such as shrine, forest, dedicated to deities. In Akpoku, this sacred spot or areas are forbidden to penetrate and in turn symbolize no go area. Despite this, this forbidden spot is at present being intentionally desecrated by the youths of present generation of Akpoku who often go into this forbidden areas to cut down the trees for firewood and charcoal all for economic gains. The methodology adopted was oral interviews (report of Akpoku traditional priests and Handed down tradition from the custodians of custom and traditions of Akpoku) and secondary sources (published materials). Findings reveal that indiscriminate destruction of the bush dedicated to deities by the youths of present generation of Akpoku has impinged very negatively the important Akpoku cultural values and practices.

Keywords: Akpoku, Priesthood, Environment and Deforestation

Introduction
In Akpoku, traditional priesthood, is one of the ritual practices associated with Akpoku religio-cultural heritage . Thus, it is as old as Akpoku indigenous religion. When the question was posed to the custodians of Akpoku culture, and tradition; "Why do you perform such a rituals"? They quickly replied: "Because our forefathers did so," meaning that it has been there right from the inception of the community In Akpoku, traditional priesthood is communal, in the sense that during this period, the community contributes resources to celebrate the events. Apart from this, there are numerous taboos surrounding the different stages of Akpoku traditional priesthood. In Akpoku, traditional priesthood not only help to encourage the participation of the people into the supersensible world but also sustain the ontological balance between the visible, tangible world and the invisible, spiritual world since the people strongly believe in the reality of both realms. This paper, therefore, seek to reflects on the effects of deforestation on Akpoku traditional priesthood.

Background of the Study

Akpoku is located at the North-East margin of Niger-Delta, having boundaries with Umuoye Etche and Umuekwuene Ngor-Okpala in Imo State. On the East with Mba Etche, Okechi Clan of Etche, Obite Etche, Opehi, Umuikoro and Orishieze Ngor-Okpala in Imo State. On the South with Odufor, Nihi, Opiro and Egwi Etche, and on the West with Ozuzu Clan of Etche. The town itself is made up of six villages namely, Umuoria, Umuekwuene, Umuorde, Okomoko, Umudim and Umuaghara which are bounded by common ancestry. At present, Akpoku is one of the towns that make up Etche LGA of Rivers State (Amadi, 2006, p. 75).

As for their economic life, the people of Akpoku are predominantly farmers. They engage in production of palm wine, fish, coco-yam, palm oil etc, but the most important are yam and cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people located within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, they experience the normal Niger-Delta climatic condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy season and dry season. The rainy season takes place between March and November, the dry season occurs between November and February (Amadi, 2015, p. 209). Regarding their spiritual life, Akpoku people strongly believe in the existential reality of the Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Akpoku, like other traditional African societies, do not approach Him directly, rather He is approached and worshiped through the pantheon of divinities.

Methodology

The study was carried out as interview – based research. Two types of oral investigation procedure were utilized, viz:

i. Reports of Akpoku traditional priest about the danger inherent in deforestation on Akpoku traditional priesthood.
ii. Handed down tradition about the consequences of deforestation on Akpoku traditional priesthood.

Conceptual Clarification

Priesthood

Priesthood is an institution which brings to mind a body of persons who perform religious functions and mediate between men and the supersensible world (Tasie and Okinedo, 2005, p. 124)., Awolalu and Dopamu (1979, p.142) have pointed out that in some towns certain cults have a town-wide recognition. According to them, in such cults, priesthood is highly hierarchical, and there is a graded order of priesthood. A telling example here is that of Orunmila among the Yoruba where there are about sixteen different grades. The grades are named in ascending or descending order. In affirmation to this, Idowu (1962, p.133), posits that there is always a chief priest who is assisted by other sub-priests according to their ranks. Following this is the call to priesthood. Ajayi, (1981, p.82), observes that the call to priesthood varies from place to place and according to the categories of priests. Similarly, Tasie and Okinedo (2005, p.124), have noted that in most African societies the call to priesthood is hereditary, sometimes passing from father to son in immediate succession and in other cases, to the oldest surviving member of the priestly family. In other cases, the call to priesthood may not be through hereditary but by spirit possession. Hence an abnormal behavior may be an indication that the individual is the favourite of the gods. Apart from spirit possession, some

people are set aside from birth to be priests. Affirming this, Awolalu and Dopamu (1919, p.141) observed that "a particular mark found on a child at birth may be an indication that he may have been set apart for the office of a priest". According to Awolalu and Dopamu, "this is so in the case of *Ndazo*, the priest of *Gunnu* among the Nupe. He must be born with a tuff of hair on top of his head". On the other hand, Awolalu and Dopamu also contend that a priest may be called to the service of divinity either by spirit possession, through dreams, visions, and trance or by the oracle. For them, once a person has been called he must retire from the business of daily living and submit to the service of the divinity and refusal might be greeted with calamitous consequences.

In a similar way, Anyacho, (1994, p.270), notes that the call to priesthood is always for life and is made when there is vacancy in the post which is only possible after the incumbent has died, hence there is no retirement. Onwubiko, (1991, p.74) writing on priesthood in Igbo religion opined that priesthood is by heredity and never by election. According to him, a person is a priest of a certain deity because his father was the priest of that deity. To confirm the above; he cited a case where two old men from Ezinihitte in Ezinihitte Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State, were struggling for the vacant seat of *Ajala* deity of Umuerim in Obeama Ezinihitte. Despite the struggle, the deity did not choose the two men on the premise that the priestly office was not a contestable one. Along the line, this deity by felling a tree in its shrine knocked down a part of the shrine and revealed through an oracle that both men should cease struggling for the vacant seat. According to Onwubiko, the deity further revealed that the true priest was yet to be born and his office was to be held in proxy for him.

Besides, George, (1980, p.64), interestingly notes that Yoruba priests are not "called to priesthood", usually the person who succeeds the lineage priest or the town priest is the person next to him in rank. He further observed that a person could assume priestly office purely by heredity. Rotimi and Chris (2005, p. 22), also posit that another way by which a devotee may be called as a priest is through the declaration of the oracle. According to Rotimi and Chris, this often happens when the customary rite is performed immediately after a child's birth. In much the same vein, in Ihiagwa traditional religion of Imo State. A person may be called a priest by selection. For instance, the *Otamiri* deity chooses his priests by reincarnation and it is rotated between the people of Ibuzo and the people of Iriamogu villages respectively. The chief priest of the deity is called *Ezeario*, the *Ezeario* is vested on an individual by reincarnation. That is to say that any *Ezeario*, is a reincarnate of the previous *Ezeario*. In addition to this, the training of priest is also considered significant. To this end, Ajayi (1981), noted that where priesthood passes from head of the clan to another, the training is usually by observation on the part of the person who is to succeed the priest. According to him, the priesthood of Orumila among the Yoruba is a professional one and as such his training takes a long time. An aspirant may be trained for about three years and without the training the aspirant can never become a specialist except he had been affiliated from youth to the priesthood of *Orunmila*. Ajayi, however further noted that among the Ewe, the training for a priest takes place in the temple where there are seminaries attached to the temple. In the temple, priests are trained for a period of three to five years or eight to ten years. During the training, the priest to be learns the rituals of the deity, its nature, the chantings and invocations, dances and the general ceremonies of divinity (p. 40).

There are also cases where the priest to be has been identified or marked out. The training in such a case is mostly by observation and apprenticeship. Here, the priest to be understudies the other priest for several years through participation in relevant religious activities. He takes note of what the priest does at each stage of a ritual. The training of priests takes different forms depending on the nature of priesthood. Of significance is that in all forms of training, the priest is regarded as being trained to be set apart, for example, the Ashanti priest during training, must not gossip, mut not quarrel or fight, must not salute his elders by bending the right knee. According to them, such restrictions are an indication that the priest is leading an ascetic life and they emphasize his separateness. He or she is married to the divinity during training, although he or she could marry again or join his or her partner after training. The above are some of the taboos a priest must observe during training (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 143).

In addition to the taboos which a priest must observe in the course of training, some scholars have also noted that the priest of each divinity has a distinguishing mark, the type of which depends on which divinity he serves. For example, the priest or priestess of *Orisa-nla* is expected to dress in white and white beads (Totimi and Chris, 2005, p.22). In line with this, Awolalu and Dopamu, (1979) also noted that priests usually have special dresses which distinguish them from other cultic functionaries. Usually, white is the colour of the dress but other colours can also be used depending on the deity being served (p.141).

Following this, is the functions of priests in African religion. The chief role of a priest is to act as a link between men and the deities. Priests also act as a channel of divine communication, making the wishes of their deity known to men. It is also the duty of priests to offer the sacrifices of men to their deities. Furthermore, a priest performs the daily and weekly rites of feeding his deity, pouring libations and offering prayers in time of crises for the overall well-being of the people. As the custodians of the shrine, he sees to it that it is kept clean and all the icons therein suitably housed (Tasie and Okindo, 2005, p.411). Priests in general look after holy and sacred places including shrines and temples where they officiate in worship and sacrifice. They are custodians of religious object, myths and traditions as well as links or intermediaries between divinities and worshippers (Anyacho, 1994, p. 270). It is also the responsibility of a priest to take care of the shrine, consecrate the religious emblems of the divinity, oversee the offering made at the shrine, and take a lead part in the annual ceremony. A priest also ascertains the will of his divinity through divination, dreams or a medium (George, 1990, p. 61).

Deforestation

This is a terminology that describes instant clearing of forests for land uses relating to agriculture, logging, mining, etc driving primarily by human activities leading to significant environmental damages such as biodiversity loss, soil erosion and climate change. Further, it is the indiscriminate removal of the trees for agricultural purposes such as crop planting, grazing and ranching (http://www.britannica.com/science/climate-change/defotestation extracted 13 February, 2026, /10:am)./.

Environment

The term environment means the natural world in which people, animals and plants live. It can be described as the unit from which resources needed for human sustenance and

development are obtained and into which human development is directed. Further, it can be defined as the circumstances or conditions that surround an organism or group of organisms, or the complex of social or cultural conditions that affect an individual or community (Ogedegbe, 2010, p. 287).

Major Components of Environment

The two major types of environment are:
Social environment; and physical environment.

Social Environment

This refers to other human beings found around us. They can influence an individuals by their behaviours, beliefs, attitude, and activities or even by the way they dress, the food they eat, the furniture and utensils they keep in their homes. Social environment consist of the following components and their interpersonal relations - the family, community and social institution such as religion, education, health, legal, political, economic, professional association and marriage, while the physical environment on the other hand, consists of four major but closely interrelated natural components. These are lithosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere and the biosphere.

i. **The Lithosphere**: This is the outer layer of the earth which is also called the earth crust. It comprises the land forms with the numerous properties and elements such as soils, mineral resources, the land itself and space. Indeed, the lithosphere is the foundation or the natural bedrock of the physical environment. It is on the lithosphere that man's special economic, cultural and political activities take place.

ii. **The Hydrosphere**: This comprises various water bodies, oceans, seas, rivers and lakes which occupy the earth surface. Waters of the oceans and seas form over 971% of the total hydrosphere. The remaining quantities, made up of ground water, lakes and streams are the sources of fresh water which sustain all forms of lives on land. About 71% of the earth surface is covered with water.

iii. **The Atmosphere**: This is a mass of gases which envelop the earth. The gases are made up of mixtures of the following:

- Oxygen, about 21% of the total air around us)
- Nitrogen, about 78%
- Argon and Neon, about 1%
- Carbon dioxide, about 0.033%
- Water vapour, about 3%, and it is the most variable. The atmosphere is of great importance to man and other living matters, e.g. plants and microorganisms. It makes life possible on the earth's surface because it supplies gases for survival of all life forms.

iv. **The Biosphere**: This is the sphere of life which lies at the interface between the lithosphere, the hydrosphere and the atmosphere. The biosphere exists on the zone of living things on the earth's surface. Living, things are made up of plants, animals, man and minute organisms such as bacteria and the microscopic plants and animals present in air, water and soil. The biosphere is, therefore of special importance to the human life and activities. It provides man with the primary source of support-air, water, food, energy and shelter. In addition to this are occurrences which affect the environment. This occurrences within the environment emanates from natural or human factors.

The occurrences of natural phenomena such as climate change, volcanicity, tectonic movements, etc and of human activities such as forest exploitation, overgrazing and mining, are believed to have adverse effect of the environment. Such impacts have created environmental disaster or hazards on different parts of the earth's surface. Some of the well known environmental hazards include global warming, soil and coastal erosion, deforestation, flooding land subsidence as well as atmosphere and water pollution (Ogedegbe, 2010, pp. 287-291).

Causes of Deforestation

One of the leading causes of deforestation is agricultural practices, accounting for more than 70 percent of deforestation rates. It involves the clearing of vast areas of forest for different agricultural uses such as crops planting/maize, okra, melon, vegetable, cattle ranching and livestock rearing and grazing, oil palm plantation, cocoa plantation, rubber plantation, logging (harvesting of timber products for construction, furniture and paper materials), etc. Both subsistence farming, i.e. where farmers grow crops at micro level to feed their families, as well as commercial agriculture, which produces crops in large quantities for export or domestic use are causative factors for the indiscriminate destruction of the forests and its reserves. Another factor that causes deforestation are mining and infrastructural development. This has to do with the clearing of the forest to carry out mining activities relating to the extraction of mineral resources such as crude oil, gold, copper, iron ores, limestone, coal, etc and building of infrastructure such as good road network, hospital, extension of, towns and industries (tobacco, breweries, oil mill, paper) (http://www.britannica.com/science/climate-change/defotestation extracted 13 February, 2026, /10:am)./.

Effects

One major effects of deforestation is that it causes biodiversity loss in the sense that it destroys the habitats of plants, and animals thereby exposing these species at the risk of extinction. In addition, it causes climate change (i.e. the release of vast amount of carbon dioxide) thereby leading to global warming. Furthermore, it causes erosion thereby leading to soil degradation and landslides. (http://www.britannica.com/science/climate-change/defotestation extracted 13 February, 2026, /10:am)./.

Effects of Deforestation on Akpoku Traditional Priesthood

In Akpoku, forest dedicated to the deities are referred to as o*hia-agbara*, meaning that they not only belong to the deities but also considered sacred in the sense that no body is expected to go into such forbidden forest to carry out any form of activity other than the priest. In Akpoku traditional priesthood, *ohia-agbara* as earlier noted, is not ordinary, it is a place where important rituals relating to priesthood are performed. To that regard, it is where the priest undergo four days of ritual seclusion to have a personal communion with the deity before the celebration of the festival associated with the deity. Thus, it is where the priest undergo two days of ritual seclusion before embarking on *oso-agbara*: a one week journey where the priest ran to his maternal home or to the place of the origin of his deity before his consecration into priesthood. Significantly, it enables the priest to prepare himself in order to be spiritually worthy and acceptable before the deity. Apart from this, it is also where the priest is buried when he died. For instance, it is in this forest that the priest of *Nkwoach* and

Ushi deities of Akpoku Etche were buried. Though that was some years back when I was a little younger. In addition, it is also where the priest performs reconciliatory ritual. In Akpoku traditional priesthood, this ritual is so significant in the sense that it is performed to reconcile the deities with its offenders especially those who killed the sacred animals dedicated to the deities without knowing (oral interview with Livinus Amadi).

Unfortunately, this sacred forest which by custom are forbidden to penetrate is at present being penetrated by the youths of the present generation of Akpoku. Often times, they go into this forbidden area to cut down the trees for firewood and charcoal all for economic gains. The danger inherent in this act is that it desecrates the forest. Another noticeable danger associated with this act is that it not destroys the sacred objects but also hampers or retrogresses the routine rites of feeding the deity and other important rituals relating to priesthood such *as oso-agbara, and ikele agbara*.

It is important to note that in Akpoku traditional priesthood, the forest is dedicated to the deities are store house of multi-religious emblems such as old blunt matchet, miniature clay pot, iron bars, staff of the deity, etc. they create an avenue for communion and communication between devotees and the object of worship (oral interview with Njoku.

Findings

Findings reveal that indiscriminate destruction of the bush dedicated to deities by the youths of Akpoku present generation has impinged very negatively the important Akpoku cultural values and practices.

Conclusion

In Akpoku, priesthood remains fundamental in Akpoku traditional religion. Through the institution of priesthood, the Akpoku people not only approach the supersensible world but also sustain the relationship since the people believe in the existence of two worlds, the visible, physical realm and the spiritual, invisible realm. There are aspects that makes Akpoku traditional priesthood thick and worthwhile. The dedication of bush or forest to the deities believed to be sacred and forbidden and the observance of rituals of *ikele-agbara* (reconciliation of deity) with people and *oso-agbara* (a journey undertaken by the priest to run to the place of the origin of his deity before consecration into priesthood are telling examples.

Unfortunately, this sacred and forbidden areas, are today being penetrated or desecrated by the youths as a result of indiscriminate cutting down of trees for charcoal, firewood, for economic gains. These activities today not only impinge very negatively on Akpoku indigenous practices but also hampers important Akpoku ritual practices relating to Akpoku traditional priesthood.

Recommendations

1. Indiscriminate destruction of *ohia-agbara* (i.e. bush dedicated to the deities) should be ceased henceforth especially by the youths of present generation of Akpoku people.
2. Akpoku Traditional Rulers and Chiefs as matter of urgency should swiftly embark on orientation exercise to conscientize the youths of present generation of Akpoku to desist from this act of destroying the forest reserves for economic gains rather they should leverage on modern technologies such as AI, laptops, android phones to create wealth.

3. They should put in place adequate measures not only to checkmate this indiscrimate act but also to punish perpetrators.
4. They should also conscientize the youths on the religious and spiritual implications of desecrating the sacred forest dedicated to the deities.
5. That the present generation of Akpoku should be proud of their indigenous practices and should see such as essential aspects of their rich cultural heritage.

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