ECOCIDE IN TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF ECOLOGICAL CRISSES IN NORTHEAST YORUBALAND

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Abstract
This paper examines ecocide in traditional African communities by using the Okun of northeast Yorubaland as a case study. The world is inundated with ecological crises of immense proportion of which traditional communities bear a huge burden. The global concern for ecological crises has inundated the world especially because humanity seems unprepared to challenge these crises. Data indicate that traditional communities such as Okun speaking people are affected badly by the ecological crises, yet, not much attention is paid to their plights. It is imperative therefore to examine the causes and effects of ecological crisis amongst the people. Methodologically, the study is a poly-analytical investigation of the menace of ecological crises among the Okun people. The study employs anthropological tools as means of investigation. Data collection was done by ethnographic fieldwork. The study identifies the various causes of ecological crises among the Okun people. Findings indicate that the ecological crises in Okunland have spiritual, economic and social impacts on the people. The study identifies the problems of ecocide in Okunland and concludes that the northeastern most part of Yorubaland is experiencing a period of ecocide. Recommendations are made for the amelioration of the problems.

Keywords: Anthropology, Ecology, Ecocide, Ethnography, Okunland.

Introduction
Ecological crisis has assumed planetary dimension and it has reached a rate that can be described as ecocide. Recently, Pope Francis (2020) declares that ecological problems have assumed frightening dimension across the world involving the unbridled exploitation of creation; both human beings and the environment. Scientists, theologians and activists are lamenting the heavy rate of ecological disasters which befall humanity (Aptekar, 1994; McDonagh, 2010; Tucker, 2004; Okpe, 2014; Okpoko, 2007; Shehu, 2015). Similarly, the olori ode (chief hunter) of Ogidi during the research looked askance at a side of the community and sighed. He pointed at the place and said, “this was a forest of the deity, now it is laid bare”. Also, the aworo (chief priest) of Ayedayo bemoans that the sacred grove has been invaded by herdsmen and lumber contractors. In general, data indicate that ecological crisis has assumed global proportion. Its effects have been of huge magnitude (McDonagh, 2010; Tubi, 2020).

This paper posits ecocide is taking place in traditional communities of northeast Yorubaland and that the effects of ecological crises are felt more among traditional communities who have
come under the severe attacks of ecological crises of which they lack the capacity to control or withstand. It is incumbent, therefore, for researchers to examine the cause and effect of ecological crises in general as well as examine in detail the same within traditional communities. It is in this light that this study uses the Okun people of Northern Yorubaland as a case study. The Okun present a good ground for the study because of its ability to maintain more of its pristine culture as a result of its location at the borderline of Yoruba nation. The researcher observed that the major socio-economic modern variables which have impacted heavily on Nigeria have had little effects on the people’s culture as they maintain a high degree of their pristine culture, (Tubi 2015).

Tubi (2020) asserts that ecological crisis is affecting the whole world and no community is immune. By drawing attention to Okunland, the study assumes a micro study which is different from global and regional studies which have been undertaken by scholars. Extensive ecological studies have been undertaken on regional and global levels by scholars. There is yet no detailed work on traditional communities known to the authors. It is, therefore, expedient to focus on generating data from traditional communities such as the Okun. The study is basically based on anthropological paradigm. The advantage of this approach is that it gives focus to a specific cultural milieu and situates it within the global data.

**People and Area of the Study**

The northeastern part of Yorubaland is peopled by the Okun, a subgroup of the Yoruba. They are found in Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara and Kogi States of Nigeria. However, this study focuses on the Okun who are domiciled in six Local Governments of Kogi state namely, Ijumu, Kabba-Bunu, Lokoja, Mopa-Muro, Yagba East and Yagba West. They speak a variant of Yoruba language called Okun and are grouped into six dialects of Bunu, Ijumu, Owe, Oworo, Kiri and Yagba, which are variants of the same language. They see themselves as kith and kin who migrated as siblings from Ile Ife or Oyo as the case may be. Their general historiography points inescapably to Ile Ife as their original home due to the fact that migration from Ile Ife has become the general format of Yoruba historiographical discourse. Archaeological data have enriched our knowledge of the people and their settlement history. Archaeology, thus, indicates that the area has been inhabited longer than Ile Ife. Recent archaeological data obtained in the area by Tubi (2020) revealed a Late Stone Age culture in the area, which substantially collaborate the studies of scholars like Asakitipi (2001), Bakinde (2013), Obayemi (2004) and Oyelaran (1996, 1998), who have carried out excavations in the area and dated the emergence of human habitation in the area to circa 300-400 BC. In this paper, the terms northeast Yorubaland and Okun will be used interchangeably as referring to the same reality.
Ecocide as a global concern

Ecocide is here construed as a deliberate destruction, degradation, devastation and deterioration of the environment by human activities. Human beings are destroying and damaging the earth and inescapably degrading the entire ecology. As a result, we are confronted with an immense ecocide of global proportion. Data by Adam (2009), Koop (2019), McDonagh (2010) and Christensen (2019) and others revealed that human beings are unleashing unmitigated disaster on the ecosystem, so much so that human beings and other creatures on the planet are facing extinction. According to scholars like Aptekar (1994), Shehu (2015), Okpe (2014) and Okpoko (2007), the natural environment has been defaced and impaired. This wide range of activities form what is called ecocide. Ecocide refers to the damage inflicted on the earth by human beings. It is the decimation of the planet and living things in it. It covers extensive damage to nature, the annihilation of the natural environment and incalculable vandalization of the earth. According to Adam (2009, p. 135) ecocide is “humanity’s environmental demon”. Ecocide is here defined as the self-inflicted fatality on the environment by human beings and other natural factors. Green (2019) advocates that ecocide should be considered as an international crime, while Okpe (2014) calls for ethical considerations for ecological crises.

According to scholars like Carrington (2019), McDonagh (2010), Tucker (2004), and Carmody (1983), the level of the ecological crisis that is besetting the world presents a glooming data. Humanity, therefore, can be said to have entered an era of ecocide. Seeing the grave condition of the earth, scientists presented the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) in 2005 saying, “Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of the earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted” (p. 5). Earlier, 1700 world’s leading scientists gave warning to humanity in 1992, saying:

“We the undersigned senior members of the world’s scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our
stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided. And our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated” (https://www.ucsua.org).

As a follow up, in 2017, 16,000 scientists issued another alarm on the impeding ecocide (Christensen, 2017), while on 5th November, 2019, 11,000 scientists from 150 countries issued a grim warming about ecological mayhem which has befallen the world by identifying what they called vital signs and indicators of the magnitude of the climatic emergency facing humanity (Carrington, 2019; Koop, 2019, Pytel, 2020). The climate change issue confronts humanity with the dangerous propensity of ecocide. This observation comes from scientific data which indicate that for more than fifty (50) years, the global temperature has accelerated tremendously. They contend that the earth’s ocean temperature is getting warmer, frequency of hurricanes has increased since the 1980s, extreme heat waves cause thousands of deaths around the world and the Antarctica is losing about 134 billion metric tons of ice per year since 2002. Severe droughts, troublesome new pests, heavy downpours, increased flooding, among others, have inflicted severe hardship on humanity.

In the words of Carmody and Carmody (1994: 174),

The major reason we have come to the brink of ecological crisis has been our loss of relation to nature. By treating nature as a factory, a production center existing only for our service, we have spent non-renewable resources prodigally and seriously damaged systems of renewable resources. The pollution of our air, water, and soil is mechanism’s telltale bequest.

Methodology
This research is an anthropological study of the ecology of the northeastern part of Yorubaland. Haen (2016) has substantiated the fact that environmental study can be enhanced by anthropology. Ethnography was the primary method of gathering data. It is useful in participant-observant fieldwork which helps to gather firsthand data on the ongoing ecological condition of the area. The research is based on physical examination of the ecology of the area and the ecological linguistic expressions of the people. The paper makes a critical analysis of the reasons and effects of the ecological conditions of the area. According to scholars like Tubi (2015), Ezeh and Okpoko (2006), ethnography is best suited for the study of traditional communities. Tubi (2015) examines the relevance of ethnography among the Okun and he concluded that it is effective in executing scientific studies of the cultural activities among the people and their responses to modernization and globalization.

To achieve maximum result, the researchers had a period of insertion among the Okun people for fifteen months with a view of ascertaining the level of ecological crises and determining their response to the menace. The study finds out the causes of the ecological crises and the linguistic expressions of the people. Anthropological investigation focuses on traditional Okun communities which are acclaimed by informants to have maintained aspects of their pristine culture better than the other communities. These communities are Ogidi, Mopa, Oyo-Obajana, Iluke-Olle and Alu-Igbagun. This method involves physical investigation of the
general environment of Okunland noting with particular attention the evidence and rate of ecological disasters which are ravaging the area.

Research Findings
The study reveals that the Okun people have good understanding of their environment and the level of ethnoecology is high. The words ayika (environmental) and agbegbe (environment) explain their connection to the ecology of the area. Paleo-archaeological data which focus on the ancient environment of the area point to human habitation dating to the Late Stone Age. Asakitipi (2001) and Oyelaran (1996, 1998) have enriched our knowledge of the ancient ecology of the area. The archaeological excavations at Ife and Ogidi have confirmed that the area has human habitation that extends into antiquity. Allsworth-Jones and Oyelaran (1991), Asakitipi (2001), and Oyelaran (1996, 1998) reveal extensive human impacts in the area involving human exploitation of natural resources like plants and animals. There are archaeological evidences of human impacts on Okunland for over two millennia (Oyelaran, 1996, 1998). Extensive clearance of the forest took place, while foraging, hunting and farming went on together in the area. There was also massive exploitation of ore used in metal working. A recent ethnographic study by Tubi (2019, 2020) reveals the magnitude of ecological crises among the Okun people. The study observes that the Okun people have no answer to the menace due to their low technological expertise, lack of government support and poor environmental management in the country. The research reveals that the people are aware of the on-going environmental crises in the area. Thus, ethnographic information derived from the fieldwork reveal that the people have local terms such as igbo (forest), aginju (wilderness), aluju (open grassland), asale (non-fertile ground) and ahorosale (desert) to describe the vegetation of the area.

The paper identifies deforestation, over grazing, bush burning, climate change, soil degradation, globalization and modernization as the prevalent causes of ecological crises and ecocide in Okunland.

Deforestation: A major ecocide activity which affects Okunland is deforestation. The Okun call it ipagborun. Deforestation is here defined as the felling of trees and clearance of land surfaces which affects the physical appearance of the environment. Paleo-environmental data from past archaeological investigations reveal that the area has been subjected long years of deforestation from the distant past (Asakitipi, 2001; Oyelaran, 1998). Ethnographic data reveal on-going deforestation of Okunland. Hunters of Okunland, in the course of this study, lament that several animals have vanished from their lands due to the disappearance of their forests. Hunting is a major pastime activity among the people. They hunt games to supplement their menu and sell the excess. Games hunted include rabbits, bush pigs, monkeys, monitor lizards, etc. The people say that in the past there were games like elephants, lions, cheetah, giraffe, and assorted animals, but all these have become extinct in Okunland (Adewumi, personal communication; Obahun, personal communication).

The main culprits of deforestation are timber lumbers who fell trees indiscriminately without replanting any substitute. The activities of lumber contractors have done incalculable damage to the environment. Another factor is the activity of charcoal makers. Peasant migrant Bassa and Tiv farmers who came into Okunland for farming activities, are also major causes of
heavy deforestation as they cut down many trees for processing charcoal for economic gain. As a result, several forests have become open grassland (Tubi, 2020).

**Over grazing:** The paper identifies over grazing as a major menace inflicted on the Okun people, who identify it as *ijeogborun*. Their land has virtually been subjected to overgrazing by cattle herders. The people are experiencing influx of Fulani herdsmen who come with large herds in search of fodder for their animals. Due to desertification which has made their traditional homes in the northern part of Nigeria unfavourable for cattle rearing, the Fulani have moved southwards in search of new grassland (Tubi, 2020). Fortunately, Okunland is a good arable land with sufficient water and grass, which appeal to the herdsmen. Turning Okunland into their new homes, they set up camps in the forest and open savannah. As a result of over grazing activities, arable lands have been despoiled and most parts have been rendered useless for farming activities.

**Bush burning:** Another cause of ecocide in Okunland is uncontrolled bush burning. Bush burning, called *igbosisun* by the Okun, has destroyed large swath of Okunland and destroyed parts of the ecosystem. Fauna and flora species have disappeared as a result of this activity. The Chief hunter of Ayedayo, one of the rural communities in the area, laments that sacred groves, hitherto hallowed, have been set on fire by cattle herdsmen, (Obahun, personal communication). At Oke Agi, the chief priest bemoans that the grove of the local deity has almost been wiped out due to bush burning by youths in search of animals (Yakubu, personal communication). This activity spread across the length and breadth of Okunland.

**Climate change:** The Okun refer to climate change as *iyipadaojuojo*. According to Pope Francis (2020), climate change is a global phenomenon which has unleashed ecological disasters on the world. Scholars such as Aptekar (1990) and McDonagh (2010) have identified climate change as a major ecological factor in the modern world. Traditional communities, being part of the global community, are experiencing global warming brought about by climate change. The planet has been subjected to heavy emission of carbon dioxide and the pollution of the atmospheric air. Okunland is part of the communities experiencing the effects of these activities. Since no part of the world is immune from climate change, Okunland like other traditional communities, bears a heavy brunt because they lack the mechanism and wherewithal to ameliorate the consequences of climate change. Climate change is very obvious to traditional communities. In this study, the hunters and herbalists of Okunland, who are adept at the environment pointed out that the climatic conditions of yore have changed from what obtains today. They note that irregularities of rainfall are basic indicators of climate change.

**Soil degradation:** *Ibajeile* are the Okun words for soil degradation. As maintained by scholars like Okpoko (2007) and Shehu (2009), soil degradation is another indicator of ecological crises in the world. This is even more pronounced in traditional communities who have to cope with the environment with crude farming equipment and limited food resources. Okunland land is facing a lot of degradation due to several activities like erosion, quarrying by extraction industries and use of fertilizers. Soil degradation is a major ecological issue among the Okun, because they are rural farmers who use hoe and machete for farming. Due to the over use of their land and the desire for more yields, they apply fertilizers consistently on their farms,
which though produce ample yields, have unfavourable effects on the soil. This is because fertilizers degrade the soil and the residue seeps into underground water which makes ponds and cisterns unfit for human consumption.

Fig 1: Soil degradation by Dangote Cement Company at Oyo-Obajana
Source: Original to researcher
Globalization and modernization: The people refer to globalization and modernization as *agbaye* and *isodotun* respectively. Tubi (2015) has identified globalization and modernization as major factors which affect the Okun people. He identifies interconnectivity of human beings which globalization portends as inimical to the advancement of traditional communities like the Okun, which have to compete with advanced economies. The result is that traditional communities like the Okun are heavily disadvantaged in the competition. The peoples’ search for modernization, in their quest of bringing about development, has despoiled the ecology of the local communities. Major construction works like schools, hospitals and factories demand extensive landmass. These buildings invariably lead to deforestation and its attendant losses.

Ecological Impacts on Northeast Yorubaland

This study reveals the causes of ecocide within Okun communities of northeast Yorubaland. Ecological crises have impacts on the people in the following areas: agriculture, social life and religion. These factors according to Tubi (2019, 2020), make Okunland to come under intense ecological crises.

Agricultural impact: On the authority of local informants, there are clear evidence of depreciation in agricultural yields due to ecological crises in Okunland (Akomolafe, personal...
communication; Ooju, personal communication). Basically, the Okun are agrarian and they rely heavily on fertile arable land for yam production, which is their stable crop, and others like millet, maize, cassava and melons, amongst others. The ravaging ecological crises have caused them to experience heavy reduction on the farm yields. Due to the activities of erosion, incessant bush burning and soil depreciation, their crops are not yielding as much as they had wished. Moreover, they are faced with constant threats from herders who destroy their crops.

Social impact: This study reveals another aspect of the social impact of ecological crises in Okunland, which is the emergence of conflict over lands. Ecological crises have contributed to intra and inter communal conflicts in the area over land disputes. As claimed by local informants, there is an increase in communal clashes between Okun communities. Hitherto largely unknown among the Okun, intra-communal clashes have emerged setting one community against the other overland boundaries. This is due to the search for arable land for farming. There are also inter-communal clashes between migrant farmers, herders and indigenes over competition for water and land (Akomolafe, personal communication). This sort of internecine warfare sets people of the communities against one another and this has invariably led to insecurity, and loss of lives and properties in the area.

Religious impact: According to Tubi (2015), Okun traditional religion is heavily dependent on the natural environment in which natural niches like hills, forests, caves, monoliths and trees are utilized maximally for ritual purposes. Okun’s rituals are embedded with natural features. Thus, any ecological disturbance is a major threat to their traditional religion. As claimed by traditionalists, ecological crises have impacted negatively on their religion (Akande, personal communication; Yakubu, personal communication). In recent times, forests are giving way to houses, hallowed groves are disappearing and sacred hills are vandalized. Due to modernizing activities like factories, roads, schools, stadia, etc., forests have receded and many animals have disappeared. Culturally moderating influence within the communities, such as designation of forests as groves of deities and the enactment of taboos, have been jettisoned in the name of modernization. Okpe (2014) gives a refreshing data on the religious implications of ecological crisis, and concludes that environmental pollution has moral implications for humanity.

Conclusion
This paper reveals fresh and illuminating data on the ecological crises that befall traditional communities by using the Okun speaking people as a case study. Ethnographic data show that the people are fully aware of the menace. General scholarship shows that the world is under immense ecological pressure occasioned by human activities and natural disasters. As noted in this paper, activists, scholars and religious men and women such as Pope Francis, (2013, 2020) Pope JohnPaul II (1990), Apte k (1994), Okpoko (2007) and Shehu (2015) among several authors, have voiced their concern on the menace. The data on traditional communities in Africa have not been well explored as noted by the paper. Okunland presents clear evidence on environmental degradation of different categories and from diverse sources. The paper concludes that ecocide menacingly faces humanity and there is the urgent need to respond appropriately, thus, the paper calls for criminalizing ecocide in line with the scholar, Green (2019) as a means of stemming the tide of ecological crises. The study opines that inappropriate response will spell doom for humanity and all living things on earth. Hence,
Eccocide is here presented as the inevitable outcome of the ongoing global ecological crises of which northeast Yorubaland bears a heavy brunt.

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