

THE ROLE OF FRANCISCAN ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN URHOBOLAND OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The global environmental crisis (or ecological crisis) remains unabated. Outside the global dimension, the ecological crisis can also be seen in different places, such as Urhoboland in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Environmental problems in Urhoboland include deforestation, oil pollution, which has affected air, land, and atmospheric conditions; mismanagement of waste, etc. And even a lack of awareness of environmental problems constitutes a problem. The paper argues that Franciscan eco-spirituality (emanating from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi), which emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, the need for human beings to live in harmony with nature (birds, animals, plants, and all other creatures), and humans as stewards of nature have a role to play in ameliorating the environmental problems found in Urhoboland. The paper uses critical, analytic, and hermeneutic methods to examine and explicate the issues in the paper for better understanding. The paper finds that there are environmental problems in Urhoboland. The paper concludes that Franciscan eco-spirituality can play a role in resolving the ecological crisis in Urhoboland.

Keywords: *Francis, ecospirituality, environment, Urhobo, Niger Delta.*

Introduction

Amidst the global environmental crisis that has affected native localities, nations, and the international society, there is an ongoing search for ideas and insights that can help to eradicate the crisis. In this ongoing search, there is the tendency to ignore spirituality or religion as some may see no value in it. But the fact is that spiritual values have a role to play in resolving the environmental crisis at the local, national, and international levels. The United Nations Environment Programme (2021) has affirmed that spiritual values have a place in ameliorating the environmental crisis. Another source, such as Universe

Spirit (n.d.), affirms that the global environmental crisis has deep ecological and spiritual causes, and that the principles of eco-spirituality are therefore important. Omojayowo et al (2023) also indicate that spirituality is connected to ecological matters and has and can continue to contribute to environmental conservation.

There is a need to call for environmental conservation in Urhoboland, a major area in the Niger Delta in which oil and gas resources are exploited. This exploitation of oil and gas resources and other factors that will be examined later has caused untold environmental damage to the people, land, and resources of Urhoboland. Environmental damage has not only happened in Urhoboland, but it has also occurred in the entire Niger Delta and beyond. Issues like global climate change, global warming, gas flaring, deforestation, desertification, environmental refugeeism, ecocide, eco-terrorism, violent struggle over natural resources, and many others are replete in Urhobo land, the Niger Delta, and beyond. Without environmental conservation, humanity runs the risk of bringing itself into extinction and annihilating all other non-human life on Earth. Without environmental conservation, the lives of future generations are not assured.

By way of method, the paper will use hermeneutics and critical analysis. The concepts in the paper shall be hermeneutically interpreted for better understanding. The issues that the paper deals with shall be critically evaluated and unraveled. By procedure, the paper will examine the basic concepts, look at some environmental problems confronting Urhoboland, examine some elements of Franciscan eco-spirituality, and the application of the eco-spirituality to Urhoboland and beyond. While the paper deals with Urhoboland, the implications of Franciscan eco-spirituality extend beyond Urhoboland.

Conceptual Clarifications and Analysis

The following concepts will be defined in this paper: Franciscan, Eco-spirituality, environmental conservation, and Urhoboland. Tetlow (1995) opines that some persons see spirituality as self-transcendence, reaching out for ultimate meaning or the establishment of an intimate relationship with God. The concept of Franciscan eco-spirituality is used to denote eco-spirituality that flows from the teaching, life, and practices of Saint Francis of Assisi. Roewe (2020) writes that Francis was born in 1181/2 to a wealthy Italian cloth merchant, and he got converted in 1201 when he was captured in a battle and later on had visions of God commanding him to build his church, the church which he came to understand later as all creation. Jim (2007) pointedly indicates that in 1209, Francis was inspired by Matthew 10:7-10 to adopt a life of radical poverty and to preach repentance, love, and spiritual innocence. This bible version in the Revised Standard Version reads thus: “And preach as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay. Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your

belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food.” Macy (2007) writes that in 1210, Pope Innocent III gave approval for the way of life established by Francis and those around him, while he relinquished leadership of the order, and he died in 1226 in the little church in Portiuncula, near Assisi.

In this work, eco-spirituality or ecospirituality or ecological spirituality shall be used interchangeably. University of San Diego Online (2024), in a paper reviewed by Keith Warner, states that eco-spirituality celebrates human connection to the earth, which is seen as sacred and in line with the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi, ecology's patron saint. Universe Spirit (n.d) asserts that eco-spirituality or evolution spirituality asserts fundamentally that nature, the earth, or the universe is sacred and human beings are an intrinsic part of nature. Crockett (2020) writes that: The word 'spirit' comes from the Latin spiritus. Spiritus is the root of the words 'inspiration, ' 'respiration' and 'transpiration.' Spiritus means 'breath.' The Indo-European root is likely (s)pies, which means 'to blow.' In its original meaning, spirit is a physical thing, inhalation and exhalation. Only in the 14th century did 'spirit' start to mean a supernatural, disembodied entity, a ghost (p.2).

Billet et al (2023) state that: “ Ecospirituality may then be defined as the appraisal and experience of nature's spiritual qualities” (par 3). In looking at the link or connection between spirituality and ecology, Chole (2017) writes that there is an ecological dimension to spirituality, and there is a spiritual dimension to ecology, and from the 1980s, there is a dialogue between both. Moltzen (2015) writes that in the medieval world, people became alienated from the intimate bonds they previously had with the ecosystems as a result of landowning by the rich and ruling class who oppressed the people and denigrated their human dignity; but Francis of Assisi identified with the poor and lowly and also coming to understand his human place in creation developed and cultivated spiritual closeness with the land, birds, animals (and this is beautifully encapsulated with his Canticle's of the Creatures).

The term environment, according to Ezedike (2020), comes from environmer, a French word that means what surrounds or encircles, and by extension, it now refers to all abiotic and biotic realities that surround an entity. Ezedike (2020) notes further that it is also the totality of economic, physical, cultural, aesthetic, and social circumstances that surround and affect human life and other organisms. Bellamy (2007) writes that the environment is “ that which surrounds an individual or a community at any point in its life cycle, both physical and cultural surroundings....The environment includes air, water, soil, light, temperature, and the presence or absence of other organisms” (pp. 153- 154).

Omojayowo et al (2023) state that: “to recreate sustainable healthy living space for humanity, efforts would be required to provide clean air, natural resources, and a non-toxic environment. This so-called human effort is what scientists literally termed environmental conservation” (para 5). Ezenweke & Nwachukwu (2023) cite R B Primack, who writes that conservation encompasses a range of scientific, political, and ethical approaches aimed at preserving and restoring ecosystems, species, and habitats in order to maintain ecological balance and prevent further loss of biodiversity” (p. 128). Urhoboland refers to the ancestral land of the Urhobo people, which they have occupied from time immemorial. This land, which is located in the Delta State of Nigeria, is home mainly to the Urhobo people who speak the Urhobo language as their native language and Pidgin (though many equally speak English and other foreign languages), and practice the Urhobo culture. The Urhobo people are mainly found in this land. Darah (2014) remarks that as at 2006, they numbered 2 million and they have their immediate neighbours, the Ukwuani to the northeast, the Isoko to the East, the Edo to the North, the Itsekiri to the southwest and the Ijaw to the south. Darah (2014) states further that the Urhobo territory is about 5000 sq. km, located in the tropical rainforest lowlands in Western Niger Delta. Otit (2021) writes that Urhoboland is “ marked by latitude 6° and 5° 151 North and longitudes 5° 401 and 6 ° 251 East in the present Delta State of Nigeria” (p.1).

Environmental Challenges in Urhoboland and Beyond

Urhoboland is inundated with a lot of environmental challenges and problems. The environmental problems that plague Urhoboland include deforestation, pollution from gas ?aring and oil exploitation, wildlife destruction and extinction, mismanagement of industrial and domestic waste, communal/family land disputes, and even poor awareness of environmental issues. Deforestation is a common problem in Urhoboland. In a place like Urhoboland, as in other parts of Nigeria, there is an epileptic power supply. As a result of this inadequate power supply, many people in rural places depend on wood for fuel. There are villages in rural places that are not even connected to the power grid, and so many have no option but to depend on wood for fuel and other uses. It is a common sight to travel through roads, especially in rural places in Urhoboland, and see neatly arranged wood packed in different bundles waiting to be sold. However, in recent times, the demand for wood has gone beyond its mere use for domestic purposes by rural dwellers. As industrialization increases, the construction of gigantic and luxurious houses increases among urban and city dwellers. There is an extremely high demand for wood and other natural materials like rock and even sand, and often some of these materials, especially sand, are gotten from surrounding villages. There is hardly any area that you go to in Urhoboland where you will not find people drilling for sand. In all of these forests, plants and trees are being felled to get to the sand and wood. Thus, the rate of deforestation and environmental destruction in Urhoboland needs urgent attention.

Deforestation has also been heightened by oil and gas exploration in the land. It is impossible to exploit and drill for crude oil without felling plants and trees. Multinational oil companies often have to fell trees to give way for their heavy transport vehicles, transporting their equipment, machinery, and staff. Pipelines that carry crude oil have to be laid, and this requires that trees be felled. The oil companies mainly think of the profits that they will make more than anything else. The destruction of trees to make way for oil activities also degrades the land, water, and atmosphere. Different organisms are killed in the process, the habitat of birds and animals is tampered with, and the atmosphere is polluted by drilling activities. One cannot also shy away completely from the negative effect of religious practices that involve the felling of trees in the name of cleansing and eradication of the domain and habitats of 'evil spirits.' These authors disagree with this belief system that demonizes the trees and forests. It is a common sight in communities that have organized religious crusades against the devil to see trees being felled or burnt. Trees that are alleged to be possessed by evil spirits are cut down and burnt without the conscious effort of planting new ones. Even if new ones are planted, this does not warrant the felling of trees in the name of deliverance. If there is anybody or anything that needs delivery, it is the human beings who cut down trees indiscriminately in the name of God. These religious acts do not just constitute deforestation; they also engender air pollution and health hazards in some instances.

There is another environmental disaster that has become a common practice in Urhoboland, it is the practice of sand dredging. This is disturbing because in every 400-meter drive, one is likely to see a sand quarry. The sight of these quarries is very ugly, because most of them are very close to houses where people live, with no proper soil or geological research and guidance on how to operate such sites. They are even near people's farmland. These haphazardly sited quarries may also distort the topography of the land and destroy the habitat of some smaller species of animals. This is because before these quarries are sited, the bushes around which are a habitation to smaller animals are cleared. This common environmental challenge, if not addressed on time, may become worse than oil spillage, considering the long-term or future environmental harm that may ensue from it. Sand quarry sites also create noise pollution.

Pollution of the land, water, and atmosphere in Urhoboland is a common occurrence. Gas flaring is a common problem in Urhoboland. It is unfortunate to note that in Nigeria, the Federal Government has mandated and set deadlines for gas flaring to end, but to this day, gas flaring is still a common issue in Urhoboland and beyond. This is simply because, like in many other failed laws, many Nigerian government administrations lack the will to enforce some of these laws, or there is a high level of politicking going on. Gas is flared in many places in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. While many countries in the West have put an end to gas flaring, it has yet to be stopped in Nigeria. Gas flaring pollutes the land and atmosphere. Gas flaring has led to various health hazards and the

spread of diseases. Gas flaring has caused acid rain and corroded people's roofs. Olong, Nkanu, Efut, and Uba (2018) write concerning the Niger Delta that oil exploitation has produced enormous environmental degradation, displaced the native settlers, polluted water and agricultural land, and created health problems for the people. What is said of the Niger Delta is inclusive of Urhoboland, which is situated in the Niger Delta region. As in other areas in the Niger Delta, there are many oil wells and oil exploitation activities in Urhoboland. Ojameruaye (2021) lists some of the problems associated with oil and gas exploration in Urhoboland as gas flaring, oil spills, explosions, and fire disasters, etc.

Ojameruaye (2021) writes that gas flaring contributes to global warming and climate change as methane is released into the atmosphere, contributes to health hazards; oil spills, which are common in Urhoboland contributes to land and marine pollution; and petroleum oil disasters in places like Idherhe, Ekakpamre, Amukpe, Elume, Egborode, causing damage to people's crops, damage to lands and streams. Abotutu (2015) shows that oil companies such as Shell hurt the environment of Urhoboland, as big fires from their sites hinder people from sleeping, scorch the earth, and make the air hot in places like Kokori, Orogun, Agbarha-Otor; while pipeline infernos killed over ten thousand people in Urhoboland since 1998; with all these religious sites, trees, fish, and farmlands have been destroyed in places like Edjophe, Adeje, Ewu, and other places. The devastating effect of the oil spill and eventual inferno at Jesse is still fresh in the memories of the natives. Lives were lost, the land was destroyed, and uncultivable.

Human activities have also led to the destruction of wildlife and the extinction of some. It is well known that as the human population grows, there is a need for more human houses, factories, and industries. Many years back, there were not many cities and towns as found in Urhoboland today. Growing up in Ughelli and Otogor many years back, one of the authors of this paper recalls there were a lot of bushes and forests, and many species of birds and animals, such as monkeys, bush babies, monitor lizards, snakes, etc., could be found in the nearby bushes, even surrounding the houses. But today, these cannot be found as either they have been hunted or driven out of their habitat. Fishes that were common in the streams and rivers in Urhoboland are now rare to see as they have been poisoned by chemicals from oil companies and other factories.

Another area in which there are grave environmental challenges in Urhoboland is the management of waste. There is nowhere in Urhoboland or elsewhere in the world where waste is not generated. The problem of waste is both a local and a global one. The United Nations has noted the problem with plastic waste. The rivers and oceans are filled with plastic waste, which has endangered or killed the lives of animals and other marine creatures. A walk-through of markets in Urhoboland, which the current authors have done, reveals solid waste that is placed in the open spaces in the market that lies there for

days. This pollutes and causes health hazards, especially as the air gets poisoned by the smell of the waste. Water bodies in Urhoboland are filled with waste. People generate waste in their homes or as they travel on the road from the food that they have purchased and just throw it on the roads, the roadsides, or the rivers. It is a common sight to see some people connect their pipes from their toilets to the open gutters in front of their houses. Open defecation is still very common in rural areas due to the absence of proper toilets. It is common to see people defecating in streams in rural places. Joab-Peterside (2019) writes that in the Niger Delta, the problem of waste is assuming monumental dimensions as the population explodes and homes and industries generate waste, which is poorly managed

Poor environmental awareness could also be considered an environmental problem in Urhoboland. One of the present writers writes a monthly environmental column titled “Earth Keeper” for the diocesan Messenger of Peace Magazine of the Catholic Diocese of Warri. People have often expressed to him that they previously did not know they had duties towards the environment. Because of poor environmental awareness or a lack of interest in environmental issues, some people don't care about monthly environmental sanitation. It is also a reality that some natural animals and birds are stereotyped as evil and possessed. This is a direct consequence of a lack of proper knowledge. It has resulted in the hurting of these animals. The environmental problems examined above regarding Urhoboland are not peculiar to Urhoboland. There is hardly any place that you go in this world that is free from environmental problems. It is the view of this paper that because environmental problems are everywhere, the Franciscan eco-spirituality proposed here is equally applicable beyond Urhoboland.

Elements of Franciscan Eco-spirituality

The following, according to the University of San Diego Online (2024), are principles of Eco-spirituality, the source of nature is the divine, human beings are part of nature and not separated from it, nature is not to be used exclusively by humans, humans are stewards of nature, humans are to show love to nature by caring for nature, and we can relate with the divine we live in the world. Universe Spirit (n.d) also presents similar ideas when it enunciates that human beings are born of nature, are not the owners of nature and nature does not simply exist for anthropocentric purposes; human beings should make good use of nature and stop all pollution, human should realize that the natural world is not infinite and overexploitation of the earth must stop, human beings are stewards not destroyers, humans should honour the principles in ecology, and principles of planetary evolution.

In his *Canticles of Creatures*, Francis expressed his deep love to be with and care for all creatures. Moltzen (2015) states that Franciscan spirituality has as its object seeing in everyone, God, particularly in the poor and marginalized; protection of all creatures and

creation, thereby also paying attention to the issue of climate change and justice. Bratton (2009) writes that the medieval biographer of St Francis, Thomas of Celano, reported that Francis “ fed bees in winter, released animals from traps, and allowed native wild?owers to remain around the edges of a cultivated garden” (p. 280). Francis, as Bratton (2009) writes, resisted treating nature as a material possession, showed concern for the marginalized (both humans and nature), and had a “non-hierarchical valuation of nature, by identifying the planets as brother and sister” (p.281). Francis's (2015) encyclical letter titled *Laudato Si* could be described as an expression of Franciscan eco-spirituality. The title of the encyclical itself is drawn from Saint Francis's *Canticle of all Creatures*. Cholim and Parker (2021) writes that Francis lived an emetical life of non-luxury serving the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, preaching to animals and birds (see the *Sermon to the Birds*), showing concerns to all creatures such as insects, cornfields and vineyards, air and wind, calling creatures sisters and brothers not to be treated as objects to be dominated by having belongings with humans in one family, kinship. For Francis, all life is sacred and should be lovingly protected for the love of God Almighty.

Franciscan eco-spirituality can be seen as an incarnational ecological spirituality. The material world is not a mirage. The material world is not evil. It is real, and God dwells in it. God became a human being in Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and by his taking human ?esh in this material world, he signified the world as a holy place and a resident of divinity. There can be some persons in the world who consistently cultivate a life of sin, but the world or creature in itself is not evil. Creation is loved by God, and God is incarnated in the world. Elphick (2023) states that: “At one time, spirituality devalued matter to focus solely on a new world to come. This mindset makes caring for the Earth as our common home almost unnecessary because we're going to get a new and better world. St. Francis helped recover the spirituality that treasured created matter, announcing that the present world is our sacred cloister. He celebrated Mother Earth and our Sister Water” (para 1). Francis (2015) writes concerning the natural world, thus: “ The universe unfolds in God, who fills it. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things” (no. 233).

In his life, Francis renounced wealth and riches. He lived a humble lifestyle, and even at times, he and his followers had to beg to sustain themselves. He shunned worldly privileges, and the occasion that precipitated his father's rejection of him was when he threw his father's clothes and other items to the poor and needy in the streets of Assisi. Cholim and Parker (2021) opine that Francis spirituality happened within the European medieval context, but the ethical relevance was explicitly expressed by Pope Francis who wrote of the intrinsic value of creation, the interdependence of all life, the need for

integral ecology, and the need to care for the common home by ending social injustice, environmental degradation, consumerism and the evils associated with industrial civilization.

Applying the Values of Franciscan Eco-spirituality to Urhoboland and Beyond

Though Francis lived long before our present day and did not use the same categories and terminologies as we do, the fact remains that his attitude and practical love for nature hold implications for humanity and the contemporary environmental crisis. The natural world remains the natural world from the time of Francis, though human imprints on it are different in every age. The earth has not changed from being the earth from the time of Francis.

First and foremost, it is important to state that it is difficult if not nearly impossible, to apply what you do not know. It is imperative then that awareness on Franciscan eco-spirituality and eco-spirituality in general is spread and fostered in Urhoboland and elsewhere. This requires some form of environmental education/communication centered on this spirituality. The role of every form of environmental education is indispensable in fostering environmental conservation. The United Nations (1972) enunciated that environmental education is necessary in enlightening people to improve the environment, and people across all generations and the mass media should be involved in this. This paper acknowledges that, currently, Franciscan eco-spirituality may not be well known in Urhoboland. But it can be spread. This can be done in various ways. Presently St Francis is considered a saint in the catholic church, and his feast day is celebrated on 4th October every year. This is an important day that Catholics can use to spread the message and life of Francis and speak about his eco-spirituality. Ministers in the Catholic Church should see it as their duty to promote the eco-spirituality of St Francis on this day and beyond this day. The eco-values that St Francis promoted should be incorporated into the educational curriculum in Catholic schools in Urhoboland.

St Francis remains a hero in the Christian tradition and children especially love his story. Christians should speak more about him in their churches. Franciscan spirituality is a Christian spirituality, prevalent in the Catholic tradition. This attitudinal openness and mindset concerning creation should be imbibed and cultivated by Christians. The mindset of seeing the world as an evil place should be shunned. There is a need for reorienting Christian eschatology. While it is true that heaven is the goal of believers and they have spiritual citizenship in heaven, it is also true that they have duties to the earth in the meantime. Jesus, the messiah, taught his followers to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth.” God's kingdom and will on planet earth is not only human wellbeing and welfare, but also the protection of all other non-human creatures. God's will is for human beings to cultivate, till, and care for the garden that he entrusted to humans at the beginning of creation. Francis loved and cared for creatures and creation.

He saw and lived in close affinity and kinship with the animals, birds, land, etc. He saw himself as a humble brother of creation. Francis would not hurt the animals and the birds. This is the way of life that people in Urhoboland and beyond should adopt. Do not harm creatures. This also includes not causing harm to those animals and birds allegedly stereotyped as evil, such as cats, owls, snakes, and bats. And any use of creation should be done benignly and compassionately, avoiding wanton destruction. If the Franciscan attitude is adopted, it will help in the conservation of nature and promote sustainability in Urhoboland.

Omojayowo et al (2023) state that: conservation measures that have been globally adopted include afforestation, green lifestyle such as reuse, reduce, recycle; saving energy resources and water, responsible disposal of waste, and responsible consumption. These are precisely the values that Francis stood for, also. Franciscan eco-spirituality emphasizes the importance of simple living and shuns a life of luxury and extravagance. It is well acknowledged that overconsumption and unethical consumption do hurt the planet's resources. Waste generated from overconsumption cannot be the same as that generated from little consumption. All forms of human consumption affect the earth. But the impact can be minimized. The advocacy is such that while man ploughs the earth, he must not plunder it. Woodhouse (2013) cites A Satterthwait saying global consumerism is corrosive culturally, and D. A. Crocker and T Lindman who state that it is environmentally unsustainable. This paper had mentioned waste management as one of the problems facing Urhoboland. The less consumption, the less waste that will be generated. Sagoff (2001) writes that we should treat the earth with respect, and less consumption will save our planet. Dan Hooley and Nathan Nobis (2023) opine that there is a moral obligation to reduce animal eating because of the impact of animal agriculture on global climate change.

Francis was a man of canticles and loved songs. Urhobo people are people of song. Urhobo, like many other African people, love songs and dances. Local canticles should be developed in Urhoboland, and canticles about creation that already exist should be tapped into for environmental care. They can be sung in village squares that advocate care for the environment. This can also be integrated into some of the traditional festivals in the communities. These canticles should be taught to children also and broadcast through the media. The drive for enlightenment should be all-encompassing, both for the adherents of African traditional religion and the adherents of Christianity. From either front, the campaign should be that humans must celebrate and take care of nature. Rather than misusing nature, they should contemplate in nature the beauty of creation and a means to connect with the Divine.

Conclusion

The paper examined the role that Franciscan eco-spirituality can play in environmental

conservation in Urhoboland. Key concepts that defined the paper were conceptualized. The environmental situation in Urhoboland was examined. It was shown that there are a lot of environmental problems in Urhoboland, such as deforestation, gas flaring, marine and land pollution, air pollution, indiscriminate felling of forests by people on religious crusades, indiscriminate sand dredging, mismanagement of waste, and so forth. Lack of adequate environmental awareness was also indicated to be an environmental problem. The paper proposed Franciscan eco-spirituality, coming from Saint Francis, as a viable ecological belief that can be adopted for eco-praxis in Urhoboland and beyond. As discussed above, Franciscan eco-spirituality sees nature as imbued with the divine presence, humans as stewards and friends of nature, and encourages humans to live with responsibility in the conservation of nature and, indeed, all creation. While human beings can make use of nature in Urhoboland, it should be done in moderation and prudence, doing minimal damage to nature. If people can live by the spirit of Saint Francis, it will help in environmental conservation in Urhoboland and beyond.

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