

Environmental Degradation, Sacramentality and Urhobo Conception of Oghene's Omnipresence

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Abstract

The global environmental crisis is still raging and has yet to be abated. This environmental crisis has manifested itself in the form of desertification, deforestation, ecocide, environmental terrorism, global warming, climate change, biodiversity destruction, etc. In a place like Urhoboland in Nigeria's Niger Delta, the area has been subjected to environmental degradation emanating from oil exploration activities and effects such as oil spillage, and gas flaring. The area has also suffered from the environmental consequences of herdsman attacks, careless waste disposal, noise pollution, illegal sand dredging, etc. This paper argues that the Christian doctrine of sacramentality and the Urhobo concept of Oghene's presence in the universe, which are analogous, can inspire environmental conservation in Urhoboland and beyond. It uses critical analytic, dialogical, and evaluative methods to show that environmental degradation has taken place in Urhoboland. It is also argued that environmental education, recognition of the right to Indigenous environmental knowledge, etc. can mitigate environmental degradation and the land conserved.

Keywords: Environment, degradation, sacrament, sacramentality, Urhobo, Oghene, God

Introduction

The global phenomenon of environmental crisis, which has been witnessed in biodiversity destruction, deforestation, desertification, environmental refugeeism, ecocide, environmental terrorism, global warming, climate change, and so forth, has necessitated searching into religious sources and Indigenous traditions for gems of wisdom that can contribute to positive action to ameliorate the environmental crisis. While many scholars have argued for the

greening of Christianity and its liturgy, there are still concepts in Christianity that have not been fully explored. One of such concepts is the concept of sacramentality. Concerning indigenous traditions, the Urhobo concept of *Oghene's* omnipresence has yet to be thoroughly examined. The task before this paper is to bring the Christian doctrine of universal sacramentality and the Urhobo concept of *Oghene's* omnipresence into dialogical conversation, while also applying them to the issue of environmental conservation. While the many aspects of the religions of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Native American Religions, etc., are often voiced and highlighted, the viewpoint of Urhobo traditional religion and culture, which is an aspect of African traditional religious culture, is not well known. This forms one of the crucial bases for this paper. The viewpoint of the Urhobo people of Nigeria's Niger Delta matter and should be taken into consideration in global ecological discourse.

The notion that religious concepts, beliefs, worldviews, and practices can serve environmental conservation is well acknowledged by many scholars and authors. The 1996 to 1998 Harvard conferences on Religion and Ecology, held at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religion, recognized that religions have beliefs and practices that help nurture and conserve nature and help humans discover their cosmological selves (Tucker et. al., 2013). Ecological spirituality is another idea that expresses this interconnectedness and intersection between religion and ecology (Branton, 2006). From another perspective, religious communities can help fight climate change through their activities, examine the obstacles that impede religious participation in environmental protection, and provide theological foundations for environmental protection (Renger, Stork & Ohlmann, 2024). That religion is connected to ecology and can aid in making a planetary ethic is also an attested fact (Bauman, 2014; Chitando, Conradie, and Kilonzo, 2022; Tyson, 2021; Deane-Drummond and Bedford-Strohm, 2011). It should be recognised that: "The moral values and interpretive systems of religions are crucially involved in how people imagine the challenges of sustainability and how societies mobilize to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being" (Jenkins, Tucker, & Grim, 2017, para 1). Religion and ecology remain an emerging field that has not been fully explored, but at its core is the idea that the varied and complex Earth-human relations can also be found in religious traditions (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2025).

From the key literature advanced above and many others, it becomes clear that religions have played a crucial role and can continue to play a role in resolving the Earth's crisis. To accomplish the objective of this paper, the hermeneutics, evaluative, dialogical, and critical analytic methods are adopted. Through hermeneutics, some key concepts are clarified and their meaning provided. Through the evaluative method, the paper will examine the value of the issues. Since the key variables of environmental conservation, environmental degradation, sacramentality, and Urhobo conception of God's omnipresence are the issues being discussed, the paper will bring them into dialogue with one another. The entire work is an analytic quest to provide a basis for environmental conservation. The procedure adopted in this paper is to present some key conceptual clarifications and look at the state of environmental degradation in Urhoboland. The paper will then study the elements of the Christian doctrine of sacramentality and the Urhobo concept of God's omnipresence. When that has been done, the

implications of both concepts for environmental conservation will be discussed, followed by the way forward and the conclusion of the work.

Conceptual Clarifications

The following concepts of environmental conservation, environmental degradation, sacramentality, Urhobo, *Oghene*, and omnipresence are necessary for clarification in this paper. Environment is seen as “the aggregate of all those things which directly or indirectly influence not only the life of organisms but also the communities at a particular place” (Narayanan, 2016, p. 1). Everything that surrounds an organism is called the environment. Humans are part of the environment, and everything that humans see and interact with in the universe is part of the environment. The environment includes plants, animals, wind, moisture, light, soil, temperature, pollutants, organisms, pesticides, insecticides, and everything in existence. UNEP (1976) states that the environment is the “whole physical and biological system in which man and other organisms live...with many interacting components” (Santra, 2023, p. 3). The term environment is often used synonymously with the term ecology, which refers to the interrelations and interactions among all things in the environment or ecosystem. To conserve is to keep in place, and protect from despoilation, degradation, and harm. To conserve is to make a thing sustainable and free from corruption and decay. Environmental conservation speaks of keeping, safeguarding, and protecting the environment or ecosystems of the Earth from harm, damage, degradation, and corruption. It ensures that Earth’s systems and all life on Earth live in harmony and balance and perform their ecosystemic functions. Environmental conservation does not mean human beings will not make use of the things or resources of the Earth. Like other organisms, humans depend on the ecosystems and the food chain to sustain themselves on Earth. Environmental conservation is the necessary use of resources while ensuring minimal impact on the Earth. It is a fact that: “All organisms modify their environments, and humans are no exception” (Santra, 2013, p.4). As defined by the 1969 General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, conservation is managing the environmental resources of water, air, earth, living creatures, and minerals to ensure a high quality of life (Ayoade, 2015). Simply put, conservation is the wise and ethical use of resources without depleting them. In other words, it is a sustainable use. Environmental degradation can be seen as “a situation in which a part of the natural environment is damaged. It can be used to refer to damage to the land, to water, or to the air. It can also mean a loss of biodiversity and a loss of natural resources in an area” (Anah, 2019, p. 9).

It is difficult to understand the word sacramentality without first looking at the concept of sacrament. The term sacrament is from *sacramentum* (a Latin word), and stands for a pledge, oath, or money deposited in a temple; and in turn, the term was used in translating the Greek word (*mysterion*) meaning something secret, hidden, or concealed (Pierce, 2007). Sacrament is a key term, especially in Catholic liturgy, theology, and other orthodox churches. A sacrament is generally understood to be “an outward sign of inward grace ordained by Jesus Christ” (this is what this author learnt while in catechism class). It means that when people receive a sacrament, there are outward signs, but these signs point to something fundamental, the inward grace, gift, and blessedness imparted from the external signs. From this idea comes the notion of sacramentality. There is a grace which is invisible but present through sacraments.

Sacramentality refers to grace being present in nature and the universe. The nature of the natural world has a sacramental dimension. There is present in nature and invisible grace and goodness. From the notion of Jesus Christ, God's embodiment in this world, sacramentality means God's presence is in the created things of the universe, including human beings, which makes the world sacred. Through the natural world, people can perceive and discover God, and human activities of service to one another are 'sacraments' of God (Catholic Identity, 2020). In other words, "Sacramentality is the principle that says everything in creation, people, movements, places, the environment, and the cosmos itself, can reveal God. Under this principle, the division between sacred and secular is erased: Everything is sacred because all comes from the Lord" (Order of the Most Holy Mary Theotokos, n.d, p. 1). The universe is sacramental for it carries the presence of God, the divine. It is a vital vehicle through which God communicates Godself. This makes the universe holy and blessed. The universe is not evil or cursed.

The next concept that requires clarification is Urhobo. The Urhobo people belong to the Edoid subunit of the Kwa language-speaking people, which is part of the larger Benue-Congo group (Edevbie, 2022). They are the 5th largest ethno-nation in Nigeria, occupying the rainforest zone in the Niger Delta with both upland and coastal areas (Ejoor, 2011). The Urhobo people are predominantly found in the Western Niger Delta, in Delta State of Nigeria. They occupy the Delta Central Senatorial District, though some are also in other places. Their indigenous language is Urhobo, though some also speak English, Pidgin, French, Spanish, etc. Many Urhobo people can be found in the African Diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other places. As part of Nigeria's Niger Delta, they are affected by environmental problems affecting the region, and they have suffered from much environmental degradation coming from oil exploration and drilling activities. *Oghene* is the Urhobo indigenous name for God, the supreme being.

Oghene is the almighty, the all-knowing, and the controller of the universe. The word omnipresence means present everywhere and in all places and things. There is nowhere in which *Oghene* (God) is not present. *Oghene's* omnipresence means that the supreme being and the all-powerful are everywhere. *Oghene* is the supreme spirit. *Oghene* is a spirit being, and his presence makes things holy and sacred. In all religions, the presence of God is seen as holy and sacred. It calls for own reverence. In the burning bush at the sight of the burning bush, Moses trembled with awe and put off his shoes. Since God is present in the material and natural things in the universe, they should be approached with fascination and awe.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks are used to undergird this work. They are eco-spirituality and eco-stewardship. Spirituality relates to people's relationship with spiritual realities and beings. The highest of spirits is the supreme being. This supreme being, God or *Oghene*, is the Highest Spirit and power. Spirituality is people's relation to ultimate issues. The word "eco" is the short form for ecology. Ecology deals with the interaction of all things, beings, and realities in the universe. Ecospirituality is how people relate to the ecosystems through their experience of God or the supreme spirit. Ecospirituality sees that all things are interconnected and interrelated and

permeated with the spirit of the supreme being. You cannot have an authentic relationship with the ultimate spirit when neglecting the creatures God created. It should be known that:

Ecospirituality is a spiritual perspective that integrates ecological awareness with a sense of the sacred. It acknowledges that the Earth is not merely a resource to be exploited but a living, interconnected system that must be honored and protected. Ecospirituality is deeply tied to the idea of ecological responsibility, urging individuals and communities to engage in sustainable practices as a spiritual duty (Covenant of the Goddess, n.d).

Ecospirituality means that nature has a spiritual dimension. "Ecospirituality may be defined as the appraisal and experience of nature's spiritual qualities. This definition captures common features across many examples of what one may reasonably call eco-spiritual"(Billet et al., 2023, para 3). Ecospirituality calls people to stewardship of Earth's resources. What this paper argues for is in line with ecospirituality. The sacramentality of creation and the Urhobo notion that God is present everywhere and in everything imply that nature or creation should be seen differently. Africa, of which Urhobo is included, provides a rich spirituality that is holistic, that values creation, recognizes the dynamic web of life sees the land as sacred and reverences and shows compassion to all beings (Ikeke, 2006).

Related to eco-spirituality is eco-stewardship. Human beings have been put in charge of creation. In the biblical account of creation, after God had created all things, he said to humans to have dominion. Dominion has often been misunderstood and misapplied in Christian history. The theologian Lyn White attacked Christianity for its anthropocentrism, which understands dominion to mean domination and has led humans to exploit and devastate the earth. Dominion is not domination. Dominion is for service. Humans are called to be servants to cultivate and till the garden. "Eco-stewardship means that humans are stewards of the entire planet or Earth community. Every human being is an eco-steward or earth-keeper. Both individually and collectively, humans are to take care of the land, water, atmosphere, organisms, plants, and animal species" (Ikeke, 2021, p. 71).

Environmental Degradation in Urhoboland

One focus of this paper is on Urhoboland of Nigeria's Niger Delta. While the idea of God's omnipresence applies to the entire cosmos, it also applies to Urhoboland, and this paper primarily is concerned with an Urhobo concept, so it should be applied first in Urhobo before any other place. As noted previously Urhoboland is in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region is tragically noted for massive environmental pollution arising from decades of pollution from oil exploration and drilling, gas flaring, use of decadent oil facilities and machinery, etc.

In Urhoboland, as in much of the Niger Delta, there is massive environmental degradation caused by oil exploration and exploitation activities. One negative consequence of oil exploration is oil spillage. This is the "release of ...liquid petroleum hydrocarbon into the environment, especially marine areas, due to human activity" (Anah, 2019). Oil spillage can result from broken, weak, or defective pipelines that release oil into the environment. It can also be a result of oil bunkering or pipeline sabotage. However, the primary cause of oil spillage

is the activities of the oil companies. Oil spill destroys land and marine life, plants, and organisms, pollute drinking water, degrade the land's fertility, and destroy people's farmland. Oil spillage has been reported in Urhoboland in the past.

There are many impacts of oil exploration and exploitation in Urhoboland. In Ughelli, which is in Urhoboland, oil spillage has damaged ecosystems, destroying crops and agricultural resources. Extensive swamps and rainforests have been damaged by oil pollution (Anah, 2019). Oil and gas activities remain the greatest threat to the environment of Urhoboland. There is the phenomenon of crude oil and condensate theft. In the process of oil theft, a great deal of oil is spilt into the environment, destroying and polluting it. It should be noted that it will be difficult, if not nearly impossible, for foreigners who don't know the forest and bush to enter and steal oil; rather, what happens is that there are community leaders and local people who collude with others to steal oil and do illegal bunkering (Gbemre, 2021). Oil exploration has brought untold economic distress and health hazards to people in places like Ihwrekan and other places where oil is explored in Urhoboland (Gbemre, 2021)

Gas flaring is also a serious problem that affects Urhoboland. There is hardly any area in Urhoboland where oil is exploited and where there are no gas flares. In places like Eruemukowarien and Kokori, gas is constantly flared. Gas flares have adverse effects on people's health. In the communities where gas is flared, people breathe in poisonous air. There is constant heat in the communities. It is difficult for people to sleep at night due to gas flares. Gas flaring has also destroyed plant and animal life. Gas flares have driven some animals into extinction and killed some species of plants. Gas is flared very close to communities, endangering people's lives. Gas flares cause acid rain that corrodes zincs and buildings, destroys vegetation, endangers animals, and causes excessive heat (Gbemre, 2021).

Gas flaring is a very present danger that should not be ignored. It remains one of the most significant causes of environmental degradation. The quality of life has diminished as a result of gas flaring. Gas flaring impacts people's livelihood, and as people struggle for a better life, they put more pressure on environmental resources. Concerning this issue, realise that: "Gas flaring has rendered crops unproductive and has impoverished the bush-meat production. Heat from flares causes increased river water temperatures that kill off fish-food organisms. This has led to fish depletion from the rivers through death and forced migration. Acid rain increases the acidity of both the river waters and the soil. Vapour effluents from the ...Refinery and Petroleum Company, the Delta Steel Company Plant, and gas flares are contributing to the depletion of the ozone layer" (Ekuerhare, 2007).

Life in Urhoboland has become short, brutish, and nasty, to use Hobbes' terminology. Outside of oil and gas activities that have caused untold harm and devastated the environment, many other factors degrade both the natural and the human environment. The problem of insecurity aggravated by the attack of herdsmen in the Urhobo bushes and forest is there. Herdsmen attack people on their farms. They devastate and pollute farmlands. Their cattle move through people's farmlands, eating up plants and vegetation. These herdsmen have killed many. People have abandoned their farms and water resources. Some abandoned crops, fruits, and seeds get wasted and decay. The activities of these herdsmen have added to insecurity, but have also

destroyed the environmental aesthetics of the beautiful landscape in Urhoboland. Urhoboland is also affected by many other environmental problems such as soil erosion, illegal sand dredging, noise pollution, careless disposal of solid waste, deforestation, etc.

Theological Foundations and Elements of Sacramentality

In drawing out some salient elements in the Christian doctrine of sacramentality, it is necessary to trace briefly the notion of sacrament from which sacramentality is derived. Early Christian thought used the word sacrament to designate liturgical celebrations like marriage and theological issues above human comprehension, such as the Trinity (Pierce, 2007). In the Western Catholic Church, the seven list of liturgical celebrations (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, marriage, orders, and anointing of the sick) became known as the seven sacraments (Pierce, 2007). That list of seven sacraments remains today. Concerning the sacraments and the question of sacramentality, they speak of a relationship with the divine reality, and it is seen that through the sacraments, God manifests his presence, and it should also be realised that the natural world or creation mediates, though partially, God's presence (Pierce, 2007).

Creation or the natural world is sacramental as it carries presence as a vehicle through which God's presence is revealed. The following quotation vividly illustrates this fact:

God reveals Self in creation, since God is the source and author of creation; creation is, in a way, God's Self-expression, in the same way that an artist might reveal himself or herself in a painting or sculpture. But for Christians, God's revelation of Self can be experienced even more deeply in the incarnation, since Christians believe that Jesus Christ was both divine and human. Divinity and creation are joined together uniquely in Christ (Pierce, 2007, p. 1196).

Sacramentality exists in creation. The divine presence of God in the universe, which makes the universe have a sacramental dimension, could be said to be in nature. While God is distinct from the world in Christian theology, God is not "separated" from the world, for the world is God's world and carries God's presence. At the beginning of the Judeo-Christian story, the spirit of God moved and dwelt upon the waters (Genesis 1:1-3). As a hen incubates the chicken to be hatched, the Spirit of God incubates the formless and chaotic world. The beauty and wonder of the universe come from God's presence in the world. Without God's presence, the world is not beautiful and wonderful. In the second creation story in Genesis 2, God personally plants the garden, not speaking it into being; waters the garden, and, like a potter, takes the soil to create humans. God has a personal and intimate encounter with the natural world, which makes the world holy and blessed. It is this world that carries the divine presence that God loved in John 3:16 and it is this world that the word of God became incarnated into as Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

It is important to state that the world is not synonymous with God. The world is not God, and God is not the world. Authentic Christian theology does not enunciate pantheism. Pantheism is the theory that identifies the world with God (Colombo, 2007). God transcends creation, his glory supersedes creation, he is the cause of all things, he is present to all creatures, he is the

life from which all beings derive their course, he upholds and sustains creation, and he providentially guides creation (Holy See, 1994).

Another vital foundation that should not be overlooked in seeing the sanctity of creation is the celebration of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist. Bread and wine, which come from natural elements, are sacramentalised into the body and blood of Christ, and as the Eucharist is celebrated, you can see the goodness of creation (Bud, 2013). Bread and wine, even before they are consecrated into the body and blood of Christ, mediate some elements of God's grace and are beautiful elements. Sacramental theology should give a firmer foundation for environmental protection and responsibility. It should be noted that:

...as we draw with faith to the table of the Lord to celebrate the mysteries of our faith, we must ask how well our world is caring for the very earth from which the bread, wine, and water we use come. We should not assume that we will always have these elements, for their survival and ours are tied to our care, stewardship, and management of the environment! (Nyawira, 2023).

The Urhobo Concept of Oghene's Omnipresence

In discussing *Oghene's* omnipresence, it is important to understand Urhobo cosmology and pneumatology. Urhobo cosmology is informed by the environmental features of the territory in which they dwell, and so for the Northern Urhobo, which is drier, the spiritual force (*edjo r'aghwa*) lives in the forest, while in southern Urhobo with many waters, water spirits (*edjo r'ame*) are predominant (Edevbie, 2022). It is also a fact that each community in Urhoboland has its *edjo* (spirit), and the Urhobo people believe in a duality of an interconnected world of the spiritual and physical (Edevbie, 2022). In Urhobo thought, spirits are everywhere, and all of life is influenced by spirits, which human beings must appease and live in harmony with. Oghene is the creator of heaven and Earth, and all things are under his control (Erhueh, 2005). It is believed in Urhobo cosmology that: "The Supreme Being (*Oghene*), having done with the creation of everything, left the responsibility for the day-to-day fine-tuning of His creation to the lesser deities. In Urhobo belief, the ancestors in particular play a critical role in the control of moral behaviour among the close relatives" (Okpako, 2022). This does not mean God is absent from his creation or has abandoned the universe. The reality is that there is hardly a day in which Urhobo people don't call upon *Oghene*. Prayer, an expression of African spirituality, shows that 90% of prayers are addressed to God, showing his supremacy (Mbiti, 1975). In the moment of crisis, Urhobo people call upon *Oghene* with the cry, "*Oghene Biko*" (please, God almighty (Okpako, 2022, p. 99). *Oghene* is "...creator of heaven (*odjuvwu*) and earth (*akpo*)...the supreme deity, *oroovwakpo* (owner of the universe), and *oromakpo* (creator of the world" (Okpako, 2022b, p. 241). The supreme being called *Osonobrughe* can be worshipped indirectly through divinities or intermediaries such as *Erhan* or *Ejo*, or directly (Erhimeyoma, 2016). Wherever divinities or spirits are present, the supreme being is also present, for they represent him. The supreme being was present in every compound in Urhoboland, and that is why in every family compound there was a very tall pole with a plate with sacrificial items, and the god manifested in the compound is called *Oghene-Egodo* (Erhimeyoma, 2016). The presence of God is not just shown through God himself but through divinities and things connected to him. The concept of God as being everywhere should not be in doubt. It is a fact

that: "In African belief, God is the only one that is in all places at the same time" (Jerimiye, 2014). This is why God can be worshipped everywhere and anywhere. God can be prayed to everywhere. Note that: "Africans worship God everywhere and almost every time" (Jerimiye, 2014). Like the wind, God is everywhere and accessible everywhere, and God can be reached everywhere. God is both transcendent and immanent (Gyekye, 1996).

Because of the omnipresence of *Oghene* everywhere and in all things good, the Urhobo peoples, like other African people, saw in all of nature and human life sacredness. There was no strict distinction between sacred and secular in traditional African thought. Separating a sacred realm from a secular one is an artificial one and a modern invention (Michael, 2021). Everywhere, all of life was sacred, including mountains, plants, animals, birds, the skies, the landscape, and the entire public domain (Michael, 2021).

Urhobo all affirmed that there is a world of the ancestors. The ancestors are subjects of veneration, but not worship. Worship is reserved for the supreme deity, God (Erhueh, 2005). Through ancestral spirits, the power of God is also present in the universe. Ancestors are the living-dead; they are the glorified members of the family who have departed from this life. Concerning ancestors, it is imperative to know that:

The belief that dead ancestors possess supernatural powers has been observed in virtually every human since culture studies began. The belief appears to be autochthonous: there is no direct evidence that the belief in one human group was due to diffusion from another group. Human beings, everywhere, seem to have instinctively felt the need for an all-seeing, all-powerful, and incorruptible supernatural ancestor to enforce good behaviour among them (Okpako, 2022, p. 103).

Ancestors are a manifestation of aspects of God's deity in the universe. Ancestral spirits continue to live in the family compound and watch over the people (Erhimeyoma, 2016).

The belief and practice of totemism among the Urhobo people also indicate that God's presence is real in the natural world. Totems are symbolic representations of divinities, and so they are revered, and totems play protective or ethical roles in the life of the people (Erhimeyoma, 2016). Various totems exist in Urhobo communities, such as the python among the Usiefrun people, antelope (*Orua*) among the Ughelli people, the *isekpe* among the Ughievwen people, etc., (Erhimeyoma, 2016). All totems have divine origin. Whatever totemic animal, plant or elements of nature that people revere, they know the totem was created by God and is God's messenger, for the power of totems is derived from God.

In the history of religion, there is what is called hierophanies (manifestation of the sacred) in which the sacred manifests itself in stones, trees and other objects. These objects are recognised as places where the divine is revealed and for people with religious experience, all nature is capable of revealing and manifesting cosmic sacrality and so the entire cosmos is a hierophany (Adogbo, 2014). Adogbo was a Professor of Religious Studies at the Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. He was a specialist in Urhobo religion; what he writes of

hierophanies equally applies to the Urhobo religion in which he lived and taught. For the Urbobo people, all nature is a hierophany and a manifestation of the divine. There is often a danger in separating the manifestation of God, the supreme being, from that of the spirit. But this will be wrong. As argued by the immediate previous author, from African religious cosmogonic myths, God and the divinities are in a relationship and move together, God even assigns a role to some of them, as seen in Yoruba mythology, when *Orisa nla Obatala* is assigned by God to create the phenomenal world (Adogbo, 2014). The point to be affirmed from all these is that the manifestation of the supreme being permeates the universe and all created reality. The existence of evil spirits in the world does not in any way diminish God's presence. Evil spirits, as in the biblical tradition and other traditional myths, are the ones that stray from the friendship of God. There are certain evil spirits in the Urhobo religion, but these are aberrations from the normal and the good; they are the ones who stray away from divine beauty.

Sacramentality and *Oghene's* Omnipresence for Environmental Conservation: Dialogical Appreciation

While it is true that every moment and everywhere the divine presence is present, it does not erode the fact that there are auspicious and awe-inspiring moments and places where the presence of divinity is felt in a special and immanent way. This idea is akin to what is known as *Kami* in Japanese religion (Ikeke, 2014). While the presence of God is everywhere, it is communicated especially through the sacraments. In Urhobo religious culture, there are landscapes and mysterious times when the divine is felt uniquely. This is the basis of sacred landscapes and places in Urhobo and African religion in general. This can also be referred to as the sacramental principle. The sacramental principle means that there are symbolic expressions in all religions in which rituals are enacted, which promote relationship and solidarity, such as the use of flags, emblems, special moments of breakthrough and memories, and divine awareness (Hellwig, 2004). There are awe-inspiring aspects of nature, such as majestic lakes, waterfalls, thunder, etc. These call for reverence. The sacramental principle then calls for reverence for nature and, by implication, its preservation. Globally, tourism has become a global industry, and some places people travel to are mountains, rivers, and natural places that inspire awe, meditation, sober reflection, and natural wonder. Some of these places can equally be found in Urhoboland. These include the River Ethiope, the many uncultivated forests, the Sapele River, the king's palaces, etc.

It is unfortunate to note that many of the naturally beautiful landscapes and awe-inspiring places of nature in Urhoboland and beyond are either being destroyed or are now endangered. They are endangered by the forces of capitalist globalisation, urbanisation, westernisation, industrialisation, etc. Industrialisation has led to deforestation. To give way to more industries and factories, more trees have to be felled. In Urhoboland, much of the forest has disappeared. Half-hazard dredging for sand, which is now common in Urhoboland, has destroyed beautiful river banks and landscapes. Oil exploration and drilling have also contributed to destroying the beauty of the land.

Outside these special places, the entire natural world is also sacramental. One of the implications of sacramentality is that creation is beautiful. After God had created everything,

God saw that it was beautiful and excellent. Everything in the entire Urhoboland has value and worth. Apart from what is sinful and evil, lands, lakes, water bodies, soil, plants, birds, animals, farmlands, etc, carry divine presence. They are to be treated with loving care and tenderness. Wanton destruction of nature is unacceptable. We are to approach nature with awe. Because God is everywhere and can be worshipped anywhere, all places are divine and carriers of divinity. These trees, mountains, rocks, rivers, streams, soil, air, land, etc, are places where God can be found. They carry divine elements. They are to be respected, not worshipped. They mediate the presence of the divine. This is one of the reasons why you can find African shrines almost anywhere and everywhere. This is akin to the Christian notion of finding the sacred everywhere.

The apostle Saint Paul vividly states in Romans chapter 1, verses 19 to 20, “ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” God can be perceived in the naturally created order. God’s presence is there. God expects people to know and perceive God’s presence in the created order. In a certain sense, when nature is touched, God is also touched. When nature is harmed or degraded, God is also affected. As the natural world groans under human devastation, God is also groaning. It should imply that: “Nature is not to be destroyed for it is inhabited by spirits” (Ikeke, 2004). The spirit of God and God’s presence make the entire universe an object of benevolent care.

Sacramentality, the idea that ordinary things can reveal God's presence, is increasingly seen as a powerful tool for environmental conservation within Christian theology. By recognizing the inherent sacredness of creation, Christians are encouraged to develop a deeper respect and care for the natural world. This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and calls for a holistic approach to environmental stewardship (AI Overview, 2025).

Furthermore,

This means that creation is in a constant interaction with humanity and, as a result, interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, the ecosystem forms an organic unit that creates a web of relationships that interconnects all creation. Thus, there is a kinship among all creatures, even as some cultures admit totemism. Therefore, the degradation and over-exploitation of the ecosystem by human activities dislocates the sacredness of totemism and negates the cosmic kinship and sacramentality of all creation. Hence, creation contains an aspect of God – the creator and source of all things (Obiora, 2021, p.91)

If multinational corporations, businesses, oil companies, individuals, and all others, including the government truly value the land for what it is, they will be inspired to respect it. All aspects of the environment and ecosystem are filled with spiritual life. God (*Oghene*) is present in all the trees, plants, mountains, mineral resources, streams, etc. While humans can use natural

entities, it should be done with respect and to do minimal damage to the Earth. They should strive for sustainability as they use the environmental resources of Urhoboland and beyond. Sustainability is cardinal in the use of mineral resources. Whatever part of the earth has been polluted, despoiled, and degraded; there should be remediation and restoration. Nature in Urhoboland is beautiful and should be kept so.

The Way Forward

Recognising the right of peoples such as the Urhobo people to preserve their religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs. The *Oghene* (God) belief is central to the Urhobo religion and people. Realise that: "Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains"(UN, 2007, art 12). When indigenous religious beliefs are sidelined, ignored, or endangered by other religions, then the values attached to them are also threatened. It is difficult to determine the implication of *Oghene's* omnipresence when the doctrine is lost and thrown away. The fact is that today, indigenous cultural values are threatened by Westernization, capitalist globalisation, modernity, and other forces. Indigenous religious and cultural beliefs need to be reawakened and revived. The same applies to the Christian notion of sacramentality. There is a right to religious freedom and practice. And so there is a right to spread the notion of sacramentality. There is a place for cultural and religious dialogues in a plural world and multiculturalism. And so there is a place to bring the two issues discussed above into conversation. On the dangers that indigenous Urhobo belief faces, note that as people get more influenced by scientific values, urban and modern ways of life, and industrialisation, they think there is no place for traditional values (Adogbo, 2000). But, it should be noted that amid some flaws in science and decadence in modernity, there is a place for recovering authentic traditional values that fostered environmental protection.

International harnessing of indigenous beliefs, practices, and values. Unless there is an intentional tapping of indigenous beliefs and they are applied in motivating people to preserve and protect nature, the beliefs can just be there, especially in contemporary times when some think there is no place for following indigenous beliefs. The knowledge and traditional practices of indigenous people can help in environmental management and promoting sustainable development (United Nations, 1992). Many people don't even know the implications of calling God the omnipresent one. God inhabits all things, so all things deserve to be respected and revered. This is also where the issue of intercultural and religious dialogues comes into play. Christians and many others know that God is sacramentally present in all things. Both Christian beliefs and Urhobo traditional beliefs should be brought into conversation with each other. Everything in traditional culture and religion should not be seen as a fetish. If there is anything fetishistic in traditional religion, it is a little aspect, and instead of condemning traditional cultures and values, let us tap into their positive ideas. Here also, the Christian theology of inculturation can be of help. Christ is not against culture or "above" culture; instead, Christ inserts himself into culture to transform and make it new. He became

incarnate in taking human flesh. The Christian belief in sacramentality and the Urhobo belief that *Oghene* (God) is present everywhere are analogous and enhance each other.

Educating for environmental conservation to combat environmental degradation using images, symbols, and teachings on sacramentality and *Oghene's* omnipresence is of prime importance. It is difficult for people to practice what they do not know or are unaware of. There is a serious place for environmental education in this time of environmental crisis. However, environmental education must have content. It should not be bereaved of values. The United Nations is very clear on the need for environmental education. For the United Nations, environmental education is lifelong, continuous, non-formal, formal, interdisciplinary, and addresses issues in social, economic development, and all that relates to the environment (United Nations Environment Programme, 2025). The United Nations also affirms that environmental education is for everyone and all ages. Everyone should see it as their duty. In religious places such as mosques, churches, temples, etc, it should be taught by the ministers of religion in those places. It should be taught through the entire curriculum. Is it not true that in churches, Christians teach that God is everywhere, but the implication of this for environmental conservation is often not taught? Mass media have a special role in offering environmental information that can foster environmental conservation (United Nations, 1972). The mass media should devote more programmes in Urhoboland and Nigeria to teach traditional Urhobo and other cultural stories and beliefs informing people about environmental protection.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the place that the Christian doctrine of sacramentality and the Urhobo concept of *Oghene's* omnipresence can play in environmental conservation and the curbing of environmental degradation. It noted the emergence of the discipline of religion and ecology and highlighted that religion has much to play in ecological conservation. The paper showed that the doctrine of sacramentality means that the gracious presence of God is present in the entire universe and everywhere. It also enunciated that among the Urhobo people, it is believed that *Oghene* (God) is also present everywhere in the universe. The Christian understanding of God's presence and that of the Urhobo people are analogous. They also imply that the presence of God in the natural world warrants awe, reverence, and wonder at creation, and that creation or the environment should be conserved sustainably. Human beings can make use of the things of the world, but it should be done prudently and wisely, with little harm done to the earth. It is argued here that through environmental education, recognition of the rights of the Urhobo to the preservation of their cultural values and inter-religious. Cultural dialogue between them and Christianity, an ethics that cares for the Urhobo environment and beyond, can be established, and thus the environment conserved.

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