



# The dead, cemetery and environmental conservations in kolo creek clan

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## Abstract

The study examines the dead, cemetery and the sacredness of the dead with particular emphasis on the burial ground. It adopted textual and expository analysis as well as empirical observation. The findings of the study revealed that the accorded high reverence to the dead by the Kolo Creek Clan people, its cemetery is also held sacred and not desecrated. The sacredness of the dead leads to the sacredness and holiness of the cemetery. It concluded that the sacredness of the dead as treated by the people leads to the sacredness and holiness of the cemetery thereby conserving the environment. The conservation of the environment leads to improvement in climate change.

**Keywords:** cemetery, dead, environmental conservation, sacredness, virgin Forest

## Introduction

Man is a product of nature. Its existence is dictated by nature and its surroundings. Man's existence terminates when he joins his ancestors. Since man's existence and survival is dictated by nature, so the number of years he is supposed to live on earth. Man's activities and existence naturally is tied to his surroundings/environment. All the endeavors of man terminate at death. But for the Africans, death is not the end of the existence of man. But death is a movement from one world to another world.

This paper tries to investigate the African conception of the dead buried in the cemetery to the preservation of the habitat by extension of the environment. However, we will now turn our attention to the concept of cemetery.

## The environment and location of kolo creek clan

Kolo Creek Clan is in Bayelsa State of Nigeria within latitudes 4° 15' North and 15° 23' South and longitude 5° 22' West and 6° 45' East. Kolo Creek is one of the Oil and Gas producing areas well known in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large. It houses Oil well I at Itokopiri, Otabagi near Oloibiri where oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in 1956 by Shell B. P. It is in the South East of Bayelsa State which is the southernmost state in the country and the Southern shores are less than five degrees of latitude north of the Equator. Kolo Creek is criss-crossed by several lakes, rivers and creeks in addition to the swampy that constitutes about 75 percent land mass covering an area of about 11,109 square kilometers.

Kolo Creek is located in the South East of Bayelsa state, Nigeria in the Niger Delta. It has fresh water habitat. It has an equatorial climate with more of rainy season than dry season. It is covered with swamps with thick forests and greenish vegetation all through the year. It is criss-crossed with rivers, creeks, streams and rivulets. During the flood period, inhabitants can transport into the hinterlands and the bushes with canoes. The main means of transportation is dugout canoes to farms and the interior of the forests. Kolo Creek is

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bounded in the East by Akani, Ogboloman and Emago communities in River state, North East with Amirikpoko also in Rivers State. In the North, it shares boundaries with Okarki in Rivers state, in the North West with Agudama-Epie, Edepie, Opolo and Kpansia communities all in Yenagoa local government area, in the West with Azikoro and Agbura communities also in Yenagoa local government area. Kolo Creek shares boundaries with Otuokpoti, Otuogori and Onuebum, along the Ekole River. Kolo Creek also shares boundaries with Otuoke, Otuaba, Akoloman communities. In the South, it shares with Ogbia town, Otuabo, Opume and Iduma communities. This area is swampy with thick forest and equatorial region. And it is largely fresh water but the Southern part of the creek is salt water with mangrove swamps.

## Concept of cemetery

For the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English, it defines Cemetery as "an area of land used for burying dead people, especially one that is not beside a church (236)". That apart, from Google, a Cemetery means a large burial ground especially not one in a church yard (no site). The above points to the fact that a cemetery is a place where dead people are buried not close to the community or town.

Also, according to Cambridge Dictionary, Cemetery is an area of ground in which dead bodies are buried (n.p). And to the Britannica Dictionary, it explains that a Cemetery is a place where dead people are buried; graveyard (n.p), while to Macmillan it says, Cemetery is an area of ground where dead people are buried (n.p). And to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, it says that Cemetery is piece of land usually not belonging to a church in which dead people are buried (n.p). From the above sources, Cemetery is a piece of land or an area earmarked for burying dead people. The dead people could be young or old, male or female. Also, whether the person died naturally as a result of old age or died through accident or in the war or through epidemic etc. The age and manner of the dead does not count but must be buried in a

cemetery. Though in some culture, the king or monarch or members of the royal family is buried in a special place. While in some areas it is cremated or mummified especially in Ancient Egypt. The buried of the dead depends on the culture, race or ethnic group of the people concern.

### Cemetery in kolo creek clan

In Kolo Creek Clan, a Cemetery called *Okarabh Edum* is located in a special area with no human activities in the area. And it is an area outside the community. That is an area of land that is usually at the outskirts of the town or community. It is usually a reserved area of land meant for only the burial of the dead. In the Kolo Creek Clan, cemeteries or burial grounds are usually divided into different sections namely:

- a. An area meant for the Aged. That is those that lived from 80 years and above.
- b. An area meant for those that died through accident.
- c. Those that lived for only from 0 – 5 years.
- d. Those that died of bad death whether young or old. Here, those that died bad death are those that after the oracular consultations discovered spiritually that when he was alive, the deceased killed people, maimed people through spiritual means. Also, when he was alive, through spiritual means he contributed to peoples' mental imbalances, caused spiritual havoc to people by destroying their destinies etc. When this is discovered, the corpse would be buried in a special place in the cemetery earmarked for such categories of people. Here we should be lost sight of the fact that Africans are very religious and spiritual in nature. Any of the dead that fall into this category is considered to have died a bad death and such persons are not properly buried, ceremonies are not allowed and are not put in a casket for burial but in a woven mat.
- e. Those that died good death. These are those people who after the oracular consultation is discovered spiritual to have lived a good life while alive. He was good in character but most importantly he did not give misery to people. He was not wicked; he was benevolent and did not inflict misery and havoc to people when alive spiritually. At death, they are put in caskets and respected even in death. During the burial ceremonies are made and very elaborate as well especially the aged ones.

Categorization of the death of a person is observed by other niger delta people. Okaba has this to say:

The Mein-Ijo broadly distinguished between two categories of death. The classification into holy death (*Temeataufii*) and evil death (*Seifi*) is premised on the cause and circumstances surrounding one's demise, his age and level of fecundity. A peaceful passing forth at a ripe age, leaving behind survivors is christened a holy death. When an old woman/man dies in consequence of mysterious circumstances such as caused by abominable disease (elephantiasis, leprosy and insanity), accident, and suicide and without a child to guarantee his personal immortality, that death is evil and unfortunate. Premature death including death during delivery is considered evil <sup>[82]</sup>.

The dead (*Oni-Amu*) means no longer alive and death, is the inevitable end of man but the attitude towards it everywhere is different. Kolo Creek people by extend, Africans regard death, not as the end of life but as a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits (Kofi Asare Opoku, 133). It is a journey which man must make in order to reach the life beyond and continue to survive as an ancestor. The dead, therefore do not remain in the grave, but become spirits and proceed to the spirit world called *Ema-Ebhel*. That the dead transit from the world on earth called *Edum-Ezue* to the world of the spirits called *Ema-Ebhel*. Death is not the end of man; it does not sever his connections with his family. On the contrary, death extends the family relationships into infinity, and the ceremonies and rituals performed by the living for the dead emphasize the unbroken family relationship between the living and the dead (Opoku, 133). In Kolo Creek Clan, family, therefore, has a supernatural dimension to it being made up of both the living and the dead, and the reality of the continued membership of the departed is shown by the consideration given in every family activity. Both the living and the dead have a role to play in fulfilling family obligations properly. For instance, the living gives the dead a befitting burial according to the tradition and culture of the people. The living also gives the dead food, drinks through sacrifices, full funeral rites; inheritance sharing called *Ogbela-Ebhel*. And also, the regular offer of sacrifices with drinks and food shows a sign of reverence and remembrance to the dead. The dead in like manner because the dead protects, directs, intervene and guide their families. This is the situation that in Africa it is referred to as the living dead. And also, to serve as elders of the family but death is also regarded as a wicked destroyer, a killer and a curse such frustrates human efforts. It brings about complete physical frustration and constitutes a great loss not only to the immediate family in which it occurs but also to the whole community; death is an implacable enemy of man.

Death to the Kolo Creek people is only a physical separation but not a spiritual separation. The living and the dead are still together spiritually because the living communicates with the dead through spiritual consultations.

It is generally believed that the dead go on a journey and that death does not end life. This present life is seen as a preparation for it after-life where the dead continue to live after they have completed this life (Opoku, 137). Even in the after-life, the dead are not cut off from the living, for they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to give instructions, warnings or information which are normally taken seriously by those who received them (Opoku, 137). The dead may also summon living relatives to appear before them to explain their misconduct especially in cases where the living may have expropriated family property or sold family land in exchange for money and punish them.

In Kolo Creek Clan, the dead are also believed to be able to return to earth to be reborn into their families. The belief in the return of the dead is expressed in the naming of children after their grandparents and other ancestors. A child in the family is named after an aged man or woman in the family that died a good death. This custom is necessitated by the fact that the

custom of the Kolo Creek people has the belief that a name which a person bears influences his entire life on each. That is why a child can only bear the name of good and aged ancestors. In a larger context, that is why names for the people are very important and it affects the child metaphysically and materially. Thus, the names of good ancestors are used more frequently. The names of aged bad ancestors are not used in naming a child at all because it is believed it will influence the life of the child negatively. It is also not uncommon to name a child after an ancestor because it bears a close resemblance to him (Opoku, 138).

This leads us to the belief in reincarnation by the Kolo Creek people. The Kolo Creek people call reincarnation as *Otibra-Oru*. The coming back of a good and aged ancestor of the family in a new body but believed to have the characteristics/traits of the ancestor in the new born baby. This new born baby is named after the name of the ancestor and is accorded absolute respect and reverence as the ancestor especially the direct children, relatives and family members of the ancestor in this new born baby.

Kofi A. Opoku has this to say:

The West African belief in reincarnation is, however, quite distinctive, for it is only the dominant characteristics and the spirit of the ancestor which are believed to be reincarnated in his descendant and not his soul (138).

Reincarnation can only occur with a man or woman who died a good death and was aged. A man or woman who aged and died bad death according to the Kolo Creek people cannot reincarnate and the name cannot be given to any person. In addition to that, the young cannot reincarnate; that is, from age 0 – 70 years. It is also believed that for each soul remains distinct and each birth represents a new soul, and even though the ancestor is believed to be reincarnated in his grandchildren or great grandchildren or family relatives, he nevertheless continues to live in the after-life. This can be referred to as partial reincarnation to borrow Opoku's words. According to E. B. Idowu, in reincarnation, "there are certain dominant lineage characteristics which keep recurring through births and thus ensuring the continuity of the vital existence of the family (195)". And for a new born baby to be confirmed as an incarnate of any family ancestor, either the child would be crying unabated since birth or the child would be seriously ill with no clear cause of its illness, or the child cannot crawl or takes abnormal time to be on its feet. This is usually ascertained through spiritual consultations. When this is confirmed and the ancestor's name is given to the child, the child becomes normal despite the enormity of the situation of the child. This child bears the name of the ancestor even though the parents give the child a name. The ancestors act as the official guardians of the social and moral order of the living.

### **The dead, cemetery and environmental conservation**

Man's existence is tied to the spiritual and the physical. Man interacts with the spiritual world and the physical world. In the

physical world, he interacts with his environment to make life fulfilled as long as he exists on earth.

As man lives on earth, he struggles for survival by trying to conquer its environment for its wellbeing. But as man dies, he is buried. But for the Kolo Creek Clan, the burial of the dead is done in an earmarked place in the bush usually at the outskirts of the community. The cemetery is usually divided into parts based on the category of the death of the person; good or bad, young or old, natural or accident, illness etc. For the Kolo Creek Clan, they see death as not an end that death is not the end but only a transition from the visible world (*Edum-Ezue*) to the invisible world – spiritual world (*Ema-Ebhel*) and that the dead is regarded as going on a journey and must therefore, be equipped with many articles that he may need on his way. For the people of Kolo Creek, the dead is especially the aged and those that die good death, they reincarnate in the family. The dead protects, directs and maintains the moral standard of the family. The dead is accorded absolute respect and reverence by the people.

Also, the dead is seen as a being, existing and inhabiting with the living and the people communicates with them through sacrifices and offerings by offering the dead food and drinks at every interval.

Stressing further on worship and sacrifice, Okaba states:

Informally, every African is in a sense, his own priest. He wakes up in the morning, goes straight into the shrine of the ancestral spirit to offer prayers of gratitude for the protection during the night. He asks for protection as he and his family go out of the house in pursuit of their daily bread. On stepping out of the house, he looks up at the rising sun, which reminds him of the supremacy and constancy of God and offers his prayers of gratitude for his providential care. At meals, he pours out libation for the spirits and ancestors, thanking them for the provision and guidance he has received (53).

Okaba still explaining further on sacrifice states thus:

Sacrifice is the root of religion over the globe. The nature of sacrifice and the way in which it is presented is determined by the sort of divinity or spirit and the purpose of the sacrifice. Sacrifices in African Indigenous Religion are made to the ancestors, divinities, to evil spirits and rarely to the Supreme Being. Sacrifices in the mind of the African is intended and expected to really opiate sin, to conduce towards, if not necessarily to succeed in removing his affliction (54).

Okaba explaining on sacrifice and its relevance in the relationship between the dead and the living states thus:

Sacrifices made to the ancestral spirits are usually for thanksgiving and petition for protection and blessings. Whenever the African attains his heart's desire, his first impulse is to offer sacrifice of thanksgiving to the ancestral spirits (55).

When there is a problem in the family, the dead is expected to solutions or security to the living members of the family or lineage. This is achieved by the dead communicating with the living through dreams, physical manifestations through any

means possible to show that it is from the ancestors/spirit world.

It is as a result of the people's perception about the dead that when someone dies, the corpse is treated with respect and dignity because it is assumed that he is not dead but still alive and he is still with the family but is just embarking on a journey from the physical to the spiritual world.

The Kolo Creek people sees the dead as not dead totally but still living that is why it is referred to as the living dead. And when somebody is buried, even the grave is sacred to the people because a desecration of the grave is a desecration of the dead. A desecration of the dead must receive the wrath of the dead by the family or individual. The interaction of the dead and the living as concerned by The Kolo Creek Clan people leads to the sacredness of the place that they are buried, that is, the cemetery. The cemeteries in Kolo Creek Clan are very sacred. The cemeteries are so sacred that no human activities are allowed to take place there; no farming, hunting, fishing and cutting down of trees, it is always kept holy. The holiness and sacredness of the cemeteries in Kolo Creek Clan now made all plants and animals in the cemeteries untouched; the cemeteries become sacred, virgin and thick forests. In these thick, sacred and virgin forests, no animal of any kind, no plant of any kind is touched. This is because the cemetery is the place that the living dead inhabit. That is, the Kolo Creek Clan people's belief in the dead and cemetery leads to afforestation and by extension improvement in climate change for the existence and survival of man. It is the dead's spiritual home. Any human activities there attracts the wrath of the living either the infliction of calamity in the community, family or individual who goes there to disturb the peace of the dead in the cemetery. The disturbance could be cutting down trees, fishing, farming, carving of canoe, picking of snails, hunting and so on. As a result of the sacredness of the cemetery, all plants and animals in that cemetery is safe from human destruction or killing. This practice of keeping the cemetery sacred, holy and virgin indirectly leads to environmental preservation. This unconscious preservation of the environment by the Kolo Creek people leads to all the cemeteries in the area been virgin, sacred and holy thereby preserving the habitat and the environment which by extension is a positive and unconscious measure to climate change.

### Conclusion

Here, it is necessary for us to recapitulate the work. We clearly observed that because of the Kolo Creek view of death as not an end but a transition or journey to *Ema-Ebhel* (spiritual world) from the physical world (*Edum-Ezue*). The dead is not dead but still alive and just embark on a journey; the Kolo Creek people sees the dead as still existing a lot of influence and control on the living and its everyday life. The dead commune, protects, secure and controls the morals of the living. The link between the dead and the living is maintained spiritually through consultations and offering. And the dead transmits information to the living through dreams, practical happenings on the people etc. As a result of the believe of the Kolo Creek people about the dead as not dead but on a

journey/transition from the physical world to the spiritual world as well as the influence of the dead on the living in all aspects of the living in the family and the community, the cemetery where the dead are finally interred are seen as the abode of the dead and no person desecrates the cemetery. No living disturbs the cemetery in any form. A disturbance, desecration or performance of any human activities in the cemetery is a disturbance in the life and daily activities of the dead. For that, all cemeteries are sacred, holy and tabooed. This practice of keeping the cemetery sacred, holy and human activities of any kind tabooed leads to all plants and animals in the cemetery untouched. Nobody kills or destroys anything in the cemetery. With this, all animals multiply tremendously while the trees grow luxuriantly without hindrance; this leads to environmental conservation. So, Kolo Creek conception of dead leads to the sacredness of the cemetery and the sacredness of the cemetery leads to Environmental Conservation with an improvement in Climate Change and the survival of man since man's life is sustained through the interdependence of man and the environment leading to a good and longer life naturally.

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