

Perception and Role of Religious Leaders in Climate Change Awareness and Mitigation in Sokoto State

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Abstract

It is a well-established fact that religious leaders play a prominent role in shaping, guiding and moulding of opinion, thinking and behaviour of adherent of their religion. How people perceived climate change and how it can be mitigated can be strongly influenced by the perception and roles played by religious leaders (who are often revered and respected) in that regard. Their contribution to the discourse on climate change can and will greatly enhance understanding of the phenomena and its mitigation means particularly amongst their subjects. Data for the study were collected via primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected via administration of structured questionnaire to 125 Islamic Scholars (selected purposively) in Sokoto State. Major findings of the study reveals that majority of the scholars believes climate change is a reality and is affecting the environment and livelihoods of a lot of people negatively. The study highlighted that Islam strongly advocated for tree planting as an act of charity. Furthermore, the study found out that the role of religious leaders in educating their subjects on climate change awareness and mitigation is negligible and they attributed this to non-involvement by government and non-state actors such as NGOs and CSOs, inability to single-handedly carry out awareness campaign due to financial constraints and inaccessibility to electronic media. The study recommends among others, the need to engage these vital actors in climate change awareness and mitigation campaign(s) and supporting them with all necessary inputs financial and material to ensure their active involvement in climate change education as well as enhancement of sustainable communities and livelihoods in the study area.

Keywords: Awareness, Climate Change, Mitigation, Perception, Religious Leaders and Role

Introduction

One of the most topical issue nowadays is global climate change. It might not be out of place to claim that climate change and global warming are now the foremost issues of global concern in the recent decades. For quite some time now the concern of all nations, environmentalist and stakeholders since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 has been on how to mitigate the effect of climate change. Various high level meetings have been held at global, regional, national and local levels on how to mitigate the menace of climate change (Baylor & Brandhorst, 2015; Benessaiah, 2011; Gottlieb, 1996; Grim & Tucker, 2014; Hulme, 2009). Nations adopts various methods and strategies to educate and sensitize citizens on how to effectively deal with the negative effect of climate change on the environment and livelihood opportunities. Series of community engagement has been held with community

leaders, local populace and government agencies and Non-state actors on how best to handle global climatic impact. One option that has been neglected by both governments and its agencies in involving the populace on issues relating to climate change awareness and mitigation is engaging religious scholars in the process (see for examples, Odjugo, 2012; Oruonye, 2011; Dankani & Halidu, 2015; Eliade, 1968). These scholars are often revered and respected in their community. Their views, perceptions and attitudes can to a great extent moulds the thinking, psyche and attitude of the members of the society. Most at times opinion of these scholars are often sought before community members accept or reject any form of proposal particularly from the government.

Sokoto State located on the extreme North-western part of Nigeria is vulnerable to the effects of climate change, due to its high dependence on rain-fed agriculture, widespread poverty and weak mitigation and response capacity (Igwebuike *et al*, 2009). Igwebuike *et al* (2009) further assert that this vulnerability is compounded by the socioeconomic activities of the people. Africa's vulnerability to climate change and its inability to adapt to these changes may be devastating to the socio-economic life of the people. Majority of the people living within Sokoto state are natives and locals who normally view climate phenomenon from the prism of culture or religious beliefs and norms. The fact that the founding father of Sokoto is a renowned scholar and Jihadist (in the person of Sheikh Usmanu bin Fodio) inculcated a deep rooted respect for scholarly religious advice and opinion. Relying on Government agencies, NGOs and environmentalist to champion the task of climate change awareness and mitigation will not achieve the desired result without involving Islamic scholars in the process. Their input will give religious dimension to the awareness and mitigation effort and this will make the people and community to view issue of global climatic change and its mitigations as an act of service to God and humanity. It is important to note that at global level Muslim leaders have called on the world's 1.6 billion Muslims to play an active role in combatting climate change and have urged governments to conclude an effective universal climate change agreement by the end of 2018 (UNFCC, 2018). It is on this premise that this study seeks to examine the perception and role of religious leaders in climate change awareness and mitigation in Sokoto, state Nigeria with a view to identify their perception of the phenomenon and their level of involvement in climate change mitigation.

Description of Study Area

Sokoto State is located to the extreme Northwestern part of Nigeria between latitudes 12° 00'N to 13° 58'N and longitude 04° 8' E and 06° 54' E. It covers a total land area of about 28,232.37 square kilometers. The State share boundaries with the Republic of Niger to the North, Kebbi State to the West and South West, and Zamfara State to the East. The State has 23 local government areas (Figure 1). Sokoto state is situated in the e Sudan savannah vegetation belt (Olayinka, 2003). The climate of Sokoto is tropical continental type dominated by two opposing air masses, tropical maritime and tropical continental. The

tropical maritime is moist and blows from the Atlantic, while the tropical continental air mass is dry, blows from the Sahara and predominates during the dry season. Much of the rains in Sokoto falls between the months of June and September. The annual rainfall is between 500mm³ and 1300mm³. The state is characterized by hot and the cold seasons with the highest temperatures experienced during the hot season usually in the months of March and April. The Harmattan period starts from November to February and is characterized by cold temperatures and high dusty winds (Jibril, 2004).

Generally, the vegetation of the area is characterized by short and stunted shrubs and grasses around the metropolis, but the inner part and the precincts have vestiges and patches of vegetation composed mainly of trees (Eniolorunda & Dankani, 2012).

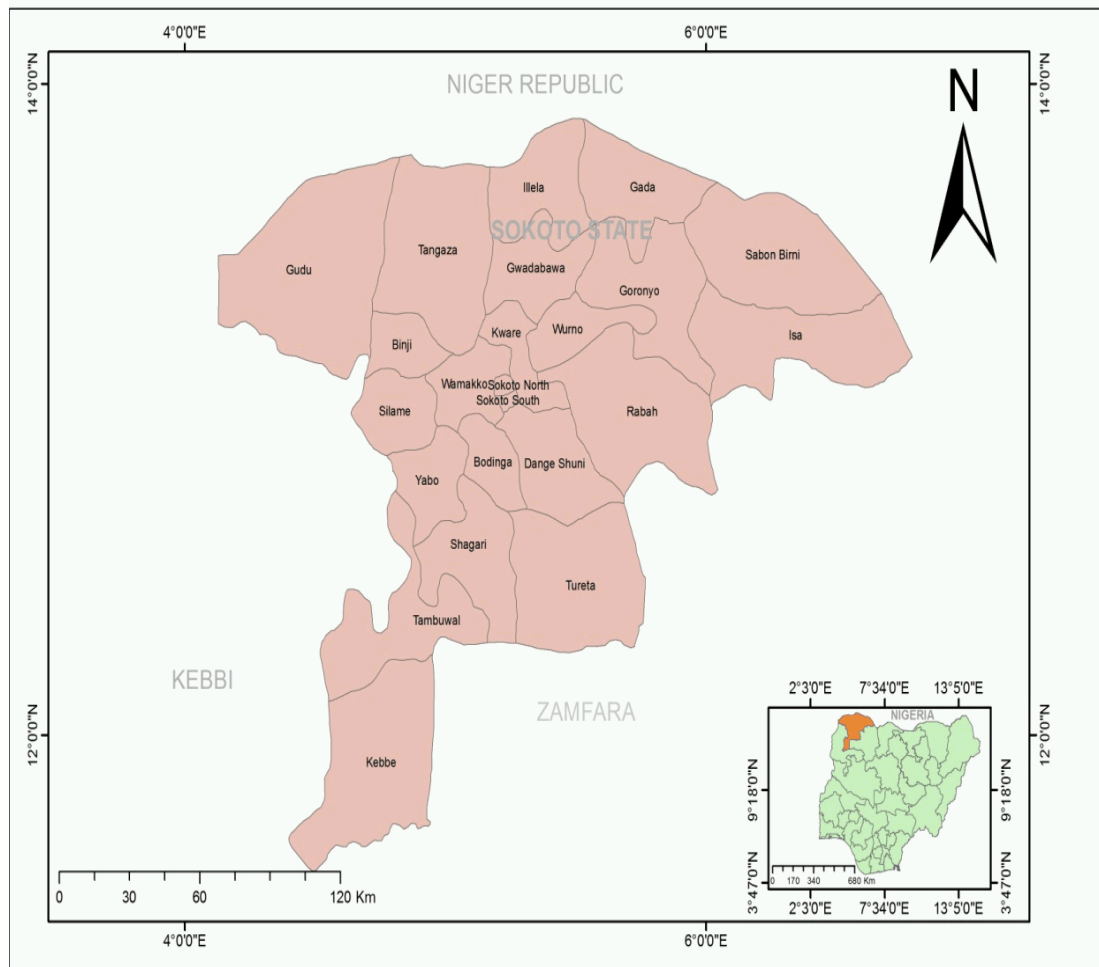


Figure 1. Map of Sokoto State

Source: Adapted from Eniolorunda and Dankani (2012)

Islamic Position on Climate Change and the Environment

There were a lot of consensus amongst Islamic scholars on the issue of climate change. Several verses of the Quran speak eloquently on the need for people to cater for the environments they lived in. Environmental sustainability is one of the contemporary discourses that has abundant values embedded in the Quran and Sunnah teachings. The environment is created by Allah SWT in perfect and balanced condition. Every element in the environment is created to operate in an integrated manner and plays an important role in maintaining the balance and function of nature that allows human to live healthily and prosperously (Abedi-Sarvestani & Shahvali, 2008).

Some of the Quranic verses that dwells on climate change and environmental sustainability are as follows:

- i. **Incorporating Trusteeship:** The Quran clearly stated that the wealth of the universe is a common resource for man to use for his livelihood and wellbeing but the use should not be harmful to the environment. Man is expected to preserve and conserve resources (Din, 2010; Fakhry, 1994). God Almighty stated in Quran Chapter 6 verse 95 that....

“Do no mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts); for the mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good.” Quran 6.95

By implication of the verse above, God almighty has entrusted humans to assume the role of Vicegerent and act as his trustee on earth. As trustee one is not expected to pollute the environment. Protecting natural entities from misuse is thus a religious obligation upon every Muslim in addition to other qualities of altruism, generosity, mutual understanding and cooperation on good. In other words, man is duty bound to be moderate in the use of natural resources and ensure the protection of others vested interest (Muyibi *et al*, 2010).

- ii. **Sustaining the balance of the natural world:** The Quran made it vividly clear that all things in the universe are created for a purpose and measure both qualitatively and quantitatively (Spahic, 2009). Verses from the Holy Quran on sustaining universal balance are stated below:

“Verily, We have created all things in proportion and measure (qadar)” Quran 54:49

“He has created everything and has measured it exactly according to its due measurements (faqaddarahu taqdiran),” Quran 25:2

” Glorify the Name of your Lord, the Most High. Who has created (everything), and then proportioned it. And Who has measured (qaddara) and then guided.” Quran 87-1-3

"The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; and the herbs and the trees -both (alike) prostrate in adoration. And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance (of justice) in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance" Quran 55:5-8

*But squander not (your wealth) in the manner of a spendthrift. * Verily spendthrifts are brothers of the Evil Ones; and the Evil One is to his Lord (himself) ungrateful." Quran 17:26, 27*

"It is He Who produceth gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety): eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for Allah loveth not the wasters." 6:141

Many Quranic verses show the values of unity, balance, order and harmony in the natural setting of this universe. It can equally be deduced from the verses of the Quran that Allah SWT instructs mankind to observe the interdependence and connections of each environmental components so as to keep the balance of the original ecosystem's functioning. This indicates that all parts of the natural world with its enormous diversity have a value to each other and to the total global system over and above their value to mankind (Kamali, 2010).

iii. Teachings of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (Hadith and Sunnah): Prophetic traditions shows that Prophet Mohammed (S.A.W.) invites and encourage his members to spread the tree and reclaim desert land.

Allah's Apostle said:

"There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sow's seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him." Sahih Bukhari (See Ibn Kathir, vol. 4, 227)

It's recorded too in the books of Sunnah, that the prophet inhibited extravagance in using water even when on the side of a river.

In a nutshell it can be argued that Islamic perspective of protecting the environment revolves around the following points

- i. Respecting nature.
- ii. Keeping the natural resources from wasting and misuse.
- iii. Increasing the amount of Trees.
- iv. Increasing the Suitable Lands for Agriculture through Encouraging Reclaiming Dead Lands.

Materials and Methods

Data for this study was collected via primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained via administration of structured questionnaire while secondary data was obtained from published materials and documents. Respondents for the study were selected purposively. The desired respondents for the study were Islamic scholars comprising of preachers, teachers and Imams. Scholars who are in close relationship with the populace and also capable of influencing or molding the opinion of adherent of Islamic faith. Snowballing technique was also employed. Here one scholar will be asked to name other scholars who could contribute to the study and in these way a total of one hundred and twenty five respondents were obtained (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of Islamic Scholars

Socio-Economic Characteristics	Frequency	%
Preachers	34	27
Teachers	53	42
Imams	38	31
	125	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2017

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics comprising of tables showing frequencies and percentages.

Result of the Findings

Information in Table 2 on the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents reveals that majority of the Islamic scholars (54%) are above the age of forty years. Those within the age range of 30-40 and 20-30 years accounts for 25% and 21% respectively. Males are the predominant respondents with 95% and 5% are females. The findings of the study reveals that respondents with Islamic educational background accounts for 71% while the remaining 29% have western educational background. It is a common phenomenon in the Northern part of the country for natives/indigenes to acquire the two forms of education. In fact, it is mandatory for children to go to Islamic schools whether they combine it with western education or not. Islamic education is viewed as necessary means of relating with God without which one's worship can be put to doubt.

Table 2 Socio-economic Characteristics of Respondents

Socio-Economic Characteristics	Frequency	%
Age		
20-30 Years	26	21
30-40 Years	31	25
Above 40 Years	68	54
Sex		
Male	119	95
Female	06	05
Major Educational		
Islamic	89	71
Western	36	29
Total	125	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2017

Findings of the study in Table 3 on climate change awareness shows that 83% of the respondents claimed to be aware of global climatic change while 17% claimed they do not. The study further reveals with respect to those who claimed to be aware of climate change that 37% of the respondents got to know about climate change in schools, 21% and 19% through electronic/print media and the internet respectively. 9% claimed they got to know about climate change through seminars and community meetings.

Table 3 Climate Change Awareness

Response	Frequency	%
Yes	104	83
No	21	17
Total	125	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2017

The result in Table 4 on the respondent's perception of climate change reveals that 87% stated that climate change is a reality and its manifestations are glaringly clear while 13% claimed it is myth, a grand design to make less developed countries to continue to rely heavily on richer nations on issues of leadership and ways to exploit and manage naturally endowed resources. It is important to note that among those respondents who believed in the reality of climate change, majority stated that Islam for time immemorial has encourage tree planting as an act of charity (*Sadaqatul Jariyyah*) and also the religion has also frown against any form of corruption warning that there will be dire consequence if people refused to lead a pious lifestyle and this includes catering for the environment.

Table 4 Perception of Climate Change

Response	Frequency	%
Reality	109	87
Myth	16	13
Total		100

Source: Author’s Fieldwork, 2015

Respondent’s perception of the major cause of climate change in Table 5 shows that majority (42%) believed it is an act of God, 22% and 21% attributed it to deforestation and emission of gases (as a result of man’s anthropogenic processes) respectively while 15% claimed they have no idea. Going by this finding, it is clear that majority of the respondents attributed climate change to an act of God almighty. According to them God has destined what will happen when people go contrary to his directives and climate change is one of the manifestations of going contrary to God’s injunction.

Table 5 Perception about the major cause Climate Change

Response	Frequency	%
Deforestation	28	22
Emission of Gases	26	21
Act of God	52	42
No Idea	19	15
Total		100

Source: Author’s Fieldwork, 2015

Figure 2 reveals the role Islamic scholars in the study area played in creating awareness on climate change and its mitigation. From the figure 2, 62% of the respondents claimed they play no role at all. Other scholars 27% claimed that they engage in preaching about climate change and its mitigations and 8% stated they often participate in tree planting as a means of encouraging other members of the community to emulate them. Only 3% claimed they engaged in talking at seminars and community meetings.

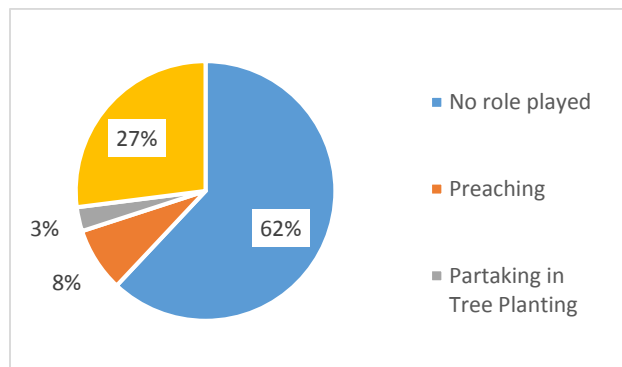


Fig. 2. Role of Islamic scholars in creating awareness on Climate change and its Mitigation

Source: Author’s Fieldwork, 2017

Table 6 shows that respondent's experiences hindrance and constraints in an attempt to educate people on climate change and its mitigation measures. 42% of the respondents stated that they were never involved or encouraged by Government and Non-Government Organizations on climate change related issues. 19% claimed that engaging in such activities on creating awareness and mitigation requires financial backing which they lacked while 14% of the respondents stated that they do not have access to electronic media and that hinders them from engaging actively. 25% of the respondents stated that they did not want to partake because of apathy (lack of interest).

Table 6 Constraints / Hindrance Experienced by Respondents

Response	Frequency	%
Non Involvement by Govt/NGOS	53	42
Financial Constraint	24	19
Inaccessibility to Electronic Media	17	14
Apathy	31	25
Total		100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2017

Conclusion

The study has examined the perception and role of religious leaders in climate change awareness and mitigation in Sokoto State. The findings of the study reveals that the enormous threat posed by climate change particularly to sub-Saharan Africa (a region considered to be more vulnerable to effect of climate change due to its high dependence on rain-fed agriculture, widespread poverty and weak mitigation and response capacity) requires drastic measures to raise awareness on the phenomenon and how it can be mitigated. The findings of the study reveals that religion played a very prominent role in shaping peoples beliefs, ideas and attitudes and it can equally enhance the participation of people particularly in upholding the tenets of mitigating climate as well as inculcating good values and practices of environmental management. It is therefore the contention of this study that to achieve efficient climate change awareness and mitigation not only in Sokoto but the entire Northern regions of Nigeria there is a need to involve religious leaders and scholars. A simple message from the religious leaders will command so much acceptance and compliance by the citizens. It is important to remember that religion is one component of a larger societal picture, and it interacts with economic, political, cultural and media factors in determining people's attitudes towards environmental and climate related issues. Religious values, just as other cultural beliefs, evolve over time and while they may provide a foundation for human-nature relationships, these ideas are shaped by a myriad of factors.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. Religious scholars should be involved in any climate change policy initiatives and campaigns

- ii. Access to electronic and printed media should be granted to these religious scholars to sensitized people on the menace of climate change and the religious obligation vested on the people in caring for their environment.
- iii. Climate change studies should be incorporated into educational curriculum of both Islamic and western schools so that students could learn about the climate change phenomenon and how it can be mitigated it in schools

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