



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY, ETHICAL PRACTICES AND LAND DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper develops a framework for understanding the relationship between African spirituality, ethical practices, land discourse, and development. It examines how African spirituality promotes ethical values and influences attitudes toward land and community life in Africa. Since Africa is culturally diverse, the study approaches these issues holistically while recognizing religion as a central factor in social and developmental decisions. The relationship between humans and nature in African societies is deeply rooted in spiritual and religious beliefs, especially regarding land use and environmental practices. It further explores how African spirituality can help address challenges associated with unethical practices, land conflicts, and unsustainable development. The study maintains that many developmental problems in Africa, including environmental degradation and global warming, are linked to the neglect of African worldviews and spiritual values. Therefore, it advocates for new development models, epistemologies that incorporate African spirituality as a vital component for sustainable development and social harmony.

Keywords: African Spirituality, Ethical, Land, Development and Spirituality.

Introduction

It is interesting, however, that many African Spirituality, Ethical Practices, Land Discourse and Development do have a spiritual view in spite of the fact that they view the whole of life as sacred. As a matter of fact, Africans cannot conceive of human life apart from its relationship to invisible spirits. That is to say, they believe that neither humanity nor nature is alone in the universe but surrounded by and dependent upon the superior power of eternal spirits. Thus, for them, the realms of nature, Ethical Practices, humanity and spirit comprise a cosmological whole and, hence, it is unthinkable for Africans to think of humanity apart from its connectedness with that larger world perspective.



Further, the African understanding of humanity is reneactive of human experience as a whole and, consequently, it unites thought and experience, reason and emotion, person and community, present and past, nature, history and spirit. Similarly, African spirits, Ethical Practices, Land Discourse and Development are related to the whole of nature and history. Thus, spiritually pertains to the whole of life and more specifically, it is the principle by which the human spirit is related to its primary source of meaning and power. In the African world-view, all life is thought to be created, recreated, preserved and affirmed by the Supreme being. Hence, the chief function of humans is to create, recreate, preserve and affirm life in communion with God and all of God's spiritual associates which include not only sub-divinities and ancestral spirits, but all leaders, institutions and movements serving the well-being of their peoples.

In most African societies, as Ranger (19) has observed, nature and culture carry a symbiotic relationship with traditional religion. In concrete terms, it is this traditional religion that forms the core of in concrete terms, it is this traditional religion that forms the core of a particularistic culture of local people in their situations. Thus, the utilization of natural resources is more than satisfying the immediate needs; but also a part of the conservation and celebration of human life (Sibanda 20). It must be pointed out that the indigenous people utilize natural resources in quite systematic ways and with deep observance of a 'rich tradition' of norms, taboo systems and assorted practices that are grounded in the religio-cultural milieu. This body of belief system shapes local people's interpretation of their perception of the accessibility and utility of the available natural resources.

Concept of African Spirituality, Ethical Practices and Land Discourse

While there are specific geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and spiritual characteristics among peoples in Africa, African Spirituality in general is the indigenous faith and practice of African peoples, which is the product of their perception, encounter, reflection upon, and experiences of the universe in which they live. Generally, the African world exists in two spheres – the visible, tangible, and concrete world of humans, animals, vegetation, and other natural elements; and the invisible world of the spirits, ancestors, divinities, and the supreme deity. Yet it is one world, indivisible, with one sphere touching on the other. Its specific elements are basically the belief in the existence of God and/or gods; the belief in spirits, both good and bad; and the belief in cultic prohibitions (taboos) and moral violations. Africans believe in sacrifices performed for various purposes (e.g., warding off evils, securing ancestors' support, appeasing divinities and supernatural beings, and expressing gratitude), in the continuing existence of the dead in the invisible world (from which they can assist the living), and in judgment from God or from the dead. African traditional religion gives meaning and direction to its adherents. It is expressed in the way the Africans have always regulated their relationship with nature and with fellow human beings. (Peler 76).

African Spirituality must not be perceived as a conservative cultural element that works to resist change and hence is a barrier to development. Each community practises religious observances that direct the lives of that community, and in other areas, cults are responsible for different developmental activities. Therefore, religious elements in the African people's cosmology have an effect on the process of development initiatives. Since religion is integral to understanding the world and one's place in it, it affects decisions: for instance, about who will treat a sick child, when



and how people will plant their fields, and whether to participate in any risky but potentially beneficial social action. Just as social scientists and practitioners have recognized that gender, class, and ethnicity, while potentially conflictual, are integral components of people's identity and must be taken fully into account in development efforts, so too must they recognize religion, as it is also central to the life of the people. (Peler 115)

The spirituality of the people appeared in each of those genres. Each creative activity expressed in some way their communion with God and God's realm of spirits: the primary source of their power to endure, resist and transcend the evil forces they experienced. Clearly, the only thing that these oppressed people had to rely upon for strength and meaning was the spiritual resources that they had brought with them from their homeland: unseen mythical treasures deeply concealed in their consciousness and firmly written in their hearts (Mbiti 121).

Ethical Practices

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that used to study ideal human behavior and ideal ways of being. The approaches to ethics and the meanings of related concepts have varied over time among philosophers and ethicists. For example, Aristotle believed that ideal behaviors were practices that lead to the end goal of eudaimonia, which is synonymous with a high level of happiness or well-being; on the other hand, Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century philosopher and ethicist, believed that ideal behavior was acting in accordance with one's duty. For Kant, well-being meant having the freedom to exercise autonomy (self-determination), not being used as a means to an end, being treated with dignity, and having the capability to think rationally. (112).

Ethics is an active process rather than a static condition, so some ethicists use the expression doing ethics. When people are doing ethics, they need to support their beliefs and assertions with sound reasoning; in other words, even if people believe that ethics is totally subjective, they must be able to justify their positions through logical, theoretically based arguments. Feelings and emotions are a normal part of everyday life and can play a legitimate role in doing ethics. However, people sometimes allow their emotions to overtake good reasoning, and when this happens, it does not provide a good foundation for ethics-related decisions. Evaluations generated through the practice of ethics require a balance of emotion and reason. Throughout history, people, based on their culture, have engaged in actions that they believed were justifiable only to have the light of reason later show otherwise. Following a charismatic, but ego-centric, leader, such as Adolph Hitler, is an example of such a practice. (116)

Ethics is the study of what is good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. George (87) defined ethics as the study of morality and immorality. Morality is highly associated with God. Thus, if one does not want to invite God's wrath onto himself/herself, he/she must not indulge in any evil deed. So men and women are taught right at birth to eschew immoral acts. In Nigeria,

Kaviya (11) described ethics as a discipline dealing with that which is good and bad, and with moral duty and obligation. Despite the fact that, ethical behaviour in one country sometimes is viewed as unethical behaviour in other countries, ethical principles have the very profound function of making behaviour predicable (Mahdavi 3).



Land Discourse and Ethical Practices in African Societies

Control of land and the role of religion in expressing people's ideas about the proper use and ownership of land is closely connected to what remains Africa's most fundamental economic activity: agriculture. Fontein (76), Land fulfils many functions in an African society, from a physical perspective, it is the space in which we move and create shelter and from which we obtain our food and water. From an ecological perspective, it plays a vital role in the breeding and survival strategies of many living species. From an economic point of view, it is a foundation on which wealth is built, in other words it is a resource which, along with capital and labour, is to be exploited and conserved in order to achieve economic production and development. From a legal stand point, it is an abstract set of property rights. From a social and cultural perspective; it is a taproot through which people draw spiritual sustenance. It is the ultimate resource without which no nation can exist and to many, it is simply the space for human activity as reflected in many different forms of land use.

Land is the most valuable possession of mankind and an important asset of any African spirituality. Without land, there can be no country. The wealth of the nation and its economic development are dependent on the state of the land and its usage. It is apparent, therefore that it serves as a key » to financial investments, commerce, industry- and agriculture. Good stewardship of the land is therefore necessary for present and future generations in order to ensure its sustainability and to facilitate economic development (United Nation 16).

Furthermore, there is no distinction or opposition between the two worlds. The African seeks to live in harmony and to balance their life in a harmonious and peaceful existence with entire world and especially the spiritual world. As a follow up, the above is the belief that the cosmos represent an organic unity, and within this, the environment is seen as a nurturing mother, sensible and alive, capable of responding to human action. For the future and beyond, Africans will continue to suffer if she does not look to the past to recapture those values that ensured the survival of her people and the environment,” unfortunately, religion which is perceived by many as a defining force within cultures and development agenda is in practice playing second fiddle to the excessive want for productivity and profitability in our society today. For instance, theories of development in our society have devoted little or no attention to religion although in traditional thought. (Manu 19),

Land in African Communities

Land in African communities belongs to the clans and not the individuals. The individuals are holding the land in trust of the clan which consists of the living, living dead, and the unborn members. This has enhanced the idea of sharing and caring for nature. In many *Ibibio* Communities, there are purification rites of the lands, to remove abominations, bad practices and restore the land to its former state of purity. Farming is restricted on certain days as Spirits of the ancestors visit the land. There are also designated forests as abode of the masquerades.

Moreover, land in some communities is seen as a goddess for example Ala in Igbo, and Asaaseyaa, by the Akans in Ghana. On the other hand, land set aside within the confines of the settlement or immediately outside the settlement where farming or any other forms of human activity would be forbidden, such lands retain its original flora and fauna. Shrines of some deities might be located therein. The forest thus becomes known as sacred forest or forest of the spirits. Hence, only the



priest and adherents of such deities could enter such a restricted area and only at specific times. Among the people of eastern Nigeria, Ala is the mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and custodian of public morality in association with ancestors. Farmers take permission from her before they till the land. (Aniekan 169).

Development in African Communities

According to the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Report for 1996, “development has come to be understood as a multidimensional undertaking, a people-centered and equitable process in which the ultimate goal of economic and social policies must be to better the human condition responding to the needs, and maximizing the potential, of all members of society.” At the level of the individual, it implies increased capacity and skill, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility, and material well-being. Goulet distinguishes three basic components or core values of development as life sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom. At a national level, development is measured in terms of gross national product, a measure of national income. The human needs approach conceives development as where the level of satisfaction of various dimensions of human needs is considered to have improved (12).

African spirituality has a number of clearly discernible tenets. African cultures share a common belief that whatever exists, visible and invisible, is spiritual in nature and is endowed by the Supreme Being, the Creator of all things, with intrinsic dignity, special attributes and distinct power. It is also a common African belief that the Creator had a purpose for creating everything; and gave each entity a definite place and mission in creation. On the myriad entities in creation, Africans also posit that all existents have mutual spiritual relationships and interact according to a principle of cosmic order. In this regard, Africans believe not only that human beings interact with each other and with other existents in the world in a way that can maintain their integrity and dignity or degrade them and disturb the harmony of nature; but also that the need to protect and preserve the integrity and dignity of created things and the harmony among them, imposes on human beings, as individuals and communities, obligations that find expression in moral norms, customary rules of behaviour, ritual observances and avoidances breach of which carry severe, inexorable and ineluctable repercussions (Light 43).

In the collective consciousness and lived experience of the African, security and fullness of life for each human being to pursue the destiny the Creator gave them requires awareness of and adherence to the spiritual as well as the physical rules of nature. In the African world-view, the spiritual realm is not cut off from the physical realm it is the laws of the spiritual realm that explain events in the physical realm. The ideas and norms of African cultural spirituality subsist in many forms of expression in African communities. They can be found in myths of creation, legends, folktales, aphorisms, proverbs, libation prayers, sacred songs and dirges. They subsist in well-established rules and taboos for the protection and conservation of nature, in clearly defined cultural values, moral norms, social norms, attitudes, etiquette, traditional rules of conduct, in established patterns of behaviour and in ceremonial and ritual acts and processes. These varied forms of expression constitute a rich source material for the study of the commonalities and divergences in African cultural spirituality. And it is in these forms that we also discover the place and utility of water in African spirituality. (Olaniran 47).



Tenets of African Spirituality

African spirituality refers to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of African people, which are deeply rooted in their culture, traditions, and worldview. It is one of the oldest spiritual systems in human history and emphasizes the relationship between the Supreme Being, ancestors, humanity, and nature (Mbiti, 19). Unlike many Western religious traditions, African spirituality does not separate religion from everyday life; rather, spirituality is reflected in social relationships, moral values, community life, and cultural practices (Idowu, 13).

The tenets of African spirituality are founded on principles such as reverence for ancestors, communal living, respect for nature, belief in spiritual forces, and the pursuit of harmony within society. These beliefs guide the moral and social conduct of individuals and communities across Africa. According to John S. Mbiti, Africans are “notoriously religious,” meaning that religion permeates every aspect of life and existence (Mbiti, 19). Through rituals, oral traditions, festivals, music, and ceremonies, African spirituality continues to preserve cultural identity and spiritual heritage across generations.

Conclusion

The impact of African spirituality, ethical practice, land discourse and development has been critically looked at. The Traditional African has for centuries, through myths, taboos, festivals and the cultural practices, been preserving the environment except that too many people are despising the same practices and traditions. People today are no longer scared of the dictates of the deities which were shrouded in myths and in taboos. Such behavior has rendered nature naked before it devourer in African traditional area. It the discovered that mankind has influenced the African spirituality ethical practice. Thus, the land discourse and development in it technological development; the rate at which the African ecosystem is abused is so alarming. In this regard, not until mankind look for the alternatives, we shall continue to live in perpetual danger of the consequence of the abuse of our African ecosystem in the quest for development. African spirituality and the environment intertwined in that they have a history and will continue to have a role together in the future. This may be one area where science religion can find a common ground both have the environment in best interest and can work together to find a solution to the current environmental crisis. As traditions, ethics and beliefs have shaped human values and behaviors towards the African environment in that this is one possibility for working towards positive environment attitude for the future. Clearly, African spirituality has a central role in the formation of worldviews that orient us to the natural world and the articulation of ethics that guide human behavior. The size and complexity of the pros we face requires collaborative efforts both among African spirituality, ethical practice, land discourse and development, in dialogue with other key domains of human endeavor.

Recommendations

To strengthen the relationship between African spirituality, ethical practices, and land discourse, a comprehensive set of recommendations can be established. These recommendations aim to promote sustainable land use, respect for cultural heritage, and community empowerment. Here's a structured approach: Integrate Indigenous Knowledge in Land Management, Encourage the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices into land management policies and practices. Promote Education on Spiritual and Ethical Values by developing educational programs



that teach the importance of African spirituality and ethical practices in relation to land stewardship, increased awareness and understanding among younger generations, fostering a culture of respect for land and community. Initiate projects to document and revitalize traditional practices related to land use, rituals, and community governance.

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