

Chapter One

AFRICAN ECO-SPIRITUALITY: NATURE AND SOURCES

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Executive Summary

The world in which we live has been wounded by the current ecological issues staring us all at the face. Carbon dioxide emissions are still with us. Sulfur oxides still bring acidic rains. Misuse and subsequent depletion of natural resources have not stopped. Floods, draughts, outbreak of diseases emerging from ecological changes are yearly experiences. The seas are constantly being polluted leading to the death of sea animals. Rivers, seas, canals, etc., are shrinking and drying up. Scientific discoveries and advances in the area of technology cannot adequately attend to the problem of ecological crisis in our globalized world. There is the need for alternative perspectives and models or approaches in such a manner that it works for all peoples and in all places. While developing solutions to ecological problems there is the need to put into consideration the categories of particular people, and to use languages that people understand. It is in this regard that a discourse on African eco-spirituality becomes very important, not only to show the contribution of the African worldview to ecological discourses but to show that solutions to ecological problems need to be packaged within categories that the African will not only understand but respect. While there are a few papers written on African eco-spirituality, there is hardly literature that discusses

its nature and sources in a profound manner in relation to the African worldview. This paper, therefore, discusses African ecological spirituality with the purpose of bringing out its distinctive characteristics and the sources of its perspective. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological and analytic methods of inquiry were employed. It submitted that African eco-spirituality is an indispensable dimension in the effort towards finding and articulating alternative solutions to the present ecological crisis.

Keywords: African, Ecology, Eco-Spirituality, Proverbs, Myths, Taboos, Deities, Spirits

Introduction

Eco-spirituality was born out of the need to establish a connection between spirituality and the earth or ecology. This began with the growing appreciation of the relationship between spirituality and the environment, and the growing understanding of the universe as the representation of the presence of a great spirit. It was also a reaction to the Western emphasis on the material, consumerism, technological and economic which lacked the spiritual depth required for a humane approach to the problem of ecological crisis (Delaney 2009). Thus, Aurelie (2017) defines eco-spirituality as:

A wide range of discourses, whose common interest is in showing that the current ecological crisis is an essentially spiritual crisis of values, so that answers to it should not be merely technological or material but should be sought on a spiritual level, through the foundation of an 'inner ecology' and an enlightened reflection about the meaning of life, the Other, the sacred (p. 7).

Eco-spirituality does not in any way speak of a particular spirituality, but can be developed alongside a particular

spirituality, such as the Christian eco-spirituality, Buddhist eco-spirituality, African eco-spirituality, etc., which provides the principles that shape its peculiarity. However, a spirituality does not necessarily involve any particular religion. One can have a secular spirituality that has nothing to do with Islam or Christianity or African traditional religion. It is, therefore, possible to have proponents of eco-spirituality coming from different religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, etc. To understand this better there is need to make a distinction between spirituality and the religious. While the religious has got to do with a particular religion, the spiritual goes beyond the bounds of particular religions, such that one can be spiritual and yet not believe in God. It is in this regard that Aurelie (2017) avers that:

It is possible to pursue spirituality inside organized religion or out of any religious context, and even without having any faith in God. As it is founded on a personal inner experience, it is difficult to define it univocally, but it is generally associated with a quest for interiority, for self-knowledge, transcendence, wisdom, the sacred (p. 2).

What qualifies it as a particular eco-spirituality is the type of spirituality that forms the basis of its moral, religious dimension. This is possible as most spiritualities have a deep connection to the earth even though some might have more connections than the other. Rockefeller and John (1992) argue that eco-spirituality emerged as a result of the realization that ecological crisis affects all lives not minding a person's religious affiliation, therefore, requiring a multi-religious approach. Writing further they aver that:

The foundation of this collaboration among religions, academics, and activists is an awareness of a commitment to a new ecological worldview that reflects alternative values, ethics, and actions about and toward life on Earth.

There is an understanding that religion not only broadens the conversation beyond discussing environmental issues in terms of economics, political legislation, or scientific analysis, but also that at the heart of spirituality is an encounter with the sacred: an intuition of the wondrous mystery in the power of life and being (p. 10).

Pope Francis (2015) teaches that: “If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it” (no. 63). It is in this regard that it becomes important to look at African eco-spirituality as an alternative approach towards the solving of the problems posed by ecological crisis emerging not only in Europe, America and Asia, but also here in Africa. This paper will focus on defining African eco-spirituality, determining its sources and categorizing its characteristics. What then is African eco-spirituality?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework to be used for this study is the traditional african ethics of care theory developed by Ogungbemi (2007). He argues that the traditional African lived with nature with respect and awe. He writes about the traditional environmental management guided by care thus:

In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water and air management to our traditional communities. The ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps this explains why earth, forest, rivers wind and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved the

ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation (p. 36).

Although this ethic was not written in books or carved on walls, the African was given an orientation in which he or she is not to take more than he or she needs from nature or the environment. This is a value with a universal appeal and application which African traditional preservation behavior introduces to the entire effort towards the preservation of the environment. The questions: How do we know how much we need, given, the nature of human greed and insatiability? Who judges whether we have been taking more or less than need from the natural resources? If we have been taking more than we need, what are the penalties and how fair are they? were dealt with at the level of taboos, however, adoption by modern society will imply developing guidelines and setting limits using categories the modern man or woman understands.

This idea of care for the environment, needed on the part of the human person for the sustenance of the environment and the well being of the human person is at the heart of African eco-spirituality. It is also the basis for the interpretation of the African's relationships with the forces of nature: he or she craves for nature knowing fully well that the survival of nature will mean his or her own survival.

African Eco-spirituality

African Eco-spirituality also known as African spiritual ecological, establishes a connection between the ecosystem and the African spirituality, which is the African's consciousness and relationship with the supernatural. This consciousness and relationship with that which is spiritual now becomes a basis for a responsible and humane relationship with and management of the environment. It is anchored on the African worldview of

spiritual interconnectedness of reality, and thus, the sacredness of the eco-system. Life in the African ecosystem is one in which relationships between nature and humans, spirit and nature are not dichotomized or compartmentalized, but are integrated into an interdependent system of existence that is tied together through spiritual interactions. Every dimension of the ecosystem is as important as the other and must not be exploited for personal gains; in this case, actions must be motivated by the general good of the entire ecosystem.

African eco-spirituality packages the understanding that the human person is a steward not master of the earth; reciprocity between land, plants and humans makes life on earth possible; symbiotic relationship with the earth; and being aware of the impacts of one's actions in the use of the environment on the present and future generations. Thus Olga (2012) avers that "eco-spirituality brings together religion and environmental activism" (n.pg.) and Valerie (2000) asserts that it is "a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment." (p. 227). It refers to ecological discourses or reflections that are anchored on the African fundamental beliefs in the sacredness of the natural world and in the connection between human beings and nature, with the aim of finding solutions to the emerging ecological crisis.

In relation to the idea of the sacred in African ecospirituality, Sponsel (2014) referring to eco-spirituality generally writes that: "there are spiritual elements at the root of environmental issues" (p.1719). The spiritual dimension of eco-spirituality is the major contribution that it makes in the face of the present ecological crisis. Thus, White (1967) avers that "there is a critical need to recognize and address the spiritual dynamics at their roots" (p.1203). The reflections in African eco-spirituality precisely, are done in such a manner that it respects the African patterns of life

or culture as its starting point. African eco-spirituality also holds as fundamental the need for reconnecting oneself with nature, people and the cosmos as a whole, rooted in the manner in which the African understands the world around him or her. What distinguishes African ecological spirituality from others is that it is deeply religious and may not be formulated outside religious lines. Mbiti (1969) puts this succinctly:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2).

In the contention of Njoku (2004), this is such that:

The African man (woman) had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors. (p. 57).

Still within this context, Busia (1967) remarks that the African is "intensely and pervasively religious ... in traditional African communities it was not possible to distinguish between religious and non-religious areas of life. All life is religious" (p.34)

It, therefore, offers an alternative approach to the present ecological crisis. In this regard, Orobator (2016) posits that: “Upon careful scrutiny, the wisdom of the African spiritual tradition ... offers resources for cultivating sound ecological virtues and commitment” (p. 1). In the contention of Uwineze (2021):

African spirituality invites us to an *aggiornamento*, a return to our origins (*ressourcement*), to use traditional African resources in deep appreciation of and conversation with Pope Francis’ exhortation to care for and dialogue with our common home (p. 1).

African eco-spirituality connects the science of ecology with African spirituality, which cannot be obtained outside of the African worldview or cosmology, which establishes a very strong spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. In this case, the African worldview and experience provides the context for ecological reflection.

Sources of African Eco-spirituality

There are several sources of African eco-spirituality that could be enumerated. However, in this work reference would be made to African proverbs, African gods and spirits of nature, African mythologies, African totems and African taboos.

1. African Proverbs

There are several African proverbs that bring out the richness of African ecological spirituality, and in such circumstances, these proverbs become a source of African eco-spirituality. Examples of such proverbs include:

1. A tree on a hill is a meeting place for birds
2. Trees pull the rain
3. Hills with trees are footprints of God
4. The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the second-best time is now

5. When there is something wrong in the forest, there is something wrong in the society
6. A person who has planted a tree before he dies did not live in vain
7. To plant a tree is to mix with God
8. Eat, but leave some in the forest for others
9. Do not finish the arrowroot; think of the future
10. Earth is our mother's womb
11. One will take a reserve if only one put it in the reserve
12. Treat the earth well; it was not given to you by your parents
13. Do not drain the river till it dries
14. A dried-up tree do not bear a green one
15. A tree blossoms with rain
16. No one throws a stone where he or she has placed a container of milk

2. African Gods and Spirits of Nature

One of the motivations for the emergence of eco-spirituality is the understanding of the earth as the manifestation of the presence of great spirit. This becomes interesting when studied from the African perspective where several African deities and spirit forces have taken the form of the different dimensions of the ecosystem. An understanding of these spirit forces can be a source of African eco-spirituality. Examples of these gods and spirits of nature include:

- a. *Mmuo Mmiri*: Igbo river goddess
- b. *Ala*: Igbo earth goddess
- c. *Osun*: Yoruba goddess of the river Osun
- d. *Oya*: Yoruba goddess of the river Niger
- e. *Oba*: The Yoruba goddess of rivers
- f. *Oko*: The Yoruba goddess of agriculture
- g. *Osanyin*: The Yoruba god of herbs and small plants
- h. *Olokun*: The Yoruba god of the seas

- i. *Anyanwu*: Igbo god of the sun
- j. *Ahiajoku*: Igbo god of agriculture and vegetation
- k. *Sango*: Yoruba god of lightening and thunder
- l. *Amadioha*: Igbo god of lightening and thunder
- m. *Damballah*: Benin Republic god of fertility and usually lives in springs and swamps. He is symbolized by a snake.
- n. *Erzulie-Freda-Dahomey*: Benin Republic Sea goddess.
- o. There are spirits that inhabit the mountains
- p. There are spirits that inhabit the trees
- q. There are spirits that inhabit the forests
- r. There are spirits that inhabit the animals
- s. There are spirits that inhabit rivers and seas

3. African Mythologies

The African world with varied ethnic groups and languages has several mythologies that can become sources of African ecological spirituality. These myths show how the divine gives special places to animals and plants to show that they are very significant to the Creator God. For instance, in Nri Igbo myth, when the children of Eri the proto ancestor died, Yam grew up from where the son was buried and plantain and cocoyam from where the daughter was buried. The growing up of these plants where these persons were buried was a personification of these plants, in the sense of the children of Eri come back to life. Thus, when the Igbo celebrate New Yam festival, it is a celebration of life, the life of the first son of Eri. Also, in the Yoruba myth of creation, the creator god made use of the Chameleon and the Chicken for the realization of creation. The inclusion of these animals, point to the important place that animals occupy in the divine plan, and therefore, must not be treated as though they are of no value in the divin scheme. These mythologies among others can be a huge source of African eco-spirituality when reflected upon.

4. African totems

The African believes that a person can be related to the other or another in two ways. The first way is through blood relationship, in terms of having the same father and other or being connected to the same ancestor, meaning a blood relationship. The second type of relationship is the totemic relationship in which a person shares the same totem being with another person. Totemism is the assertion of kinship between the human person and a specie of animals or some other animate or inanimate objects (Mbiti 1934; Theoderson et al 1975; Durkheim 1970; Meek 1937; Amirthalingam 2014). It could also be understood in terms of species of animals or plants whose life have been bond up with the life of a particular tribe (Burton 1977). They could also be regarded as those things that a tribe or family bear their names and revere (Freud 1970). Totems are found in virtually every African society, and have been part of the culture of the African people handed down from one generation to another. Different groups or tribes have their totem or totems and this gives them their unique identity as a kinship, and in places where different groups share the same totem, they might begin to consider themselves as related to each other. What totems do is that it shows the relationship between human beings, animals and the environment, and constitutes the human person's earliest conservation behavior.

Once a child is born, it becomes his or her duty to defend his or her totem as it is a part of his or her identity as a member of the clan or kinship. They have obligation to feed, protect, care for and rescue the totem where and when necessary. There are times great stories are told young people on how human beings became great by being kind to these totems. This was a way of encouraging the young to keep to the tradition of their people by seeking greatness by keeping to the totems of the community or tribe. To each totem is attached a symbolic meaning which a

taboo accompanies, such that to kill or destroy any of them has consequences. Examples of totems among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria include:

- a. Python, referred to as father or mother
- b. *Utohi*, a specie of money
- c. Fishes in particular streams or rivers
- d. *Oziza*, a type of crab
- e. Iroko tree
- f. *Ogirishi* tree
- g. *Akpu onyima*, silk tree
- h. *Ofo* tree
- i. *Ngwu* tree

This totemic relationship is based on the African's concept of the universe. According to Onwubiko (1991): "Ideologically speaking, the African world is a world of inanimate, animate and spiritual beings. The African is conscious of the influence of each category of these beings in the universe. Their existence, for the African, is reality; so also is the fact that they interact as co-existent beings in the universe." (p. 3) These are considered totem not only because of their relationship with a tribe or people, but also because of their relationship with spirit forces that these tribes or people revere.

5. African Taboos

Africans have moral principles referred to as taboos that served as proscriptions, spelling out how African traditional societies ought to or ought not to relate with their environment. These taboos provide and preserve balance and harmony within the community, and in the community's relationship with nature (Magesa 2015). Some of these taboos include:

- a. Hunting an animal and not eating the meat
- b. Killing a pregnant animal
- c. Killing an animal fending for her young

- d. Killing a python
- e. Killing a dog
- f. Killing an Iguana
- g. Killing a tiger
- h. Entering particular forests
- i. Going to the stream on particular days
- j. Hunting on particular days
- k. Not washing cloth or taking bath on some parts of the stream
- l. Not fishing in some particular streams

These taboos were respected by members of African communities because of the spiritual background that they possess, given that they are either promulgated by a deity or the ancestors as a conservation behavior or as a respect for the nature that symbolizes a spirit force.

Characteristics of African Eco-spirituality

Several characteristics can be drawn from the very nature of African eco-spirituality. However, for the purpose of this initial study, the religious, cosmological, moral and complementary characteristics would be discussed.

a. Religious

African eco-spirituality is highly religious, and begins by linking a person back to God as a starting point. This strongly religious characteristic is on account of the myriad of spiritual powers that dominate the African world, and which manifests themselves in every creature. This religious dimension is clear from the reality that the African does not understand his or her existence outside of God- he or she is bound by the spirituality that continuously speaks of created reality as sacred. God is both transcendent and immanent in his creation, he did not create it and then left it. He holds his creation in being and the process of creation still perdures through the cooperation of the human person with

God. It is therefore very difficult for the African to discuss issues bordering on eco-spirituality without reference to his or her religion. Thus, while it is still spiritual, it is also very religious.

If African eco-spirituality is religious, of what relevance is it to the discourse on eco-spirituality? Does the religious dimension destroy the spirituality required for the preservation of nature? A cursory glance reveals that several events and points of agreement over the years have led to the recognition of the importance of the religious perspective in the discourse on the fight against ecological crisis. The major reason is the ability of religious affiliations to have come to a point where they have been able to articulate an understanding of nature as the outcome of divine ordering which must not be manipulated and exploited for the purpose of maintaining a balance in nature. This perspective is anchored on the interconnectedness and interdependence of the different dimensions of creation (Francis 2015 & Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective, 2015). The religious perspective is also fundamental as 4 out of every 5 human beings have a religious belief. This makes it very important to respond to ecological questions from the perspective of religion which comes from the angle of stewardship and trusteeship (Halpert 2012; Islamic International Climate Change Symposium, 2015; Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies/Bhumi Project, 2015; Northcott, 2013).

Religions are having a better understanding of scientific positions on climate change. The consequence is that those adhering to religious beliefs now queue behind the policies that have been made from the outcome of these scientific findings (Francis 2015). More so, the need to reconstruct the religious perspective on unlimitless pursuit of prosperity requires the input of religious persons and bodies (Zholnai 2013; Northcott, 2013; Pettifor, 2013; Khalid, 2013; Izzi Dien, 2013). From this

understanding, it is not out of place to have an African perspective that is heavily religious.

b. Cosmological

African eco-spirituality is cosmological. It is related to the way the African understands the universe and conducts himself or herself in it. It is this cosmological foundation that forms the basis and in fact that makes it an African eco-spirituality different from other eco-spiritualities. The universe for the African is anthropocentric. Everything that God has created was created for the human person and it is the human person that gives meaning to the realities around him or her. As such, the human person is at the center of creation. The implication is that if the human person cares for the earth, it will mean his or her own good, and if he or she mismanages the earth he or she will obviously be at the center of the crisis. Thus, it is the responsibility of the human person to ensure that there is balance in the cosmos for his or her own peace and happiness.

Although there are gods, spirits, ancestors, animals, plants, inanimate objects, etc., in the African universe, it is the human person that has the responsibility of preserving or maintaining the earth. Therefore, instances of abuse and misuse of natural resources like water, land, gas, animals, forests, the earth, etc., in Africa because of excessive greed will have consequences that will end on the table of the human person; just as the consequences rests on the table of the human person, in the same way does the solution lie on his or her table.

c. Moral

The human person has a moral responsibility to care for the earth. The manifestations of ecological problems are only a sign of a moral decadence in the responsible use of natural resources or the mismanagement of natural resources. It, therefore, calls for

a moral responsibility articulated and expressed in what we refer to as African eco-spirituality. This moral responsibility is not only one that resides with the individual but with every member of the African community. The communal responsibility is anchored on the fact that if punishment comes as a result of mismanaging the earth, everyone would be a part of the painful experience. This explains why everyone, at a time when there were no police, puts hands together to ensure that the law is kept. These laws are the taboos of the community bordering on the use of trees, care for animals, forests, water bodies, etc. These taboos always have a religious background for what it disapproves (Uche 2009) but usually enforced by the community (Dauglas 2009) for the preservation of the collective ecosystem. Thus, these taboos are referred to as the ecological guardians of the environment (Adu-Gyamfi 2011; Johannes 1978, 1982, 1984; Chapman 1985, 1987; Gadgil 1987).

d. Complementary

African eco-spirituality understands the dimensions of the world as inextricably related to all other life forms within an *interrelated, interconnected* web. Every reality in the African world has an inseparable link to every reality. The world complements the being of the human person while the human person complements the being of the world. While the world provides a home for the human person, the human person beautifies the world through creativity, science and technology to make it a better home.

The implication of the human person destroying the world is that he or she unknowingly destroys his or her home, and so becomes homeless at home. The world is the human person's seat of belongingness. If the world is destroyed, the human person would suffer self-alienation as he loses his or her belongingness. This explains the African proverb which says: "No one throws a

stone where he or she has placed a container of milk". The ruin of the world entails the ruin of the human person. The safety of the world entails the safety of the human person. Thus, Uwenze (2021) writes that:

Oneness, harmony, mutuality, and interdependence are central to most African culture's conception of existence because everything that exists as a being with others. Life in the world is so interlinked that to upset one aspect of it is to begin to put an end to the whole of it (p. 1).

This understanding should help the African to treat nature with the same respect that he or she deserves, given that the world is a part of his or her being.

Conclusion

This work has focused on African eco-spirituality, a form of indigenized eco-spirituality. In the face of carbon dioxide emissions that are still with us, sulfur oxides still causing acidic rains, misuse and subsequent depletion of natural resources, floods, draughts, outbreak of diseases emerging from ecological changes, the seas are constantly being polluted leading to the death of sea animals; rivers, seas, canals, etc., are shrinking and drying up, African eco-spirituality emerges as an African response to the global challenge. It is also a recognition of the fact that scientific discoveries and advances in the area of technology cannot adequately attend to the problem of ecological crisis in our globalized world. African eco-spirituality is a recognition of the need for alternative perspectives and models or approaches in such a manner that it works for all peoples and in all places. It further recognizes the importance of putting into consideration the categories of particular people, and to use languages that people understand in developing solutions to the ecological crisis at hand.

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