

Chapter Twenty

RETHINKING TRADITIONAL EDIFICATION AND THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

Vincent Stephen KABUK, PhD

*Department of Religion and Philosophy,
University of Jos.*

kabukv@unijos.edu.ng

Executive Summary

This chapter argues that the African indigenous ecospirituality is largely a form of ethnocentric anthroposophy which evinces a consciousness about the relationship linking all beings in the ontological order. The traditional African society raised questions through the centuries on how humans ought to live in the society to foster a sustainable ecological community. As unsophisticated as the African society may seem there were attempts to avert some perceived ecocatastrophe in the community to keep harmony between the individual entities and the cosmic totality.

Keywords: African, Nigeria, Traditional, Indigenous, Ecospirituality, Environment

Introduction

In all the philosophies of the world none has suffered criticisms, and even rejection, like those of the African continent. The African sub-regional thinking has suffered acrimonious debates throughout the twentieth century. Some of these culture-bound thought among the indigenous Africans were denied without concerted efforts to understand the contextual historical

antecedents of the development of such line of thinking. The global resentments against the continental indigenous thinking were probably justificatory tendencies for the colonial incursion of the imperialists and their colonial projects in the region (Areji, 2005:63).

Conversely, Africa has navigated through turbulences for decades to assert a culture of belonging that expresses their identities. It behoves the indigenous scholarship to develop the feelings that, although, philosophy is a general enterprise, but it is not barred from having any cultural relevance or regional uniqueness; and if that is the case, other regional experts were exceeding their limits if they claimed the right to define what African philosophy (that is largely cultural thinking) is. Perhaps, philosophy in its character dethrones all sorts of methodological stereotypes and permits certain peculiarities that emphasize cultural or indigenous philosophies (Kabuk, & Torkwembe, 2019). Until this is clarified, the acrimonious debates on the existence of African philosophy will keep resonating endlessly.

Unless the above presumption is deemphasized, debatable issues in the indigenous philosophy within the African context would generate further controversies and re-enthroned chasms of destruction about the nature of African intellect. Indicatively, there are certain intelligibly discourses and theories that assert the indigenous thinking of the intimate interconnectivity between parts of a whole, which may not be understood without reference to the whole. Of course, this forms the basis for the new wave of ecological philosophy in the Africa context. It is in view of this realisation the chapter is born; which aims at generating more insights that will influence national, continental and global debates in philosophy on various perspectives regarding the evolution of ecological spirituality in Africa.

Cultural Edification in the African Society

Scholars who are familiar with the subject matter of philosophy in the African cultural context are not unaware of the fact that it is not likely to be the easiest subject in the world. This is because there is often misunderstanding and misrepresentation by others who choose to use other paradigms (particularly those of the West) to gauge it. Such deliberate misconstruing narratives about the African cultural thought are somehow intellectually dishonest. Issues concerning African cultural experiences are not fairly treated; certain presumptions and exaggerated narratives that are largely second hand sources attract attentions and even appear more authoritative than the real or original ideas.

The brand of thinking that originates from the cultural context of the Africans is often adjudged from the angle of its formality or non-formality, documented or not documented, and a request for other evidences; and its authentication depends largely on such considerations. Although, those holding such notions cannot be totally exonerated of their claims but they can be excused for lack of in-depth knowledge of some African cultural values. Becoming conscious of one's cultural values does not require any formal education, being in a particular culture automatically conscripts one to be part of that culture; a cultural experience that is uncommon to other races. This explains the facts of learning and enlightenment among Africans traditional societies, which must not have the semblance of other cultural models. Now, the big question the potential readers would likely ask is; how do African societies achieve certain edification within cultural contexts?

The answer to this question may take a twist, which experience has shown that certain tendencies of demand for literary productions, and the 'formal-informal' categorizations of

learning come to play, with which supposed “privileged” cultures feel superior; as if no certitudes can be attained beyond ‘formal’ knowledge acquisition. Perhaps, this has been the decades-long experience which Africa passed through in her quest for learning in the cultural context.

Indicatively, neither the concept of education nor learning is restricted to their formal usages. Each has its designated operational mode within certain contextual frameworks, which every culture finds congenial for learning. To start with, can any knowledge be derived from the traditional African culture? If the answer is in the affirmative, then, how authentic can that knowledge be? Various attempts to answer these and other related questions perhaps led to the reconstruction of a new pattern of thinking amongst African scholars in the last quarter of the twentieth century; which the various cultural values became the sources for raw material for such discourses. No African in the 21st century, whether educated or not, continually exhibits the cognition of inferiorly cultural thinking, waiting for a superior approbation from other cultures. Undoubtedly, people within the traditional African societies who are in tuned with the cultural values are integrally conscripted or integrated automatically as members of that culture. It is on this basis that certain determinations of culture-bound consciousness emanate, which primarily gives to each member a first taste of what their culture comprised of.

Such an understanding and the concerted action to resist the sweeping effects of the waves of neo-colonialism compelled Africans to become ‘self-conscious’; and, also the need to cultivate a culture of ‘belonging’ that is more demanding now than ever before in many African societies. Therefore, the collective determination of Africans towards decolonisation of their minds in recent times – struggles that have engrossed

Africa since the dawn of slavery, and perhaps colonial projects on the continent – made Africans to retrace certain contextual historical trends to understand their cultural values, and navigate them in the development of African philosophic ideas generally.

Cultural edification entails some kind of learning or becoming conscious of what every society commonly hold sway, which characterises or identifies them as a people differently from others. Michael Oakeshott (2010:108) gives a striking concise approach on the nature of learning in *The Concept of Education* that:

Learning is the comprehensive activity in which we come to know ourselves and the world around us. It is a paradoxical activity: it is doing and submitting at the same time. And its achievements range from merely being aware, to what may be called understanding and being able to explain. In each of us, it begins at birth; it takes place not in some ideal abstract world, but in the local world we inhabit; for the individual it terminates only in death, for a civilisation it ends in the collapse of the characteristic manner of Life, and for the race it is, in principle, interminable. The activity of learning may, however, be suspended from time to time while we enjoy what we have learned.

Oakeshott succeeds in establishing that learning is pre-eminently human characteristic, intelligent beings capable of choices and self-direction in relation to their own impulses and to the world around them. Hence, the African traditional society is not excluded from this commitment. Perhaps, this reflects Kabuk's view on traditional education that:

Traditional education, therefore, is the transmission of culture in form of beliefs, values, customs, ideas,

technology and others from one generation to another, in order for an individual to be conscripted and function within a given society. Traditional education may not exclusively mean 'archaic' or 'older' kind of education as others thought, but it implies loosely an indigenous system of education that is practised in a given 'simple' culture. Hence, traditional or indigenous education emphasises social responsibilities, job orientation, political participation and active participation in ceremonies and rituals. This system of education may not have to do with schools and books, no paid professional personnel etc. It is basically non-literacy as opposed to the western education, which is peculiar to simple cultures, such as the ones found in Africa; and the medium of transmission is through oral tradition (Kabuk, 2017: 193-4).

This indeed expresses the nature of African traditional education system. The concept "traditional" here implies a body of long-established customs and beliefs viewed as a set of precedents; often one that has been handed down from generation to generation. Nonetheless, as unsophisticated as the traditional system of learning in the African culture may appear it has some methodical pattern that are largely demonstration, imitation, play, and oral, etc; and its simple nature makes its evaluation less strenuous by mere observation and approval (Kabuk, 2017: 196).

By and large, every human culture has a pattern of learning certain values peculiar to it which does not necessarily has to be in a formal way. The culture however, is a repository of information in every traditional setting. Therefore, the informal system of learning constitutes the core of indigenous African education, under which every individual in the community is practically trained and prepared for their role in the society. This perhaps is the means by which the African society, like any other

culture (sophisticated or unsophisticated), explores its rich cultural repository. Such values are known through various means of cultural participations like rituals, signs and symbols, other ceremonies or traditional practices, music, folktales, etc. In some sense, this is how Africans become conscious of the 'self', which is part of, and as it relates to the environment which they live. This perhaps is transmitted through orals and other sacred and social traditions to younger generations for the preservation of the cultural-bound values and other fixed moral norms of the people.

Conversely, the field of philosophy of ecology is relatively new, which is increasingly receiving considerable attention. The general understanding is that the "area holds great promise for the advancement of both ecology and the philosophy of science" (Colyvan, M., Et al, 2009). However, it is a familiar model within the cultural context of the African traditional values. The environment and all that concerns it are normatively conceptualised into some sort of holism. What seems to make this claim defeasible is the pattern that the cultural inquiry among Africans trailed over the years which was never systematized or methodized. The simple reason why the new found area of philosophy of environment is a familiar terrain among Africans is simple; the cultural practices of the black race evinces a sort of realisation that there is a common thread that unites the nonhuman biological entities that deserves consideration too which is typically extended squarely to humans. This perhaps plunged them to develop some ethical concerns toward the conservation of the ecosystem for some traditional and perhaps ritual purposes. Most intriguingly, it is from this general consciousness of the unity and the interrelatedness of human and nonhuman bio-entities within the

environment that Africans manipulate the ecosystem for their own survival.

Ecophilosophy and the African Ecological Thinking

The basic concept of humanism and human autonomy, on the contrary, has placed through the ages a cultural boundary that echoes strictly human triumph without due consideration of interdependency of all other existence, as they relate within the environment. The breakaway of the ecological standpoint from this tradition has historical antecedents, which saw various environmental rights and ethical movements within various cultures of the globe that seek to preserve the ecology. On its part, deep ecology breaks from the supposed 'shallow' ecological thought that seemed to impose anthropocentric boundaries, which obliged the relevance of the environment so far as all that concerns it strictly benefits humans. Beyond this anthropocentrism is the contemporary interests that seek to demonstrate the importance of nonhuman biological entities and the environment that make up the entire ecosystem. Indeed, ecophilosophy is the birthwort of the conjoined doctrines of ecology and philosophy.

Ecosophy or ecophilosophy are basically neologisms contracted from the phrase ecological philosophy. The advent of the terms is attributed to a Norwegian philosopher and ecologist, Arne Naess. As a founder of *deep philosophy*, Naess assumes that there can be an intersection between philosophy and ecology, where philosophy would provide the wisdom to guide the actions necessary to foil some impending ecocatastrophes that are anthropogenic in nature. Ontologically speaking, the new found thought of "deep ecology" posits that the reality of nature is such that humans are inseparable from nature itself. Hence, ecophilosophy is essentially an area of interest that unites philosophy and ecology which emphasises that human beings

are intrinsic part of, and inseparable from nature itself. Therefore, ecophilosophy as a critical study of ecological issues assess critically the human-earth rapport and advocacy for friendly treatment of the environment.

Naess construed ecophilosophy as a discipline, just as philosophy, that is based on some kind of analytical thinking, reasoned argument, with carefully examined assumptions on ecological praxis. He however attempted to distinguish between ecosophy and ecophilosophy, which in some sense the former is portrayed not as a discipline (as in the sense of philosophy), but as personal philosophies that guide our conducts as they affect the environment. Ecosophy is nonetheless a set of beliefs about the interrelatedness of nature and people in the various environments (Naess, 1989). Such ecosophic thinking is believed to vary from an individual to another, but may share certain fundamental elements, based on some norms or assumptions that seek to conserve it.

Conversely, Naess' ecosophilosophy is widely seen as a model or a sort of general framework that guides individuals' ecosophies (eco-beliefs); this emphasises certain *intrinsic values* about nature in general, and the significance of cultural and natural diversity, which provides a methodological pathway for a systematized reflective thinking about the ecology. The contemporary discourse on environmental philosophy seems to express this even deeper; this line of thinking is scientifically designed as a discipline to put emphasis on the basic fact that all lives have independent values that are free from human perspectives or uses, which of course, must not be tempered with, unless it should be done for the sake of survival (Naess, 1989; Hedgpeth, 1996). Perhaps, the understanding of interconnectedness of facts of human existence and the

environment prevents all inclinations of ecocatastrophism. Hence, this trend of thinking is to redefine the position of the human species and reposition the importance of the entire environment and the interdependence of organisms as an ecosystem.

The African ecological thinking demonstrates a cultural unity that explores indigenous socioecological praxis; a continuous cross-cultural practice that is not based on some ecological theory or any philosophical system that explicates it as afrocentric ecophilosophy. Although, recent researches have demonstrate this, and provides more informational data that contributes to the reconstruction of an African-centred ecophilosophy in modern terms. Prior to the modern ecophilosophy discourses in Africa, the established customs that may probably have resonated from the habitual practices of conserving the ecosystem among Africans is consistent with the ecosophic beliefs that are inherent in virtually all Afro-cultural practices. Despite its traditional mode the Afro-ecological belief is not found to contravene the basic principles of the most recent global environment ethics. Even though, just as much other non-western environmental wisdom are excluded in the theorisation and deciding global issues, there is indeed non-recognition of African traditional ecological knowledge at the global stage. Such negation amounts to a superficial knowledge about the reality of African traditional ecological thinking which existed for centuries before the echoes of the voices of the western frontiers were heard in the 1960s.

There is no doubt that Africa as region has indeed suffered all shades of acrimonious debates through the ages, probably due to problem of nonconforming its thought pattern to those of the West. The relatively recent found ecological thinking of the globe demonstrates this even more. The African traditional ecological

consciousness is far beyond the Western paradigm of mere ecological conservation and environmental justice. This is due to the fact that the Afro-cultural wisdom incorporates a united consciousness that determines the destinies of the various individuals, and also aid in interpreting the purpose of all biological realities within an environment. Perhaps, this involves some level of spirituality; a form Afrocentric anthroposophy that evinces African earth-based spiritual traditions and practices. In some sense, there is a point of intersection between spirituality and ecology within an environment.

Afro-cultural Edification and Ecospirituality

The concept of culture has various meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It could imply the basic idea of enlightenment and sophistication obtained through education or some exposures. It could also denote a people with a shared beliefs, values, customs, practices, or social behaviours; while in some instances it implies a particular set of attitudes that characterizes a group of individuals. However the concept of culture may be conceived, central to it is the basic understanding that it is the lifeblood of a lively society, which enhances and even preserves a community's identity and other intrinsic values through some intellectual and emotional experiences (Gilmore, 2014).

Culture in the African context provides a veritable platform for cultural consciousness, where each individual within it derives certain intellectual and moral values that help shape and broaden their thought about life generally. The African people's cultural values however elicit the traditional knowledge of the Africans which depends largely on the cultural and environmental situation of the people. Hence, the African people's cultural values include various sources of traditional

knowledge through reflections, and interactions with nature imbedded in their proverbs, wise sayings, taboos, ritual and other institutions. Indeed, these were the means which the Africans became conscious of their environment and of course, their various traditional values. This shows clearly that transmitting, and conserving indigenous knowledge is fundamental to cultural identity for an indigenous people.

It is truism that the entire cultural and environmental situations of a people illicit their traditional knowledge, which perhaps the African traditional ecological knowledge is part of. The various cultures within the Africa sub-region have however advanced their knowledge, innovations and practices that educe ecological knowledge within the indigenous context in their local communities. Nonetheless, there was that desire for searching deeper questions about the human relations and nature. Such an indigenous ecological concern among African cultures was aimed at preserving the natural environment, even though for purely anthropocentric reasons. Perhaps, the traditional ecological thinking of Africans has never evinced some biocentric concern as it is with the modern 'deep ecology' doctrine. The indigenous African ecological consciousness reveals some interconnectedness between human and non-human entities, and such intersection is educed from an explicitly metaphysical point of view, rather than some psychological feelings. Ikenga-Metuh (1987) expressed this deeply in his concept of "harmony of beings", where he explained that:

The goal of interaction of beings in African world-views is the maintenance of the integration and balance of the beings in it. Harmonious interaction of beings leads to mutual strengthening of the beings involved, and enhances the growth of life. A pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the

harmony and integration of the whole. Thus one of the bases on which the African mode of life rests is participation or profound communion with the universe. Ikega-Metuh further explained that:

The main objective of an African is to live a life of harmony with humanity and with nature. Man strives to be in harmony with God, deities, and his fellowmen both living and dead. He feels himself in intimate rapport and tries to maintain harmonious relationship with the animal, vegetables, and other elements and phenomena in the universe. For him, the first evil is disintegration for this would spell disaster both for himself and his immediate world. The ideal thing is integration, communion and harmony.

The view of Emefie Ikega-Metuh (1987;78-9) seems to demonstrates deeply the indigenous African concern about the ecological spirituality. Metuh is not unaware of the fact that man in the African context must “constantly consult oracles and divination to assure himself that he is in relationship with all forces in his world.” His indulgence in frequent ritual would reinforce his communion with the forces and “repairs any interruptions that may have occurred.” Indeed, Naess (1989) deciphered this in a simple argument that becoming conscious about human and nonhuman entities’ rapport within the environment may prevent harm to nature, because in doing that we simultaneously harm ourselves – since there is the understanding that humanity is inseparable with nature.

The case with the tradition African ecological thinking is rather ethnographical praxis than a concern for some principles of environmentalism as it is practiced among the Western scholars. Metuh (1987;79) reiterated on a man’s wellbeing that consists in maintaining a constant harmony with the cosmic totality. Metuh

seems to re-echo John V. Taylor's account of his conversations on indigenous culture with many different African people. Taylor (1963:67) believed that, in keeping harmony with cosmic totality, man is communion with other realities, hence, when things go well with him, he is conscious that he is at peace with the scheme of things, and if things go wrong, then he knows somewhere he has fallen out of steps.

Although, the African worldview is naturally anthropocentric, but it somehow displays some ontological link between the spiritual realm and other beings in the temporal order; this demonstrates in some sense a sort of network of relationships that link all beings in ontological order. Nonetheless, the ecological spirituality in Africa evinces the fact that they are united by the consciousness that our individual destinies are caught up with the health of the natural systems.

Conversely, there were elements of ethnographic ecological concern among Africans which could be scout through cultural adage, folktales, songs, oral instructions, and other cultural practices. This demonstrates the fact that all natural entities (biological and non-biological) were perhaps morally considerable which is not in conflict with the modern construct of normative ethic. The moral concern of Africans is the actual concern about the place of other realities and their meaning in human cultures rather than engaging in some abstract ethical reasoning on how we treat them, since they too form part of the ecological order. This realization however stirs up a sort of consciousness on ecological spirituality and conservation for sustainability of the natural environment; except doing otherwise is aimed at man's survival.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the African indigenous ecospirituality is largely a form of ethnocentric anthroposophy which evinces a consciousness about the relationship linking all beings in the ontological order. The traditional African society raised questions through the centuries on how humans ought to live in the society to foster a sustainable ecological community. As unsophisticated as the African society may seem there were attempts to avert some perceived ecocatastrophe in the community to keep harmony between the individual entities and the cosmic totality.

Although, there is general believed among indigenous Africans that the universe was created and man became the dominant being within it, but it does not mean that man can misuse the earth; hence, it is within the purview of the indigenous African belief that humans are to act as friends and stewards of nature, respect the moral order in the universe, and prevent any form of ecological destruction (Mbiti, 1991). Perhaps, one thing should be clear, the African cosmic knowledge is not based on mythical imagination, it emanates from African experience of the universe, and has indeed enabled Africans to navigate through their environment in a sustainable manner (Ikeke, 2018; 234).

Ikeke's view succinctly expressed the traditional ecological knowledge; according to him, the indigenous ecological knowledge helped Africans in time past to preserve water supply sources, control erosion, preserve grooves and shrines, rehabilitate endangered animals, overcome drought and famine, etc. Ikeke therefore recommended there should be a place in ecophilosophy for African traditional ecological knowledge, since Africans protected their environment through the years. Ikeke (2018) wondered how African developed taboos to protect

medicinal plants and animals, religious myths to protect some environment. Indeed, the African traditional eco-thoughts have through the years eduved cultural values that helped in the preservation of the environment.

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