

AFRICAN CULTURAL BELIEFS AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Every society or community in the world and Africa in particular has a set of values and norms that guide the activities and protects their interests. Culture which is commonly known as the people's way of life, in Africa, can be said to be a tree in which eco – spirituality has a branch. The connection between spirituality and the earth has deep and historical roots in many cultural practices and beliefs especially those that have remained in tune with the rhythm and limits of the earth, such as the African tradition. Using the method of critical evaluation and analysis the researchers find out that the African cultural beliefs have positive effects on the revolution of eco – spirituality. The researchers, therefore, suggested that the African cultural beliefs be critically assessed and those found inimical to the intricacies of eco – spirituality be dissolved. It is essential then, that African cultural beliefs be revaluated and the relevance of these beliefs especially those pertaining to ecological spirituality be sustained for an improved ecology.

Keywords: African; Culture; Ecology; Spirituality; Beliefs; Eco-spirituality

Introduction

Culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people. This presupposes the fact that there can be no people without a culture. To claim that there is no society without a culture would, by implication, mean that such a society has continued to survive without any form of social organisation or institutions, norms, beliefs and taboos, and so on; and this kind of assertion is quite untrue. That is why the western who claim we the Africans have no history never insinuated we had no culture. Eco-spirituality which simply denotes the environment and its sacredness have and would always be effected by cultural and believes. The African cultural believes have always been concerned with the well being of the environment and at such been a big source of environmental

conservation. The practice of eco-spirituality has been part of Africans cultural believe and practice, in fact, the importance of the environment was at some point overly emphasised on by the Africans and this emphasis led to not just respecting but worshipping the eco-system, the worshipping of the ecosystem though not a good idea has a good side to it which is, It in no small measure set Africans as icon worthy of emulation in matter pertaining to ecological conservation. With the coming of the white men and in a bid to meet up with trends and innovations Africans are fast forgetting the cultural believes that has sustained them for many generation an are fast embracing the activities and practice of the white men with ought considering the extent of harm being done on the environment.

It is, therefore, important that these aspects of our culture that have enhanced conservation be critically assessed and looked into so as to resuscitate and revive our cultural heritage. This works however points out the different aspect of our cultural beliefs which would enhance the revolution of the eco-spirituality if resuscitated.

Appreciation of Culture

Edward B. Taylor is reputed as the scholar who first coined and defined culture in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871) and reprinted in 1958. Taylor saw culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This definition captures the exhaustive nature of culture. One would have expected that this definition would be a univocal one - but this is not so. In fact, there are as many definitions of culture as there are scholars who are interested in the phenomenon. Culture embraces a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements and norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, morals and so on. It is the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim to share a single origin or descent. In an attempt to capture the exhaustive nature of culture, Bello (1991: 189) sees it as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours". Culture serves to distinguish a people from others (Aziza 2001; Kanu 2015).

Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos,

food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. Culture is passed on from generation to generation. The acquisition of culture is a result of the socialisation process. Explaining how culture is passed on as a generational heritage, Fafunwa (1974: 48) writes that: The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments.

This shows that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. We do not need to have all the definitions of culture and its defining characteristics for us to understand the concept and meaning of culture. Even though there are as many definitions of culture as there are writers, there is an element of similarity that runs through them all. This singular underlying characteristic is the attempt to portray and capture culture as the entire or total way of life of a particular group of people. Etuk (2002: 13) is of the opinion that "an entire way of life would embody, among other things, what the people think of themselves and the universe in which they live - their world view - in other words, how they organise their lives in order to ensure their survival". It can be safely stated that there can be no culture without a society. It can also be said that culture is uniquely human and shared with other people in a society. Culture is selective in what it absorbs or accepts from other people who do not belong to a particular cultural group.

Culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects. While material culture refers to the visible tactile objects which man is able to manufacture for the purposes of human survival; non-material culture comprises of the norms and mores of the people. While material culture is concrete and takes the form of artefacts and crafts, non-material culture is abstract but has a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular culture. Hence beliefs about what is good and what is bad, together with norms and taboos, are all good examples of non-material culture. From the foregoing, it is obvious that culture is shared since it consists of cherished values or beliefs that are shared by

a group, lineage, and religious sect and so on. Apart from this, culture is dynamic in the sense that it is continually changing. Culture is not static. We are not alone in this observation as Antia (2005: 17) states that "culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changed and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other peoples' cultures, a process known as assimilation". Etuk (2002: 25) has also observed that "cultures are not static, they change. Indeed culture needs to change; which wants to remain static and resistant to change would not be a living culture". We can see that since culture is carried by people and people do change their social patterns and institutions, beliefs and values and even skills and tools of work, then culture cannot but be an adaptive system. Once an aspect of culture adjusts or shifts in response to changes from within or outside the environment, then other aspects of the culture are affected, whether directly or indirectly. It is necessary to know that each element of a culture (such as material procedures, food processing or greeting patterns) is related to the whole system. It is in this respect that we can see that even a people's technology is part of their culture.

Appreciation of Eco-spirituality

Eco-spirituality expresses the joining of spirituality with ecological perspectives. There are numerous types, traditions, expressions, and understandings of eco-spirituality. It does not refer to any one set of beliefs, but to a range of ethical or moral, religious, spiritual, or agnostic beliefs, tendencies, or actions that relate to ecological concerns. Eco-spirituality has evolved over the years and is currently a practice the westerners hold dear. The connection between spirituality and the Earth has deep and historical roots in many religious traditions and in particular with those that have remained in tune with the rhythms and limits of the Earth, such as some indigenous traditions around the world.

Eco-spirituality has many meanings, the first referring to a thirst for connection between spirituality and the Earth, given the extent of and the general lack of religious responses to the ecological crisis. There is this recognition that the ecological crisis threatens all life on Earth, and it is fundamentally a moral, spiritual, and religious problem.

Since the early 1970s there has been a global, public, and political consciousness of the need for ethics and religions to be consistent with ecological and social liberation, noting, as does Steven Rockefeller (1992), that there are many diverse cultural paths joining in this awareness. Discussions have been increasingly cross-cultural and interreligious. Organizations such as the United Nation,

the World Wildlife Fund, World Conservation Strategy, and numerous religious groups have been involved in interdisciplinary work aimed at developing religious and spiritual responses to the ecological crisis that are connected to political decision-making. From the initiatives of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the Harvard Centre for the Study of World Religions hosted a Religion and Ecology Project involving ten conferences since 1996, bringing together scholars and environmentalists from Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Jainism, Hinduism, indigenous traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This work is entering a phase of discussions with the United Nations.

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. Eco-spirituality is a manner of speaking about this kind of religious experience that is awakening, slowly and unevenly, within the human community. As Rockefeller suggests, an appreciation of the miracle of life and of the beauty and mystery in the being of animals, plants, and the Earth as a whole becomes so intense as to generate a keen sense of the natural world's sacredness. This awareness of the inner mystery of life is at the heart of most religions.

Eco-spirituality is not connected to any one tradition. As well as pertaining to established religious traditions, eco-spirituality can refer to a myriad of Goddess, Wiccan, deep ecology, eco-feminist, or any mixture of Eastern, indigenous, and New age beliefs and practices. Eco-spirituality can refer to those who do not want any religious affiliation. James Lovelock (1970) proposed a scientific theory called the Gaia hypothesis, which revives the name of a female Greek goddess of Earth. Lovelock proposed that the best way to understand the Earth is as a living planet on which all life functions as a systemic, interconnected whole—alive in the sense that the Earth is self-organizing and self-regulating. This theory has been debated intensely, and there is a slow acceptance of its validity. The relationship between eco-spirituality and the proposed *Gaia hypothesis* does not originate with Lovelock but with those who share his sense that the Earth is alive and humans just like the Igbo who believe that both earth and humans are an integral member of a larger community of life.

Eco-spirituality is also a term that can be applied to the work in cosmology and particularly that of Thomas Berry, a cultural historian of religions. Berry's work in scientific and religious cosmologies-stories about the origin of the world that provide orientation, guidance, and meaning to life-has done much to revive a sense of the sacredness of life, the Earth, and all the processes of the universe. He offers a comprehensive context for rethinking our current situation and for understanding ourselves as part of a larger evolutionary whole that is both spiritual and material.

There are several elements within eco-spirituality, and priorities are divergent. One challenges the belief that humans are the centre of life, or anthropocentrism. Some propose a bio-centric approach wherein the intrinsic value of animals, plants, rivers, and mountains has a priority over their instrumental value as resources for humans. The eco-spirituality insights emerging from deep ecology, eco-feminism, and cosmology are in this vein. Others would attend to the ethical dimensions, such as environmental ethics, eco-feminism and issues of domination, and social ecology wherein the relationships among ethics, social issues, and ecological issues are the central pieces of their eco-spirituality. Others would put a priority on public policy and activism, seeking to change institutions, economic agendas, and legislation. Still others work to change the ideas, values, and beliefs at universities, colleges, workshops, and conferences. Finally, there is a plethora of eco-spirituality rituals.

On Cultural Beliefs

Good cultural practices denote healthy ecological value; eco-spirituality thrives on the need for a rich ecosystem that accommodates all living entity with equity and empathy of one towards another. The African cultural practice is a rich practice that covers; religion, values, mode of eating dressing and what have you. It is therefore true to say that culture defines a people, it is an identity that distinguishes one community from the other and in this context it seeks to examine or regulate the relationship of man and its environment.

Eco-spirituality is based on a fundamental belief in the sacredness of nature Earth, and universe though not relating particularly to any culture or tradition its practice involves the cultural beliefs of the people in various community. The place of culture in the evolution of eco-spirituality is that it considers the under listed aspect of the ecosystem in founding its legacy:

- i. Humanity is born of nature from nature. It's a part of nature, and does not own nature exclusively for its own ends and purposes.
- ii. Humanity should not use nature and atmosphere as a toilet for its pollution
- iii. Humanity cannot use and treat the natural world as an "infinite extraction resource and treasure chest. It must not over exploit the natural world which is like to harm the current and future generations, or other biological life forms.
- iv. Humanity must assume the role of stewardship for nature.

It is a cultural belief in most African countries that nature has its own life and at such is what brought about the existence of humans. In the Igbo tribe of Africa there have been a lingering culture of offering the earth foods and drinks to eat first before it goes into the mouth, this culture denotes the importance and respect the African Igbo tribe have for the natural earth and further shows its awareness of the fact that humanity is born of nature. This practices is directly aligned with the long living practice of the Africans allowing the fathers and the elders to take things first when items of consumption is being shared. By implication, the African sees the land as an.

The ancient African community though not grounded in western education sure try to recycle their waste into nutrients that nourishes the land. The passing of human waste in the bushes as a way of enhancing its soil nutrient is a long time practice which even today can be seen in primitive areas, proves that the African man do not believe in using nature as a toilet for its pollution rather they endeavour to savour the lands and enrich it with human waste, the culture guiding waste disposal in African is that decomposable waste be thrown into a mapped out area in the farm, where it decomposes and forms manure, nylon materials and fire consumable waste be thrown into the kitchen fire place whereas the tin waste should be packed and resold for recycling. This process of waste disposal clearly denotes the effort of the African believes and towards an enriched environment.

The African culture as pertaining to land exploitation has a lot to say when it comes to ecology conservation, the Africans practice shift cultivation and are not interested in any form of wilful escapade that might harm the ecosystem in the name of pursuit for wealth.

Traditional beliefs associated with operations in the agricultural system are guided by animistic beliefs in every farming process. Their practices

Sustainability based on the traditional beliefs have demonstrated the ability to sustain agro-diversity and inherent wild biodiversity, ensuring ecosystem functions and supporting livelihoods and food security. In another example, some African tribes performed management and conservation of natural resources as guided by their beliefs in the spirits of the forests. These tribes live in the “holy” forest perform ancient rites and rituals where they worshipped the spirits of their ancestors. They believed that the “holy” areas were the place where their god resided. Consequently, the villagers respected and maintained the forest resources. These aspects of indigenous belief systems that rest on the attribution of supernatural powers to some parts of the natural environment as the home of the gods seem to have significantly contributed to conservation and protection of essential natural resources such as groves, ponds, soil fertility and animals from overutilization and exploitation, and their use explicitly encourages conservation of environmental resources. African culture encourages eco- spirituality in all its fullness and acknowledges nature as superior and sacred.

African Cultural Beliefs and Eco-spirituality

African culture in no particular order relates to people’s believe, attitude, collective values and practices. In the actual sense of it, it is therefore not wrong if we say that culture defines a person and his relationship with his environment. Africa is not an exception to this definition in fact Africa is one of the continents that still holds onto their cultural believes and practices. Eco-spirituality which presents or advocates for the sacredness and protection of the environment would not be justly treated if we do not look at culture. Culture defines man and man governs the ecosystem so by implication culture guides the attitude of man and his reaction /responsiveness towards ecological crises and conservation. The belief of the people be it spiritual or otherwise affects the ecosystem positively or negatively.

Man often is a product of his belief and at such culture guides mans attitude towards maintaining a sustainable eco-spirituality. Indigenous people in some parts of the globe are entitled to specific rights to collectively use and manage natural resources, predicated on their historical, social and cultural connection to a particular territory. The United Nations (UN) defines indigenous people as people being inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures with unique ways of relating to people and the environment. Indigenous people have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the

dominant societies in which they live. Following such traditional practices as beliefs, taboos, and myths, some local African communities have been able to conserve their forests for generations. Access to any sacred forests in such community is governed by strict customs, which include the practice of rituals and sacrifices before obtaining the permission to harvest certain tree species. These practices could protect forest biodiversity and watersheds, certify existing forests, and prevent Africans from overexploiting resources, resulting in better conservation of their forests. An example of indigenous peoples' practices is the use of beliefs in totems for managing the natural resources and conserving flora and fauna by the *Ba'Aka* pygmies of Central Africa. They believe that killing totems for food would bring a negative impact to their well-being. They also believe that hunting of the animals would prompt bad luck for the community. It is believed that pregnant women should not eat certain types of reptiles, birds and animals because eating them might stop production of breast milk or cause fatal abortions. In addition, as some parts of rivers or streams and forests are considered sacred, fishing and hunting are forbidden unless special rituals are to be performed. Traditional practices in *Ba'Aka* demonstrate the existence of traditional strategies by indigenous people for conserving natural resources in some African communities.

Conclusion

The ecosystem has suffered a lot due to man's actions and inactions and this has been as a result of the total negligence of man. Eco-spirituality is therefore a wakeup call that reminds us of the value of our environment and the reason to keep it safe. Culture is an indispensable aspect of a man and in Africa cultural practices and beliefs have helped enhance the ecosystem. It is in fact the negligence of these cultural practices that has led to the deterioration of our ecosystem. Eco-spirituality revolution should therefore look into reviving African cultural practices that enhances the ecosystem and eco-spirituality.

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