

Original Article

Towards Curbing Environmental Degradation in Contemporary Africa: Reverting to Traditional Conservation?

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Abstract: Environmental conservation is one theme that has gained centre stage over the past few decades. This is because of the dangerous threat posed by the imposing environmental degradation being witnessed by the present century, which signals even worse doom for future generations unless nipped in the bud. No doubt, significant attention has been dedicated to investigating and finding solutions to the problem of environmental degradation, but not much seems to have been achieved, especially in Africa. It has therefore become pertinent and urgent to backpedal down memory lane to how the environment was conserved in traditional African societies with considerable success. This paper, therefore, examines the possibility of conserving the environment in Africa using the traditional environment conservation strategies that were hitherto used by different African societies. The African traditional concept of the environment enjoined the living to manage and conserve the environment for future generations, bearing in mind that they would account for their stewardship of the environment to the ancestors when they depart the earth. The African situation could be made to represent other developing regions of the world. The primary thesis of this paper is that there should be a fusion of traditional strategies of with the modern models of environmental conservation for better results to be achieved in Africa. It is the contention of this paper that the almost complete replacement of the traditional methods of environmental conservation in Africa with the modern scientific model would only remain a clog in the wheels of the progress in the environmental sustainability paradigm.

Key Words: Environment, Degradation, African Tradition, Conservation, Traditional Religion

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Introduction: The twenty first century is no doubt quite a controversial one. Observably, there is no century in history when science and technology has made such enormous positive impacts on the human environment as it makes now¹.

Conversely, there is also no time in the history of mankind when the environment was threatened with various forms of degradation as it is threatened in this century². Dokun corroborates this assertion by stating that the global-warming, ozone depletion, biological diversity loss, deforestation etc have threatened the environment³ which are all outcomes from human exploration and exploitation of

nature. Unfortunately, the environmental crises now encompass the entire Earth. Strangely enough, although the destruction of the sacred quality of nature by modern man dominated by a secularist perspective is directly responsible for this catastrophe. The role of traditional conservative methods in the solution to the existing environmental crises between man and nature is therefore crucial⁴.

African societies, in general, have been worst hit by some of these environmental problems like deforestation, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, air and water pollution to mention, etc⁵. These problems have worsened Africa's prevailing poverty and socio-economic woes. There is however a wide consensus on the fact that some of the problems plaguing the environment today have been directly or indirectly linked to the worldviews and attitudes originating from Western religio-cultural, socio-economic, scientific and philosophical principles⁶. These tendencies have connived to wreck

untold havoc on the environment, ironically to the detriment of humankind and the general sustainability of the environment.

It must be admitted that within this century, there have been increased efforts to address the problems of environmental degradation, all but to no avail. Therefore, efforts towards environmental sustainability must appeal to every aspect of human rationality, e.g. traditional/cultural, social, economic, political, religious or philosophical. This paper advocates a revert to traditional African models of conserving the environment as the best way out of the impending environmental doom on the continent.

African Traditional Worldview: The traditional worldview of an African is intrinsically religious. Almost every aspect of life has a religious underpinning. Apparently, religion helps not only in the expression of the deepest feelings of human beings, it also attempts to provide satisfying and soothing explanations to the mysteries of life. In other words, the religion of a people has a determinant role and influence over their prevailing worldview⁷.

Africans appeal to religion to give answers to various problems that daily confront them, even their relationship with one another, with other creatures and with their environment. It is observable that the political, socio-cultural, economic and even agricultural motivations and engagements of Africans are tempered and spiced with religious undertones⁸. The average African depends on religion and the supernatural for sustainability, healing, food production, goodluck/success,

fecundity and other life endeavors. There was no dichotomy among the spiritual, the physical and the rational. All aspects of life were reducible to, and explainable by the religious phenomenon.

Mbiti categorized the worldview into five parts - God, spirits, man, animals and non-biological life. But Nisbert Taringa, divided the African worldview into three basic components: the spiritual world, the world of human beings and the natural world⁹. In a consequence, African cosmologies are suffused with creation myths sometimes marked with beauty and imagery. Mbiti presents this aptly:

All the things of nature, especially the spiritual and non-human elements have their significant purpose which consists in creating a healthy and beautiful habitat for human beings. The spiritual world is inhabited by God, the Supreme Being. Lesser divinities and ancestors also make up this spiritual world. The whole world is created, controlled, sustained and manipulated by realm of these spiritual beings. They are both, the originators and custodians of the norms, customs, traditions, codes of conduct that guide the behaviour of people in their relationship with one another and with nature as a whole. They can give fortune or bring calamity depending on how rightly or wrongly people live in the community. They can also be worshipped, induced, appeased or placated. The living, the dead and those to be born make up the human world¹⁰.

These realities include authority, old age, harmony, wholeness, prosperity, progeny, a life of virtue lived in a community and a safe passage into the land of the living dead.

However, the natural world comprises plants, animals and all non-living things. It is believed that these natural phenomena are imbued with the power of the great spirit (God), ancestral spirits both family and territorial and are therefore spiritually connected¹¹. The African, then, lives daily with the belief that he/she is being surrounded by an array of spiritual beings all meant for his/her own welfare. Therefore, the African treads with caution and is filled with awe and respect so as not to offend these spirits.

The Environment in African Traditional View: What Africans think of the land and environment are reflections of their notorious religious bias. It impacts greatly on the stability and integrity of a people at spiritual, emotional, economic, political, cultural and psychological levels of their life. They have always felt a triangular bond of relationship existing among them, their land and their God. The land is not only seen as a gateway to divinity, it has even been divinized in most African societies and held as a goddess. In the religious worldview of the traditional African, nature as a whole and its content came from the creative hands of the Supreme Being. There is a fundamental relationship and interconnection between the different things in the environment as God-given responsibility to care for the environment.

Traditionally, the African held stewardship of the environment. The living were

enjoined to conserve the environment for the benefit of their present and future generations. They were to be accountable to the ancestors at the end of their lives on earth. The earth was seen as mother and the provider as well as sustainer of life. Africans offer prayers at different periods of interaction with the environment: during planting season, after planting and at harvest time. The *ipem ihihe* among the Bekwarra of Nigeria, and *Odwira* by the Fanteakwa people of Eastern Ghana are celebrated to praise the kindness of Mother Earth in order to allow the earth to continuously play its motherhood role and to enhance the biodiversity.

Moreover, the Gikuyu of Kenya treats associated soil fertility and certain trees such as Mugumo as sacred; the Igbo of Nigeria treats certain plants and lands as sacred¹². Groves, rivers, lakes, caves are dedicated to worship by traditional African societies. But most of that has changed due to the advent of Christianity and the onslaught of Westernization.

Environmental Degradation in Africa: Nowadays, Africa is facing enormous environmental challenges such as loss of biodiversity, deforestation, soil/land fertility depletion or degradation, desertification, air and water pollution, declining marine resources, water scarcity etc. Several factors have been identified for this negative impact on the ecosystem such as the annually recurrent bush burning, uncontrolled poaching for wild-life (bush-meat), deforestation and rapid encroachment of desert especially in the northern part of Nigeria¹³.

There are also many cases of increasing landfills from uncycled solid wastes, the

menace of erosion and terrible landslides most especially in the eastern part of Nigeria. Mention could also be made of the poor sanitation and lack of appropriate sewage disposal in most of our urban centres as well as unsafe drinking sources in most of our local communities. Apparently, the excruciating poverty in most African countries does not allow for a sustainable use of the environment, neither does the excessive materialism of the affluent and rich encourage a lifestyle that is eco-friendly. Maragia laments that there is no effort have been made to protect the environment for the future generation, even we are not seriously about the environment on overpopulation where we are crazy about having so many children for keep our lineage in the world¹⁴.

In the African context, the causes of the present ecological crises are complex and paradoxical. To fully appreciate these problems, Segun Ogungbemi suggests that we need to understand the ways in which both traditional and modern social structures have led to environmental degradation¹⁵. He identifies some traditional factors that make environmental sustainability difficult to embark upon in Africa because poverty, rural nature of African communities, use of wood fuel, bush burning for hunting, reliance on traditional farming methods and unimproved plant and animal varieties¹⁶.

Kekong also points out some modern social and economic structures that bring about these problems in Africa or serve to worsen them, such as: industrialization, urbanization, population growth and globalization¹⁷. In Nigeria, for instance, the past fifty years have witnessed many

cases of oil spills and gas flares in Niger Delta region with untold consequences like loss of productive land, surface and groundwater pollution and soil contamination, among other obnoxious effects.

Apart from these, the models of economic development encouraged by neo-liberal economics are equally dangerous to human environment in Africa. African countries have variously been deceived to take up trade relationships, adopt some unsavory economic, political and development options in the guise of globalization, loans, operating free market economy, and related aid packages. These schemes have left them worse with undue strain on their environment as they are perpetually dependent on exportation of raw materials with no added value. Obtaining loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank has, in the past, pushed poor countries in Africa to forcefully implement some adjustment programs aimed at “fiscal discipline, reorientation of public expenditure, financial and commercial liberalization, privatizations, promotion of direct foreign investment, etc”¹⁸ which were detrimental to their economies. These countries were made to believe that by exporting more (raw materials), their foreign currency would increase, and by reducing government expenditure, there would be more money to boost the national economy. But this was not true. We would not fail to mention also the issue of corruption and corporate irresponsibility on the part of government functionaries, community leaders and multinational companies. These factors have perpetually kept the region under environmental siege and led to a gradual erosion of the traditional sense of the

sacredness of the earth, even at the grassroots.

African Traditional Paradigms for Sustainable Environmental Conservation:

Specific beliefs, myths, symbols, and rituals in African tradition could be harnessed for environmental conservation. For the African, these concepts are not just religious but also sociologically significant. From the socio-religious points of view, these concepts can form excellent paradigms with which one can motivate a responsible attitude towards the environment.

The African belief that the gods (and goddesses) and other spirit beings often locate their abodes on rocks, trees, hills, forests, streams, ponds, or any such places that please them within the community, from where they protect the community members from different danger, harm, famine, drought, epidemics as well as defend them during war, is typical here. They form taboos to safeguard these abodes of divinities. These taboos were a prime factor guiding their conduct towards the exploitation of the natural resources. However, this onerous role played by these taboos in the preservation of endangered plant species including rare herbs and medicinal plants has been downplayed.

The concept of vitality is very paramount in African cosmology or metaphysics. As inner power of dynamism is, so is a vital force to Africans¹⁹. The presence of this force in beings accounts for the fundamental relationship and affinity to each other. The relationship or interaction is made possible by the fact that every existing being has a spirit or force inhabiting it. this prompted foreigners who

visited Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries to describe the religion of Africa as animism²⁰. Traditional actions may maintain the balance or harmony between the life forces in things or restore it when broken through human actions.

Another paradigm of traditional significance is the concept of humanism. Humanity imposes a centripetal orientation to everything created.²¹ The gamut of African spirituality revolves around humans and the central position they occupy. When the African prays, it is not strictly speaking to worship God or love Him. When he/she offers sacrifices and implores his/her God, it is so as to be able to cope with the problems of life. Onunwa sees a sort of anthropocentrism as an intrinsic constituent of African tradition. As a paradigm for environmental ethics and policy formulation, both spiritual and physical dimensions, with a divine teleology, with dignity and freedom are the prime focus of all developmental initiatives or ecological programs. In seeking developmental or ecological conservation, the primary motive is to enhance human life, to provide for the “needs of actual men and women, their families, their values, their unique social and cultural heritage, their responsibility toward future generation”.²² African humanism opposes to the Western styled humanism which is “individualistic, atheistic, materialistic and consequently antihuman and explorative of the environment”²³.

African humanism is communal humanism. This type of humanism insists that one “finds his fulfillment not as separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community”.²⁴ For the

African, this family transcends the immediate nuclear family to include the extended family and the ancestors (living dead) as well as the not yet born. African communalism – spirit of familyhood and solidarity - can be a ready panacea. This is because, it has rightly been suggested that “*care for the environment represents a challenge for all humanity; it is a matter of a common and universal duty; it is a responsibility that must mature on the basis of the global dimension of the present ecological crisis and the consequent necessity to meet it on a worldwide level, since all beings are interdependent in the universal order as established by the Creator*”²⁵. Communalism in traditional Africa thrives on justice and equality. These two virtues can serve as counterpoints against global injustice and inequality which are responsible for the poverty in most African countries today. In a bid to break out of this poverty, many African societies employ practices that are not environmentally sustainable.

Moreover, African tradition believes in wholeness. This wholeness was as a result of the intrinsic order and harmony among things. Ecological sciences today vindicate this idea of fundamental interconnection between the different things in the ecosystem whether human or non-human. It is, therefore, wrong to treat the things of nature with disrespect and disregard that portray our feelings of isolation or independence from these things. The current environmental crises must be seen as a dislocation or disruption of this harmony among things. John Paul II makes allusion to the need to preserve the inherent order and creation with these words: “Theology, philosophy and science

all speak of a harmonious universe, of a 'cosmos' endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and make use of it while safeguarding its integrity".²⁶

In traditional Africa, healing or health had to do with the "preservation or restoration of human vitality in the context of community as a whole".²⁷ Sickness which threatened the health of an African was seen as a consequence of an offence committed for which the gods or ancestors must be appeased. To do this, sacrifices were offered while also herbs from the forests were also used as medicine to effect the cure. The preservation of plant species then was also motivated by medical reasons. Through these herbs the gods were believed to restore health to the sick. Practitioners of this medical practice were referred to as medicine men, herbalists or native doctors, and religion was very much integral to their practice. Even today, their expertise is still sought as per some ailments believed to be beyond the White medicine. Sickness is still a phenomenon to deal with today. One of the reasons for the conservation of the flora and fauna today is medical potency. But sickness especially emotional and psychological ones go beyond the somatic expressions. They can be as a result of feelings of marginalization, poverty and alienation.

In preserving the environment, it was also anticipated that one was saying as it were for the unborn generation. The ancestors who often inhabited the African animate and inanimate realities were believed to look after the living generation and

safeguarding these things for the future generation. Today's environmental concern and appeal for sustainable development harps on this African sense of continuity – a concern about the welfare of the future generation. Sustainable development which is the quest of every society today is development which provides for the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the environment or the desire of the future generations to meet their own legitimate needs.²⁸

Conclusion: From the discourse so far, it is obvious that environmental conservation is not new to indigenous African communities. They knew that the wrong and irresponsible use of the environment was possible, but whether they fully appreciated the enormity of such degradation is still debatable. This is not only true of traditional African societies. In the most modern societies, environmental awareness and education in terms of the seriousness of the consequences, is still far from being appreciated by all. However one looks at it, human actions on the environment, as long as they proceed from free moral agents have a moral value of being good or bad depending on whether or not they conform to acceptable norms of morality. In the formulation of these norm, tradition has always played a significant role whether among indigenous peoples or in modern industrialized societies. What informed the worldview of most indigenous communities was their religion. They used the spiritual world to protect the environment. Through their religious beliefs and practices, these people have offered an example of a life lived in harmony with the environment they have

come to know well and to preserve. Even today, these ideals and tenets are capable of helping Africa to develop an ethics of

the environment or cultivate an ecologically friendly lifestyle to promote a sustainable environment.

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