

Nature and Humanity in African Traditional Religions

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"Duniya mace de ciki ce" - Hausa proverb

Introduction

At the outset, we must point out that when we attempt to ask what African conceptions of "nature" are or were, when we try to extract our modern notion of "nature" from African religions which have not followed the same line of historical and philosophical development, we are asking a question which the African traditions were never designed to answer. The English word *nature* or *environment* has no exact equivalent in African languages. For example we find that for the Hausa of North-central Nigeria the term *garii* is generally translated as town or sky, but signifies the total human and physical environment of the Hausa city state (Richards 106). *Garii* does not translate *nature* nor does *duniya* (meaning *the world*) nor any other term in the Hausa language, but there is a rich treasure from which to learn in the study of words which one would use to approximate a similar idea.

A further problem for our study is that in the African context there is no single authoritative tradition to which to refer as a guide. Each ethnic group (or "tribe") has its own distinct language, culture and religion, and it is estimated that Nigeria alone has over four-hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups and languages. It is not possible under these circumstances to make hard generalizations about African Traditional Religions (hereafter abbreviated ATR). Indeed the introductory

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chapters to all of the texts written on ATR all expound at length on the reasons why past definitions have been inadequate, usually stressing the fact that they were overly generalized.

This leaves us with extreme difficulty in choosing a method to tackle our topic. One may attempt the method preferred in anthropology, whereby one focuses upon one ethnic group exclusively, covering it through ethnographic writings devoted exclusively to that group, the advantage being accuracy and depth. However, the uninitiated person who reads such a work may come away imagining that he or she now knows how "Africans" view the world and this would be grossly misleading. The approach I shall attempt here is multifocal: I shall begin with a synthesis of works dealing with ecological practices throughout Africa, examine some cosmogonic myths and give a comparative analysis of a few ethnic groups in West Africa, with special attention to the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria and to some other Nigerian groups.

Africa has suffered from a long history of misunderstanding and oppression at the hands of westerners. In addition to the physical oppression of her peoples, she has also withstood a succession of differing mental pictures, all of which distort or overgeneralize. A recent work on African environments and resources (Lewis and Berry 13 ff.) chronicles some of these distortions. Africa in the early period of contact was often characterized as a place of "limitless" fertile tropical forest. Another, and sharply contrasting image was that of Africa as an endless desert. A third image is that of Africa as the home of exotic wildlife, a game preserve: many travel films and TV documentaries will show fifty minutes of superb wildlife photography and three minutes of the people in the area, yet today large areas are without any game animals. Another picture of Africa is as an area of insect and water-borne disease. Yet another and more recent picture presents Africa as a devastated continent

(Vos, Eckholm). Those who espouse this view have recognized some diversity, but portray an overall impression of total devastation, citing the Sahelian droughts, continent wide deforestation, desertification, ubiquitous soil erosion and the loss of many animal species all as evidence of generally deteriorating environments in Africa.

Throughout the various changes in approach and attitude, one tendency has remained, that of seeing Africa as *uniform*, and that is the idea which must be rooted out of one's thinking completely before any progress can be made in this area. The notion of uniformity has been applied just as much to the people who inhabit the land as to the land itself. The writings of early missionaries, anthropologists and colonial officials alike are filled with erroneous generalized applications of one cultural or religious custom or habit from one ethnic group to all Africans.

Western writers on Africa in the past have labelled African religions with such terms as *primitive*, *animism* (Tylor), *paganism*, *polytheism*, *fetishism*, *ancestor worship*, *totemism* (Freud), *naturism* and *nature worship* (Fraser, Willoughby). These terms have all been rejected by modern African scholars of religion as inaccurate and pejorative misconceptions invented by Westerners who did not understand Africans and their world view. It is only fair to point out however that modern anthropology has also rejected these terms for the most part and now uses such terms as "animism" only in a very carefully qualified manner, when used at all.

Finally, the intrusion of the West has already made it difficult to know with certainty when we have identified a genuinely "traditional" concept. Traditions already have been modified, even completely changed in response to outside pressures and have sometimes been completely

obliterated (Norris and Heine 118-137). Furthermore there is often intense suspicion about foreigners who poke about in tribal affairs. It is said among the Tiv people that when a person who is not properly initiated into the tribal society inquires into the group's secrets it is mandatory to lie to the person in order to mislead them even if the person is a member (uninitiated) of the tribe! Under these circumstances only careful observations of what a group actually practices, taken over a long period of time, can yield even the most tentative of conclusions.

African Views of Creation

Nature as Sacral

African views of creation are many and varied (Mbiti 1969, 39-41). Many African myths assume the existence of the world at the beginning and start with the creation of humanity (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 6). Most of the creation myths say that the creation of heaven preceded that of the earth but there is no normative order for the creation of other things (Mbiti 1969, 40). The idea of a creation *ex nihilo* is reported in at least three African tribes and there may possibly be others, but the idea seems to have been a rare one (Mbiti 1969, 30).

It is common in ATRs to find a high status given to the sun and to the moon. The Galla people of Ethiopia say that the sun is God's eye, the Balese people of Congo consider the sun to be God's right eye and the moon his left, while the Ila people of Zambia believe the sun signifies God's eternity (Mbiti 1969, 47, 52). For the Hahm people of Central Nigeria, there was an ambiguity about the sun: some would say that the sun is God and others only that the sun manifests God (Kato 30-34). This ambiguity is noted among other peoples as well such as the Ankore (Mbiti 1969, 41) and the Ninzam. Despite the

ambiguity modern African scholars reject the term "sun worship" as a generalized category.

All African societies depend on rain and value it highly. Mbiti reports a few societies which "associate God and rain so closely that the same word, or its cognate, is used for both" (Mbiti 1969, 53). Others personify rain as one of the divinities. Some groups saw rain as God's saliva (Mbiti 1969, 41) and others such as several groups in Nigeria's Plateau State saw rain as God's urine. Mbiti concludes that in all cases rain is taken as a sign of God's care and providence for humanity and the world. Generally throughout Africa bodies of water are thought to have major spirits or divinities in them (Mbiti 1969, 54).

The term "animism" cannot describe African religions because it implies that its practitioners believe all rocks or trees are inhabited by spirits or spirit, and this is not so. They believe that only certain rocks and trees are inhabited by spirits and these have special significance for them. Some are believed to be the dwelling place of an ancestor, for example, and such sites must be respected. Animation also extends in some cases to physical objects such as amulets.

Generally, there is a consensus among scholars of African religion that "pantheism" and "panentheism" are not appropriate terms to use as a description of African religions (Mbiti 1969, 33). Although ATRs see God or evidence of God in all things, there is according to Mbiti an ontological hierarchy in which some things are in a higher mode of being than others. Mbiti reports an ontological hierarchy of God/spirits/man/animals and plants/phenomena and objects without biological life (Mbiti 1969, 16). So the "life" or "force" that resides in a stone is ontologically lower than that of a plant, and plants than animals, and animals than humans. With this kind of hierarchy blanket terms like "pantheism" or even "panentheism" are too simple in that they fail to take in

the subtleties of the ontological hierarchy. Mbiti describes it this way:

It emerges clearly that for African peoples, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance God is seen in and behind these (natural) objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest Him, they symbolize His being and presence. . . . The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, and Africans "see" that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world (Mbiti 1969, 56-57).

He adds that in addition to the five categories of beings, there is a

force, power or energy permeating the whole universe. God is the Source and ultimate controller of this force; but the spirits have access to some of it. A few human beings have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use it, such as the medicine-men, witches, priests and rainmakers, some for the good and others for the ill of their communities (Mbiti 1969, 16).

To be more precise, he adds that this "force" is "approximately what the anthropologists call mana but it has nothing to do with Placide Tempels' 'vital force' concept" (Mbiti 1969, 16 n).

We should add that very important in the ontological hierarchy is the role of the ancestors. They are believed to be frequently present in the houses of their children overseeing their daily activities, for it is they who are most directly concerned about the welfare of their

offspring. Their influence on ecological practices is seen in the fact that in some parts of Africa initial attempts to expand the ancestral plot of farmland or to build houses in a different shape from that of the traditional had been opposed by the ancestors, because the new customs were a departure from the old. This is not the case everywhere however (Raum 1965).

It is difficult to make any firm statement about the "goodness" of creation in ATRs. On the one hand, the literature often speaks of the African affirmation of the physical world, similar to the ancient Hebraic view, and certainly this is true if one is contrasting it with the gnostic denial of the physical. Let us turn to the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria for more detail. In the Yoruba myth of creation, Olòdùmaré the Creator sent the chameleon down upon the surface of the vast waters to test to see if there were any place safe to put one's foot upon. This was because the chameleon was the most cautious and tentative of all creatures. The place where the chameleon touched down upon the earth later became the site of the first human habitation, which the Yoruba call Ilè Ifé, the ancient holy city of the Yoruba people. Interestingly their tradition fixes their story in space and time and at least the geographical component is fixed in a more concrete manner than that of the biblical account, for Ifé is a city which one can still visit today while the location of the Garden of Eden is a mystery.

Creation and Moral Order

While the general goodness of life on earth is affirmed in most African traditions, few African creation myths portray God as clearly affirming the goodness of the world in an explicit manner, for example in direct statements by God the Creator. In fact, in many African myths the world is created as the result of an accident,

lending impetus to a fatalistic interpretation of life. Idowu notes that in the Yoruba story of creation:

The oral traditions say that heaven was very near to the earth, so near that one could stretch up one's hand and touch it. . . . There was a kind of Golden Age, or a Garden-of-Eden period. Then something happened, and a giddy, frustrating extensive space occurred between heaven and earth. . . . One story is that a greedy person helped himself to too much food from heaven; another that a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled face of heaven. . . . The privilege of free intercourse, of man taking the bounty of heaven as he liked, disappeared (Idowu 1962, 21 ff.).

In the creation myth of the Angas people of Plateau State in Central Nigeria we find that in the Golden Age before the ruin of humanity the hoe pulled itself through the furrows producing food for human beings. Then one day the woman, seeing the hoe at rest in the hut, took it by the handle and worked with it in the furrows herself. At this time the hoe was so offended that it refused ever to produce food for humans in the old way again and since then humans have had to work for a living (Kangdim 3-8). We see here that the fall of humanity is due to a caprice: as there was no stated order on the part of God to the man or woman warning them not to use the hoe in this manner, the fallen state of humanity seems due to an oversight. One might deduce from this a fatalistic twist to the universe: one never knows whether it will snap back in one's face.

Yet in other myths one does find hints of moral order in the structure of the universe. One story which is found perhaps more commonly throughout all of Africa than any other myth is the following: In the beginning, in the Golden Age, Heaven, the home of God was very close to the ground, so close that one could almost reach up and

touch it with one's hand, and fellowship between God and human beings was very close. But one day a woman was pounding grain with her mortar and pestle. She was pounding very vigorously and began to hit the floor of God's home with the upper end of her pestle. At this, God was annoyed and told her to stop, but she refused. God became angry and warned her again to desist, but she continued and so he withdrew much further up into heaven so that he might live in peace and quiet. From that day to this God does not concern himself directly with the affairs of humans; they must go through intermediaries. Many differing versions of this myth are told throughout Africa. In some versions it seems that the woman is not warned at all and God leaves at the first hint of noise coming from his floor. The difference may be an important one as the omission of any warning could be taken as a more fatalistic interpretation of the universe and its proclivities than the version in which fair warning is given. Fatalism becomes especially evident in terms of ethics and the perception of the world as a place of chaos and unpredictable misfortunes, against which one may nonetheless protect oneself by means of magic.

Even more germane to a discussion of ecological ethics is the creation myth of the Ewe people of Ghana who said that it was the smoke from mens' fires which got in God's eyes, that angered him and made him withdraw higher and higher into the sky as the fires grew more numerous with the increase of human beings on the earth (Donders 31). One African theologian has commented that this story could form an excellent basis for an ecological ethic.

Human Beings and Others

African creation stories generally do not state that humankind is made in the "image of God." Neither do they state that humankind has "dominion" over the material world in any explicit or clear sense, though a few

do, such as the Fang of Gabon (Bejer 19). What generally stands out with some clarity is that humans are at the mercy of a capricious and unpredictable reality as we saw in the Angas myth above, or as embodied in the Yoruba myth of Eshu, the capricious trickster who is sometimes evil and malevolent yet sometimes extremely generous and benevolent. Sometimes Eshu is male and sometimes female, but always unpredictable.

Fatalism is a word often used to describe African religion. It may be a fair one to use, in that the myths and general orientation of ATRs do seem to communicate a sense of tremendous uncertainty and futility about the human prospect since the end of the "Golden Age", or "the Fall" as Christians style it. Of course, fatalism *per se* is found in every culture and it can be a serious impediment to social reforms in the West as everywhere. The point Mbiti and others would make is that ATRs are relatively fatalistic because of the absence of a suggested solution to humanity's dilemma.

The creation myth of the Yoruba does not give humanity any explicitly stated "dominion" over creation, such as one finds in Genesis 1. This is also generally true of most other African creation myths; it can be said however that the position of humanity *vis à vis* the created world was generally one of ontological superiority. Mbiti tells us that animals, plants and inanimate things "are in an ontological category inferior to that of man, and cannot, therefore, have the important role of functioning as intermediaries..." (Mbiti 1969, 71). The ethnographical literature from a vast number of African ethnic groups confirms this finding in each case.

The Yoruba, the Hausa, the Ibo, and the scores of ethnic groups of Plateau and Benue States of Nigeria with which I have been associated show a sharply negative reaction against all comparisons of any human to any type

of animal, even in jest. To refer to any human as a "monkey" is considered the most serious insult one can make. This could be seen as a reaction stemming from the colonial past when whites actually referred to Africans in these terms. But there is a great deal of evidence from a whole range of groups that the terms "monkey" and "wild animal" were used traditionally as an insult long before the coming of Western culture (Achebe 12). The Yoruba as well as many other groups engage in semi-ritualized verbal sparring matches which involve the use of names of animals and body parts of animals in one-upmanship contests which can go on all afternoon. Much has been written in the anthropological literature on "Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse" (Leach).

Anthropologists have noted that ethnic groups in Africa may organize their life-world in terms of polar opposites such as right and left, male and female, heaven and earth, town and "bush" (or wilderness). The literature on the Hausa people, for example, makes reference to the distinction in Hausa thought between those things which are thought to be "civilized", containing long lists of Levi-Straussian polarities (Darrah).

Some groups such as the Igbo pay homage to a "mother earth goddess" whereas other groups such as the Yoruba do not. Those groups which pay her homage pour out libations to her or offer sacrifices. Certain practices are thought to offend her particularly - for example, having sexual intercourse on the bare ground. (I noted this taboo amongst many ethnic groups of Plateau State, as well as the Igbo.) In such cases special rites must be performed and fines must be paid to restore her favour. There seem to be a very few groups where the mother earth goddess is so prominent as to receive higher status than all the other divinities. It is interesting to observe that the matrilineal Akan of Ghana understand God as both male or female (Bartle).

To many African peoples trees and forests had special significance. The Ngombe live in very dense forest and refer to God as: "The everlasting One of the forest"; "the One who clears the forest"; "the One who began the forest," while a number of peoples set aside sacred groves for sacrifices, offerings or prayers (Mbiti 1970, 109). A number of peoples such as the Mamvu-Mangutu feared the spirits of the forest and of the water (Mbiti 1970, 125).

To the Yoruba the concept of "buying" and "selling" land was quite foreign though it became commonplace after the beginning of the colonial period. Land was not seen as "owned" by anyone, similar to the ideal of the Hebrew Bible (cf. Leviticus 25) and in contradistinction to the Canaanite (and modern Western) conception of land as a saleable commodity.

Traditional Practices and the Environment

It is in the examination of agricultural and hunting methods that one is particularly warned against the romanticized picture of the "primitive living in perfect harmony with his environment." Archaeological evidence indicates that even as early as 50,000 B.C.E. Africa suffered an extinction of 30% of its wildlife species, primarily due to human technology -- fire and the use of neolithic tools (Vos 102-103). The practice of burning off crop residue and burning the bush to clear new land has prevailed in Africa from the time that cultivation first began there up to the present (Yudelman 229 ff.). Traditional farming methods generally included cutting down and burning trees and using the wood ash for fertilizer, with no use of manure. Under these conditions the land was generally useless for agricultural purposes within four years at the very best, and the family would then move on to virgin fields. Amongst the Yoruba, the time of burning the bush in preparation for the coming planting season is in January. In Northern Nigeria the

bush-burning season is generally in November and December. The religious significance of the yearly setting of bush fires has been explored by J.M. Schoffeleers.

Bush-burning does not always have a destructive ecological impact however. Some studies indicate that under certain conditions where the average climate is relatively humid and where overgrazing does not coincide with burning, then burning the bush actually stimulates and encourages new growth. Here then we would find that traditional ecological practices were beneficial. Unfortunately the percentage of the African continent in which the land is on the borderline between the humidity level wherein bush burning is beneficial and that in which it is harmful is a very large one and the practice is consequently one of the major factors contributing to the galloping desertification and famine in the continent.

We have already noted the urbanized nature of Yorubaland. Here human activity had meant the elimination of larger game animals from the region. The only area of Nigeria in which elephants are still known to roam freely (apart from game parks) is in the northeastern tip of the country on the border with Northern Cameroun. Giraffes are now extinct in Nigeria even in the game refuges where protection from poachers has proven inadequate. The last giraffe sighting in Yankari Game Reserve, Bauchi state, was in 1973.

Turning to East Africa we find today an area noted for its wildlife refuges. But it may not always have been so; one reporter states,

There is strong evidence that East Africa in the nineteenth century was not the wildlife paradise which it is today with approximately one fourth of its land area set aside as national parks and game sanctuaries in Tanzania alone. The nineteenth century [pre-colonial] situation was quite

different. Whenever man and animals came into conflict over the occupation of land, the animals were inevitably driven out (Kjekshus 70).

Visitors to East Africa in this period reported seeing a large number of huge game pits and brushwood fences three to four miles long for organized game hunting (Kjekshus 71-2). Contrary to the generally prevailing misconception then current in Europe, game in the nineteenth century was almost impossible to find in the coastal areas and was greatly reduced even in the areas now containing major game sanctuaries (Kjekshus 72). In this case, the incursion of Western culture actually brought about the possibility of a conservation ethic which seems to have been previously lacking.

Possession, Totemism, Magic

Possession by certain spirits within nature should not be confused with harmony or unity with it, as the spirits which possess the devotees of these cults are personal in nature and do not represent nature as a whole nor even usually one aspect of it (see Mbiti 1969, 187 ff.). Nor should such practices as the use of totems be seen to indicate affinity with the whole of "nature" as such, as at best it expresses a relationship only to a minor part of it. Furthermore many ethnic groups in West Africa such as the Yoruba seem to lack totem animals completely. There is an extensive anthropological literature focusing upon "totemism," much of it seeking to understand how it functions within symbol systems. In his noted work on the Nuer of Sudan, Evans-Pritchard pointed out that Nuer totems are an "odd assortment" in that they are not the animals and objects which are most useful to the Nuer and those that are valuable are absent from the list of totems (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 80). He hesitates to suggest any rationale behind the choosing of totems but says that the totem animals are respected by all the Nuer: the Nuer are

friendly to birds and will not harm them. He proposes that

Nuer totems tend to be creatures and things which for one reason or other easily evoke the idea of Spirit in any Nuer and are hence suitable symbols for Spirit in relation to lineages. . . (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 82).

The Yoruba and other groups often speak of "fear" and "awe" with regard to natural phenomena: one reads of the fear associated with sacred groves and the "evil forest." The plays of the Nobel prize-winning Yoruba playwright, Wole Soyinka and the novels of Chinua Achebe are replete with references to the fear associated with that part of the forest known as "the evil forest" or "the bad bush."

One may see the practice of magic in Africa (the only group known to lack witchcraft are the Kalahari Bushmen) as a response to a threatening environment, an attempt at mastery in a world so often unpredictable and devastating to humans. In this it is not so very different from science, but its "way of seeing" is totally different and therefore leads to a totally different method. The anthropological literature on magic is vast and we cannot begin to scratch the surface here. Much of it has sought to explain the function of magic practices in African groups as the attempt to attain "mastery over nature" (James 41-67). In fact, some scholars such as Robin Horton have sought to emphasize the similarities between modern science and magic in African thinking insofar as they both have a problem-solving rationale which moves from one possible cause of given problem to another when the first hypothesis is proven false (Horton). The debate which this thesis spawned has proven a gold mine for philosophers who examine the conception of "rationality" and challenges any western ethnocentric notions of the superiority of modern scientific technical rationality. At

the same time it cautions us against understanding African groups as striving for "harmony with nature."

In light of the above evidence, it would seem that within the life-world of the Yoruba and the other groups under study fatalistic tendencies and magical influences and forces made humanity's relationship to nature more conflictual than harmonious.

Conclusion

We have seen that the relationship between humanity and the material world is variegated and diverse in Africa. We shall have to resist the temptation to make generalized statements about that relationship and approach carefully single groups to understand them in their social and ecological context. To the Yoruba, Hausa, and others, humanity stands in a superior relationship to animals, plants and natural phenomena, while natural forces such as thunder and rivers are understood as ministers of God. The proper role of humans is as a civilizing influence in contrast to the wildness of the bush. The creation myth of the Ewe people gives us a tantalizing starting point in the search for ecological wisdom, as our willful creation of smoke from too many fires threatens our modern world with a tragic loss of intimacy with the source of life itself.

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