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SPIRITUALITY AND ENVIRONMENT: SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN AFRICA AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

Since time immemorial, Africa has been rich in natural resources and sharing spiritual connections with the nature. Indigenous practices having spiritual significance nurtured African environment. Philosophers believe that Global industrial establishments and interference of western development and Eurocentric world views are responsible for the magnitude and severity of contemporary environmental crises in Africa. It resulted in changes in values, beliefs and world views which altered their socio ecological aspects of life and promoted extraction and exploitation of natural resources. Environmental crises seek holistic approach for healing nature, new values that would stress individual and joint responsibility towards the environment and towards nurturing harmony between humanity and environment. Traditional practice of resource utilization proved to be systematic which enabled lands to regenerate it and promotes socio-cultural harmony among community. This paper highlights the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality within African communities; and explores the importance of African indigenous practices in environmental conservation.

Key words: *Spirituality; African community; Kikuyu; Indigenous; worldviews; Green belt movement; Wangari Maathai.*

Introduction

> ***"Can we really put a price tag on the carbon dioxide trees capture? I know scientists and economists are working out such evaluations and I wouldn't stop them. But the answer surely is that what they provide is literally incalculable"***
>
> *- Wangari Maathai*

Environment is our basic life support system which is an important part of one's existence. It comprises living and non-living things and covers social, political, economic, natural and spiritual environment; all the living and non- living beings are inter-related to each other. However, in Ecology organisms share reciprocal relationship to one another and their environment (Raven et al.). Spiritual ecology is also an emerging trend in conservation and academic field which understands that there is a spiritual dimension related to environmental issue.[i]

Spirituality refers to the practices and beliefs which governs life of people and enable them to experience sensible realities of the world. Spirituality encompasses many experiences which prove that the behaviors of human beings are influenced by their ultimate values and beliefs, promoted by a particular community. In the field of academia, spirituality implies to the emerging academic discipline which explores the communal and individual experiences and practices govern by something sacred[ii].

In a traditional African society, belief system and cultural values are an integral part of historical identity of people[iii] and they cannot be separated from their beliefs which they practiced, no matter which ethnic groups they belonged to[iv].

According to Ashton:

> The ancient people of the earth lived dynamically within the ebb and flow of the natural world, belonging as much to each other and the human community of life, as they did to the sun and the moon and the cyclical rhythms of nature around them. Because they depended on nature for all their essential needs, they upheld a sacred reverence for the earth that took into cognizance the give and take of the living order (2010).

In Primeval times, nature was worshiped and inspired from the magic and spirits[v]. The earliest humans of the earth depended on nature for all the essential needs, so they upheld a spiritual reverence for the earth that is driven by the awareness of give and take order (2010). People, including Africans, Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Celts and the first people of Americas Australia and New Zealand were polytheistic, worshipped nature and various goddesses and gods. Rivers, rocks, mountains and animals were permeated with spirituality and regarded as sacred.

Merchant says: The connection between people and earth shared an I-thou ethic of veneration to be performed before cutting a tree, damming a brook or sinking a mine shaft"[vi]. In most of the indigenous cultures, nature is considered as alive, and every single entity is established with intelligence and wisdom and qualities, which west has referred to as "soul"[vii].

This study highlights the connection between nature and spirituality in African communities and how gradually their indigenous practices, beliefs and worldviews have altered by the European influence. It is also informed by the traditional worldviews of Africans and suggests that in order to revive and protect African environmental degradation; they must go back to their indigenous practices and reclaim it.

Communicating African Spirituality through the Environment

Wangari Maathai, Noble laureate and environmentalist has stressed upon the sense of gratitude and respect for all the natural resources that Mother Nature has given to us and how it should be consumed, sustainably and wisely. This value was also incorporated by her in The Green Belt Movement for years, followed by the three R's (reduce, reuse, and recycle)[viii]

In Ghana, when an elder dies in the community, they are informed through a phrase, "A great tree has fallen"[ix], it connects the deceased elder to the nature. The elder believed to be a guardian of rich wisdom and knowledge; and the somatic link to the sacred and spiritual elements of nature. The spiritual connections to the nature and the indigenous knowledge that nurture it have been conquered by the Eurocentric knowledge and Western interferences which promotes commodification of nature by unlimited extraction and exploitation of natural resources. Communities struggle to come out of poverty even after independence while still practicing the western model, which does not seem a practical solution to their social and environmental problems[x].

There is a belief among Africans that the creation of universe is a contribution of God, and the universe consist both visible and invisible realities. The invisible universe can be seen after hearing or feeling the visible/ tangible world[xi]. The African view of the universe is deeply sacred/ spiritual. Albeit, humanity has been a central figure of universe and the clergyman of the universe is also seen as humankind, which links the Universe with the God, its originator. Humanity awakens the universe, speaks to it, listens to it, and creates harmony with the universe. It is humanity which transforms segments of the universe into holy objects[xii].

The participation of communities was encouraged and their natural resources were conserved with a lot of carefulness, monitored by the rules and regulations about the usage and their conservation/protection.

The communities of Africa can be considered as a moral basis for the interaction between humanity, the environment and nature; the respect and regard to the earth have been made imperative by

the traditional African society. As land belonged to the whole community, not to an individual, collective responsibility towards nature had highlighted that all the resources had to be utilized for the dead, the living ones and those yet to be born[xiii].

One such example of reverence to nature comes from Western Kenya of Luhya community. According to Luhya community, after creating the universe God turned into different parts of the nature like rocks, trees, mountains, hills and rivers. It shows and gives reason why there is an important place for nature among Luhya communities, and as per their belief there is no such non-living thing exists in the universe and there are numerous aspect of nature that are connected with something spiritual, that are above human beings and whom they must give reverence for their eternal qualities[xiv].

This spirit of interconnectedness is a spiritual understanding of life that leads to respect and reverence for nature that are not only expressed in ritual, but in the way resources are used and buildings are placed. This belief is called *Ubuntu* in South Africa; it shows interconnection between humans and the nature and the sacred/spiritual world. *Ubuntu* says, a person is a person because of other people and its understanding has deep consequences on the whole mechanism of life. Hence, in order to maintain harmony between the nature, human world, and spiritual world, a great care is to be taken[xv].

African Worldviews on Environment Conservation

A worldview is a way of understanding natural resources and human being's place in maintaining natural resources. This signifies values, attitudes, perception, practices and beliefs, based on society with special attention to the natural environmental resources of the universe. Therefore, it is important to note down that there are numerous types of communities in Africa; each has different belief system, ceremonies, ritual and religious symbols, African worldviews in this sense depicts the same worldview employ and practiced differently by different African communities, even though there is basic worldview which basically is the same everywhere[xvi]. African spiritualism understands God's omnipresence and presents god as the architect of all natural phenomena, it also suggests that the entire natural phenomenon have something spiritual that define the relationship between nature and humans that is interdependent and linked to each other[xvii].

The knowledge on worldviews can be traced from different sources like: taboos, songs, myths, proverbs, riddles, rites, metaphors and legends. Myths reflect the historical backgrounds about the origin of people and their communities, their customs and beliefs. Respect and humility for the nature is the feature of African worldviews. As conservation values are embedded on African communities, resultant, they do not intervene with what they do not understand, invent or create[xvii]. Similar beliefs are also guided by the Luhya community of Kakamega forest who continue to follow spirituality to conserve the Kakamega forest. The notion of selecting specific place used for their spirituality is a common practice of Luhya community and their way of spirituality has been considered as a way of environmental conservation[xix]. A person tries to establish spiritual relationship with natural occurrence that encourages conservation of resources significant to environment[xx].

The acceptance of interdependence between humans and nature is very common in African communities; it shows the collective responsibility to make sure that resources are not vanishing. This proposes that environmental conservation is a collective responsibility which emerged out of the indigenous and accumulative knowledge of millions of people. They understand that the practice and value of environmental conservation is a spiritual and social responsibility and if anyone goes against the values, person will have to face punishment form spiritual world.

There are various African worldviews that observe rain frequencies and soil fertility as dependent upon the liveliness of certain wildlife populations. Annihilation of sacred sites, murdering of sacred animals and felling sacred trees in the forest result in spiritual disapproval, and breaks out as a punishment in the form of deadly diseases and droughts. This encourages African communities to maintain the linkage

between humanity and the spiritual world by not interfering with nature[xxi]. Traditional practices shape ecological balance, which guide them to use plants and animals rationally and ultimately to resource utilization, environmental protection and conservation.

Wangari Maathai says values are the most important thing for a person and any organization, as she claims four core values (1- Love for the environment. 2- Gratitude and respect for earth's resources. 3- Self- empowerment and self-betterment. 4- The spirit and service for volunteerism) proved to be effective in the successful functioning of her Green Belt movement. These values are not just a part of religious traditions neither one ought not to profess a faith on being divine but are a part of nature and it is believed that we are better people only because we hold these values. When these values are ignored by the people, they may be replaced via vices consisting of selfishness, corruption, greed, and exploitation and might even lead to loss of life. Experiences and observation says that the physical destruction of nature leads to the destruction of humanity as well. If our environment is wounded- air, water, soil is contaminated with heavy metal and plastic residues, or the soil is not more than a dust- it hurts us, leading to psychical, psychological and spiritual injuries[xxii].

Human beings have a consciousness by which we can appreciate love, beauty, creativity and innovation and mourn the lack thereof. *"We can experience delicacy of dew or a flower in bloom, water as it runs over the pebbles, or the majesty of an elephant, the fragility of the butterfly, or a field of wheat or leaves blowing in the wind such aesthetic responses are valid in their own right, and as reactions to the natural world they can inspire in us a sense of wonder and beauty that in turn encourages a sense of divine*[xxiii].

Such consciousness realizes that the trees, mountains or forest might not be sacred, but the vital services they provide- water, oxygen are what make human existence possible and hence deserve our respect. From this perspective, the nature/ environment become sacred, because destroying what is important to survive is to dismantle life itself.

Unfortunately many of us have become detached from the nature because of industrialization, mechanization, urbanization and habitat loss. Conveyors of the belief and faith became entrapped with colonialists, expansionists, and with those who exploited humans and the nature, the damage or wounds they have created and promoted need to be healed[xxiv].

Threat to Worldviews and Spiritual wisdom / Challenges to African Spirituality and Ecology

Ecological crisis is one of the problems facing the world of our times, a global concern of all the human beings regardless of social class. It is not just a threat to the well-being of humanity but to the creation as a whole[xxv]. At present, human activities are contributing to soil erosion and widespread deforestation. Ecology and Spirituality in Africa are encountering many challenges that interfere with the way they practice spirituality. There are various factors that challenges and hampers the sustainability of Africa, in respect to environment such as: Population increase, Conversions, Urbanization, modernization and changes in economic trends which detached people from their social structures, corruption, political interferences etc.[xxvi].

At present, most of the postcolonial African societies overlook indigenous wisdoms, particularly, their spiritual values, resulting in ignoring their capability in enabling sustainable development. The root cause of this phenomenon is directly or indirectly linked to the onset of colonization, which dates back to 15th century. Western colonization introduced a Christian worldview that considered indigenous knowledge as inferior and imposed their worldviews and values, economic systems and beliefs on the colonized people. Through these acts, native wisdom and spirituality was subjugated by the exogenous civilization, which resulted in disinterest in the capacity of indigenous wisdoms to find out the solutions to numerous problems. And even now, despite rapid advancement in technology and modern sciences, the environment is still degrading in 21st century. It is evident that the technological and scientific knowledge

and values are limited and ecological protection is an issue that demands us to go beyond Western mindset.

The invasions of Christianity and Islam have changed the worldviews and African spirituality. After Africans converted, they surrendered their indigenous wisdom, practices and beliefs and changed African worldviews into Arabic and Christian worldviews. One such example is from Kenya: For kikuyu community, Mount Kenya (Kirinyaga) also known as a place of brightness and the second highest mountain peak in Africa was a holy place. Kikuyus believed that all the good things happen to them because of the Mount Kenya, it gave them everything they needed for survival like: clean drinking water, abundant rains, rivers, streams etc. Mount Kenya was an important part of their daily practices, right from building their houses facing its doors towards Mount Kenya to the burial and sacrificial practices; they believed that God is with them who are providing rain for their fields, livestock and themselves. But unfortunately, these beliefs and practices have now died. At the end of 19th century of European missionaries arrived in central highlands of Kenya and taught native people that God did not dwell in Mount Kenya, he resides above the clouds in the heaven and the only place to worship him is Church in Sundays. This was a very new concept to Kikuyus and after the acceptance of European worldview of worshiping god, within two decades they lost respect for their culture and they no more worshiped Mount Kenya. The adoption of new worldview solved the European purpose of exploiting resources of Mount Kenya and expanded their commercial activities within the forests[xxvii].

However, in spite of Christian and Islamic influence, some Africans still practice their traditional wisdom, while others have adopted enculturation. Embracement of current lifestyles has put African spirituality at risk which has been contributing in environmental conservation. The minds of most of the African people have been diverted towards European worldviews and way of life at the cost of native beliefs and practices. This reflects lack of community participation in African culture, which brought all the community members to practice same cultural practices and ties to environmental conservation which they had been practicing since ancient times[xxviii].

Since ancient times, there is a struggle for control over the spiritual landscape. One such example can be found in Hebrew Scriptures, the struggle of Yahwistic priests to dissipate the cult of goddess Asherah (Sacred wooden pole), who was worshipped during the first and second millennia before the common era. The political and religious authorities of ancient Israel believed that worshiping Asherah goddess is against Yahweh's decree and tore down the sacred sites. Another such approaches highlight the acts of Saint Benedict in the sixth and seventh centuries and Charlemagne's in the eighth, which destroyed pre-Christian groves in Europe which not only proved that idolatrous practices have no match for Christian god and forced native people to adopt new faith. The kikuyu community of Africa experienced strong resistance from the Kikuyu government when it comes to worshipping to god facing Mount Kenya or even visiting the mountain for spiritual pilgrimage, as this form of practice is not acceptable by the principal form of Christianity. Even today, communities understand the importance of sacred trees and that their destruction carries potent message. Invading forces were very well aware that to suppress the native voice against the imposition of social, political and religious customs, they must ruin the sacred groves and trees. But sometimes it also leadsto rallying for the protection of trees[xxix].

One of the best examples is from Kenya in 1989, when developers planned to replace Uhuru Park with a multi-story complex, which included lavish residential apartments, offices for the country's ruling party and a statue of then President Arap Moi. Wangari Maathai along with a group of women organized a peaceful protest against the demolition of Nairobi's Uhuru Park. During protest, these women sustained severe injuries from police brutality but still stood with their argument that the park belonged to the people and privatizing the park is not a fair deal; finally their hard work paid off and the developers pulled out their investment as a response to protestor's strong opposition[xxx]

Another such examples other than Africa are: The Chipko movement from Indian Himalayas, wherein men and women adopted non-violent resistance technique to protect their forest from being logged by the logging company. This modern Chipko was inspired by the event of 18th century, where more than three hundred native people of Kherjarli village in northwest India died hugging trees, while protecting their sacred *khejri* trees from loggers, sent by the local ruler[xxxi].

Conclusion

It is suggested that we must need to improve and increase living standards for all people and maintain healthy environment altogether, where natural resources are not exploited and overused. Unless the needs of poor are not met, overall sustainability can't be achieved. The world does not have enough resources for consumption as enjoyed in Europe, US and Japan. Nevertheless, there are strategies to reduce the level of consumption without compromising the current quality of life. Revival of indigenous wisdom and eco spiritual practices could help provide sustainable solutions and practical solutions to the environment in Africa. The Green Belt Movement of Kenya, founded by Noble Laureate Wangari Maathai is one such example, her success at gathering thousands of people to challenge oppressive systems. The movement employed adult education as a decolonization process and fostered the revival of indigenous culture. Her work taught us that we must not isolate our work from the root cause of environmental problems. Similar works Like Green Belt Movement should be employed by the communities which encompass indigenous and spiritual practices for the revival of their environment; it will heal the environment holistically.

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