African Traditional Religion: Reclaiming the Sustainable Anthropocenes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the negative impacts of the Anthropocene on the environment. It seeks advocacy for marginalized religions and spiritualities that hold pro-environmental knowledge. This paper argues as positive environmental Anthropocene Based on some aspects of the African Traditional Religion. The authors criticize imperialism and Christianity for suppressing and displacing African Traditional religions by failing to identify their positive qualities and leveraging on them. These colonial tendencies argued as pro-capitalist that have little regard for the environment as long as the colonial master's bottom line, guided by the ethos of "dominance for profit," is achieved. The theoretical framework draws on the perspective of decoloniality and views imperialism and its relics as a destructive Anthropocene for the environment. This paper, therefore, concludes that preserving what is left of marginalized religions, including the African Traditional Religion, would result in a more positive Anthropocene for the environment.

Keywords
Anthropocene, Religion, Environment, African Traditional Religion

INTRODUCTION

There is an isiZulu proverb that is helpful in providing a guiding framework for this paper's position on African Traditional Religion and the Anthropocene. The proverb states, "Uma uluma ngokungakhethi, ugcina udla umsila wakho" (When you bite indiscriminately, you end up eating your own tail). It provides a framework for acting sustainably on the environment. For the Anthropocene, the proverb can be taken to mean that when we are reckless with nature, we will be left homeless. Such frameworks for a sustainable perspective provide us with indigenous wisdom that is useful in challenging and decentering monolithic narratives about the impact of religions on the environment (Mohamad A. Meziane, 2021). This paper argues that the world needs to pay closer attention to spiritualities at the margins, such as African spiritualities, and their pro-environment characteristics and agency. From this paper's perspective, such approaches inform what we argue is a "positive anthropocene".

For centuries, African spiritualities – generally described as African Traditional Religions (hereafter ATR) – integrated nature into their belief systems. This had pro-environment implications, as ATR shaped both individual and collective stances and conduct toward nature. The current environmental issues on the continent seem to be the direct, negative result of modern lifestyles that have been influenced by Africa's recent history – that is, the past 400 years that have brought about disruptions in ATR through the slave trade, colonization, a more globalized outlook and the spread of world religions on the continent. Thus, in this presentation I posit that there are/have been other anthropocenes around the world – many of them pro-environment and based in localized, indigenous spiritualities, as in African societies. Though these anthropocenes have been overshadowed by the global Anthropocene we are discussing today, they are worth revisiting, re-imagining and recapturing if we are to address the climate challenges we are facing globally. With respect to ATR, this presentation will discuss some of the ways the spiritualities of various African societies were pro-environmental and suggest ways we can recapture some of their ethos to respond to the challenges brought on by the ongoing Anthropocene. However, before we discuss these points, let us first consider this paper's position on the term "anthropocene/s".

ANTHROPOCENES

I posit that reclaiming lessons from marginalized spiritualities expands how we approach and understand the Anthropocene. From a theoretical perspective, the term Anthropocene is employed to denote the current epoch of anthropogenic global environmental change. It describes the period since changes in human activity starting from the Industrial Revolution onwards has seen Earth enduring "changes sufficient to leave a global stratigraphic signature distinct from that of the Holocene or of previous Pleistocene interglacial phases, encompassing novel biotic, sedimentary, and geochemical change" (Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, A.G Smith, et. al., 2008). Thus, based on the preceding definition, if we are to define the "Anthropocene" as "the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment" (Oxford Dictionary), then surely there have been other, localized anthropocenes for as long as humans have possessed the knowledge and tools to impact their environment. This suggests that although the human impact on the environment has changed dramatically over the past few centuries, and only seems to be getting worse, there are lessons we can recover from other human/environment interactions that have been eclipsed by the arrival of the current geological age. Drawing from Meziane's (2021) approach to critiquing

monolithic interpretations of the anthropocene, we argue for reclaiming the pro-environment elements of the other, localised anthropocenes and re-imagining them in light of our current realities, technologies, and views of the religious/secular divide, we can achieve a better way of co-existing with the environment. This will also help shift the focus of Anthropocene discourse from globalized, academic "spaces" into more localized, community spaces, as those are the custodians of the marginalized, pro-environment, spiritual knowledge systems. Next, let us turn to a brief overview of the colonial impact on some of issues that will be discussed in this paper.

THE COLONIAL IMPACT

It is important to note that to date, population density has not been the primary driving factor of environmental degradation in many African communities. Rather, the major driving force is the shift from a more subsistence-based to a more commercial relationship with habitats. At 33.6 per square kilometer, Africa's population density is relatively lower than that of other continents, for example, Asia at 95.03 per square kilometer or Europe at 72.5 per square kilometer (WorldAtlas,2022). A socio-historical perspective reveals that beginning in the 1900s, methods of using land to maximize income for the colonial governments were ramped up. Cash cropping, the development of transport networks, mining, urbanization and other practices relied heavily on local natural resources. And in addition to the increased consumption of natural resources, there was the creation of a new, forced (J.A.K. Kandaŵire, 1977, 185-191) workforce on farms, in mines, urban areas, etc.

This new and rapidly expanding workforce intensified the demand for food and other resources beyond what a previous reliance on subsistence farming and smaller-scale trading could sustain. This meant an increased demand for the cultivation and supply of food, livestock, fish, cooking fuels (charcoal), the provision of water and so on. Today, post-independence, this trend has persisted. In Malawi, for example, rural to urban migration is high (Mtafu A. Zeleza Manda, 2009) with one of the main driving forces being the desire for improved livelihoods (Thandi Soko, 2016, 1024). Hence, consumption continues to be relatively high and have an adverse impact on natural habitats. Examples include over-fishing and the clearing of forests to grow crops and supply wood for construction and fuel (Friday Njaya, Katherine A. Snyder, Daniel Jamu, et al., 2011, 15-25). Other concerns include the toxic waste that results from activities such as uranium mining (Bruno Chareyron, 2015, 77). There have been an array of responses, both from religious and non-religious actors. All of these have had to contend with the reality that alternative, sustainable options have not been readily adopted, often because many find the above-mentioned sources, as well as imported non-renewables (fuel, gas, etc.), more convenient, cheaper in the short-term, and profitable. Nonetheless, perspectives from ATR can perhaps offer alternatives that shift our attention from an emphasis on needs and profit to an emphasis on sustainability that is guided by viewing the habitat as worthy of special care.

HABITAT AS SACRED

ATRs are diverse, but one element that many have in common is their perspective on natural habitats. Turning to Southern and Eastern Africa, where we hail from, let us first look at the contribution of Nisbert Taringa's (2006), from Zimbabwe, on this subject. Taringa argues that the Shona traditional religion is "necessarily environmentally friendly" (2006, 191). This is because its strong beliefs in the concepts of ancestral spirits (midzimu), pan-vitalism, kinship, taboo and totems inform an ecological attitude that is based on attitudes and practices involving land, animals, plant life and water bodies (Nisbert Taringa, 2006, 191). In other words, the elements in the habitat were never regarded as mere resources to extract, consume or exploit. Rather, the environment had to be safeguarded so that it could spiritually (and holistically) sustain the people by connecting inhabitants to their past, present and future. Thus, for instance, sacred forests, mountains, groves and water bodies are/were respected as habitats for ancestral spirits and places where herbal cures could be found. Therefore, access to these spaces by the general public was limited – rulers regulated access and there were serious consequences for trespassing (Nisbert Taringa, 2014, 53). Taringa warns against romanticizing such spiritualities, however, as they can often be "more based on fear and respect of ancestral spirits than on respect of nature itself" (Nisbert Taringa, 2014, 94). However, he regards it as worthwhile to re-examine these historical attitudes to nature and re-imagine how we can apply their environmental contribution ourselves to the environmental challenges we face in the global village (Nisbert Taringa, 2014, 94). Re-imagining their contribution can, for instance, denormalize the idea that humans can behave as superpredators without consequences, spiritual or otherwise. The past decades have shown that climate change and environmental degradation impact our well-being negatively, while pro-environment action is beneficial for both the planet and human beings (Danny Taufik, 2015).

Andrew Mukaria (2021) provides a similar example of how ATR shaped pro-environment behavior. He describes the contemporary situation in the Meru region of Kenya, where the citizens bemoan the drying up of rivers and springs due to "limited rains and reduced water which have led to the loss of 'biodiversity, forest cover, and loss of the catchment areas'" (Andrew Mukaria, 2021, 1). Mukaria explains that people in Meru, like many of us perhaps, are caught up in the myriad choices between "need" and "greed", that is, the demands of a globalized life and a post-ATR reality (Andrew Mukaria, 2021, 1). When ATR was the norm, the people of Meru had what might be called a localized, pro-environment anthropocene. Nature was viewed as an integral part of "physical, psychological and spiritual healing" (Andrew Mukaria, 2021, 1). Thus, aside from being part of a thriving ecosystem and providing remedies and spaces for contemplation, places like forests offered human interconnectedness; ancestors were believed to be resting in the 'heaven' of forested areas and were watching over the inhabitants (Andrew Mukaria, 2021, 1). As a result, the impetus to protect these areas was high. However, the people of Meru have increasingly appropriated forests for

commercial use, leading to exploitation that has fueled water crises and human suffering (Andrew Mukaria, 2021, 1). Hence the need to revisit, re-imagine, reclaim and repurpose the value of nature as sacred and integral to human survival.

NATURE VENERATION IN ATR

In the African context – and the ATR context in particular – nature is venerated. The contemporary world would do well to glean from ATR those values which can be argued to be positive towards the environment. Many societies that practiced ATR venerated nature as a goddess, which is expressed through their view of nature as feminine. This is what Chirongoma describes as:

The Shona people (like many other African communities) usually refer to the earth as feminine and it is common to hear them speak of 'the Motherland' whenever they are referring to their homeland, particularly where one was born and raised. It is in this context that the paper uses the term 'mother-earth' to refer to the centrality of Karanga people's perceptions of their ecology. Whenever one goes into a foreign setting and encounters difficulties, they are often reminded of the Shona proverb 'Kusina maihakuendwi' literally, "do not go far away from your motherland, because home is always best"(Sophia Chirongoma, 2012, 169).

Hence, the Shona always relate their homes to the warmth and security that mothers have to offer. It can be argued that this was an important indigenous wisdom of the African people, although it is perhaps a universal wisdom – it is not strange to hear people from around the world talk about their 'motherland'. This wisdom seems in line with Stoic philosophy which, according to Belden C. Lane, taught that "the world was the visible body of the invisible deity and the deity the invisible soul of the visible world. Throughout the ancient Near East, the earth was consistently personified with feminine and maternal characteristics, if not also deified" (Belden C. Lane, 1994, 8).

Many African societies, especially before the advent of Christian missions – with the Christian emphasis on liberties – were bound by taboos related to the environment. Certain trees and animals were considered sacred and were therefore preserved. Awuah-Nyamekye describes the observation of taboos pertaining to the earth stating, for example, that,

Traditionally in the Akan tribe it is a sin/taboo to defecate near a river or to plough near it. They believe that acts which are done nearer exposes the river to direct rays of the sun and that can result in the evaporation of the water in the river. To curb evaporation of water and the river running dry some deeds are prohibited near the river. Thus, perennial flow of water in the river is ensured (Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, 2012, 86-87).

Such a view of nature, and land in particular, was meant to prevent the detrimental effects that were introduced by Christianity and imperialism. The so-called civilization and the spread of Christianity emphasized the liberty of Christians from taboos and environmental restrictions. The following are example scriptures that may have resulted in the exploitation of nature:

Colossians 2:16 "let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holiday, or a new moon, or the Sabbath days: 17. Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

Genesis 1:26 "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." [emphasis added]

The Ubuntu philosophy is a good example of African indigenous wisdom and spirituality with a positive impact on the Anthropocene. Ubuntu is grounded in the view that the welfare of human beings is directly connected to ecological and environmental well-being. Thus, according to Marumo, drawing on Puleng LenkaBula (2008, 378) and Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi (2005, 217-218), ubuntu "describes personhood and humaneness". In other words,

'It has an ontological, socio-political, economic, ecological and religious dynamic.' It explains the relationship of humanity to themselves as well as the embeddedness of human life to the ecological life, thus highlighting that the self can never be fully realised without the ecological systems within which they exist. It is also an expression of people's dual identity, i.e. in relation to themselves as well as in relation to non-human creatures. It is a tie that binds innate and inanimate things' (in Phemelo O. Marumo, 2016, 89).

Pursued faithfully, this integrated approach to human and the environment's welfare has the potential to yield both wellness in social relations and wellness in the ecosystem. From the perspective of the ubuntu philosophy the two cannot be separated.

Ubuntu philosophy - and its relation to the ecosystem-characterized life before the spread of colonialism and the Christian religion in Africa – which was synonymous with civilization. With civilization came the capitalist economy with its neo-liberalistic tendencies, a concept that arguably has its roots in reformed theological teaching, such as that of John Calvin (Gordon Marshall, 1980). Furthermore, when colonial governments introduced their religion, they condemned African spirituality as evil, animistic and primitive. Yet the belief that the ancestors inhabited the environment played a positive role in the preservation of the environment. Essien argued that

The dead are regarded as the living dead and are part of the environment in which Africans live in as well as the development that comes with it. Even if African traditional religion believes God to be the Supreme Being who is in control and is omnipotent, they still maintain that God cannot do it all alone. God has certain agencies, like divinities, who are assigned certain specific functions to perform (Essien D. Essien, 2013, 239).

It was in obedience to the imperatives of this belief that traditional leaders were custodians of the land. They did not allow the random destruction of trees and other features of the environment. Thus, we can see the benefits of what the Christian imperialist termed primitive animism.

The belief that ancestors inhabited the environment led to its veneration. An example of this in Zimbabwe is the treatment of amacimbi (mopane worms/caterpillars). These are harvested from mopane trees and are believed to be sacred, such that their processing is governed by certain traditional norms and rituals. In a meeting convened by the Zimbabwe Council of Church on 'Value addition in the

processing of Mopane worms' (16th of November 2021 at Gwanda Evangelical Lutheran Church, Zimbabwe), ATR representatives argued that when harvesting amacimbi it is best to wait for them to crawl down when they are mature and not chop the tree down. Also, when cooking them, they must not be covered with lead, otherwise the gods will be angry, and this natural resource will vanish. The veneration of these 'mopane worms' resulted in respect for and preservation of the environment. In harvesting them, one must not pull or chop a tree down as it will destroy the environment. Once more we see that what the Europeans and Christian missionaries condemned as animism was part of an environmentally friendly anthropocene.

The belief in the sacrality of nature in Africa was dominant before imperialism and the coming of Christian missionaries to Africa. It ensured that humans would not negatively dominate the environment. Chouin, writing from the context of Ghana, West Africa, argued that archaeological evidence suggests that

Spatial correlation between old settlement sites and or cemeteries and existence of sacred groves is no coincidence. Old settlements were frequently turned into burial grounds and gradually colonised by forest. The association with the mortal remains of important ancestors and, consequently, its role as a territorial marker for leading lineages (Gérard L.F. Chouin, 2002, 40).

This suggests that, before colonization and Christianization, an anthropocene existed in Africa that had a positive effect on the environment. It also points to deliberate and strategic ways of protecting the environment. These ancient interventions present the current generation with imperatives in the face of current destruction.

SUMMARY

Reclaiming an approach to nature that decenters us as superpredators can help us embrace nature's potential to restore and heal us, as we restore and heal it. We do not need to romanticize spiritualities but can nonetheless adopt the practice of setting apart water bodies, forests and other natural environments to allow them to replenish themselves, knowing that their health will improve climate health. Additionally, adopting such practices reminds us that our options go beyond simply "need" versus "greed" but extend to others like sustainability of natural resources. Prioritizing sustainability keeps us mindful of the finite nature of our planet's resources and therefore the need to safeguard it – sustainably.

EPILOGUE

This essay began with an isiZulu proverb, Uma uluma ngokungakhethi, ugcina udla umsila wakho (when you bite indiscriminately, you end up eating your own tail). It served as the basis for our text and shows that, from the ATR perspective, human interaction with the Anthropocene should be one that recognises that our existence depends on a healthy, thriving environment. We find it helpful to conclude with a reminder of Sankofa, a principle of the Akan (Ghana). Sankofa is a term that refers to the wisdom of finding out what we can learn from previous generations to solve the challenges we face today - such as the challenges of the global Anthropocene.

Sankofa

The word Sankofa comes from the Akan people of Ghana. It is an Akan term that literally means, "to go back and get it." One of the Adinkra symbols for Sankofa depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward. The egg in its mouth represents the "gems" or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based; it also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from that wisdom.

There are several overlapping interpretations:

Taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge.

Going back and reclaiming our past so we can move forward; so, we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.

One basic and important meaning still lies; one's past is an important aspect of one's future. So, in order to make the best of one's future, one must visit one's past (Sankofa - Office of Equity and Inclusion, 2022).

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