

AFRICAN COSMOLOGY AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL FRIENDLY PHILOSOPHY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria as a country is besieged with myriads of problems, prominent among which is the environmental hazards consequence of our gross insensitivity to our natural habitat comprising of both animate and inanimate realities mutually interacting. The mutual order is being violated in Nigeria consequence of urbanization, deforestation, desertification and all kinds of pollution, is as a result of endless desire for food, shelter, recreation and infrastructural facilities. Our attitude permeates our environment - our needs, ideas, aims, ideals, joys and sufferings, as part of the vortex of our existence. Man is therefore tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the environment through the gamut of relationship as viewed from the gigantic historical prism of our cosmic vision. The thrust of this work is to present African Cosmology as a value laden environmental friendly philosophy where everything has a value as a major constituent in the ecological chain. However, the work may suffer some limitation as it could be interpreted as mere rhetoric; nevertheless, this study is novel, in the sense that its theme is very relevant and important in providing a conceptual frame work for better environmental enhancement in Nigeria. Secondly, the work contends that philosophy has something to contribute to national discuss as is the case with conservation of environment, and thirdly it encourages Nigerian philosophers to be more concrete in their analysis of reality for the so much needed national transformation.

KEYWORDS: African Cosmology, Created Order, Environment hazards

Introduction

In an endless desire for food, Shelter, recreation and infrastructural facilities, humanity makes an incursion into the harmony that characterizes the environment raising some environmental problems like deforestation, desertification, over-population as a result of urbanization and all kinds of pollution. These creates cosmic disorder affecting the entire ecosystem which African cosmology propagates, advocating an ordered harmonious framework that integrates time, Space, the planets, stars, and other celestial and terrestrial phenomena.

The philosopher Plato representing the ancient world, presented the world as "a soul in which things as we know them are arranged"¹

He is of the opinion that the cosmos is the work of intelligence, and thus establish the theory of order in nature, observing that the divine craftsman or the Demiurge "does not bring new things into being but rather confronts and orders what already exists in chaotic form".² This paints the picture of an ordered cosmos, courtesy of a craftsman "the Demiurge who is the craftsman, and the ideas or forms or patterns after which things are made".³ Thomas Aquinas presents the demiurge as "spiritual, unchangeable and necessary Being"⁴, who is the architect of the cosmic order. African philosophy presents the demiurge as part and parcel of the cosmic order he created. Wiredu, in reference to Akan cosmology noted that the idea of the cosmic order is an "empirical ensemble based on the belief that there is an inherent order in creation".⁵ Africans do not conceive the possibility of the existence of the universe without a creator', Chalk observed that God did not just create the universe, but also "endowed it with natural laws and is also the source of some human customs".⁶ This idea of the creator and the created will inform the African cosmology conceiving the world as being made up of visible (created) and invisible (creator), material and spiritual realities, which however, are not distinct or separated but harmoniously related in a chain of connectivity as testified by Mbiti who observed that this "divisions are not separate, but ... linked together".⁷

There are high level of inter-relatedness, the interplay of powers - Divine, ancestral, animate and inanimate forces. Magesa pointed out that "life implies the existence and interaction of mystical powers in the universe".⁸ It is this power that Temples identified as vital force which according to him can be increased or diminished. He

noted that "All force can be strengthened or enfeebled. That is to say, all being can become stronger or weaker".⁹ Magesa attributed the origin of this vital force to God, noting that "every creature has been endowed by God with its own force of life - its own power to sustain life".¹⁰ This shows that, of all the forces, God is the greatest as being their originator. It is from God that divinities, ancestors, spiritual entities, man, animate things and finally inanimate things draw their own powers in accordance with their categorical status, which in this line up is in descending order.

However, the most characteristic feature in this African cosmology is its man-centeredness. Man is at the center with other beings revolving round him, while God is at the apex.

Interaction of forces in African Cosmology.

God is the creator of the universe. He is the ultimate Being, whose presence is not outside of this conceivable universe. He is the supreme who in Igbo is called "Chukwu", a formulation of two Igbo word - Chi (spirit) and Ukwu (supreme). He is the High God through whom only, existence came into being as "other gods and spirits are creatures of the High-God who alone is supreme"¹¹. However both God and his creatures are conceived of engaging in participatory activity within this universe, even though according to various levels or spheres. Iroegbu identifies this spheres which he called zones. He gave six classes or zones in the world.

The Six Classes in the World

1. Divine-world (abode of the supreme Being, God)
2. Godian-world- world of powerful spirits.
3. Good-spirit world - world of benign spirit.
4. Bad-spirit world - world of inimical spirits
5. Ancestral world - the world of the living dead
6. Uwanyi (the world of the living).¹²

These worlds are not seen as distinct or separated from the other but they rather inter-play with each other as "no being is alone. None acts totally on its autonomy".¹³ In spite of the inter-relatedness of these zones, man still maintains a central focus as Okolo observed; "man is the centre of the created order. The focal point of the universe, the ontological mean between the visible and invisible world"¹⁴, based on this, he goes on to say that "individuals enjoy intrinsic dignity, respect, and worth in African philosophy and in real life".¹⁵

Further, there is remarkable presence of forces or powers that characterize the world of the living which humanity shares with other created entities. The Bantu ontology of Placid Temples places premium on theory of forces, in which the universe is seen as the interaction of forces.

The Created Order.

God created and sustains the world, and the world cannot thrive without God as God continue to intermingle in the affairs of the world. The cosmological vision of inter – relatedness of entities makes the idea of God as *deus otiosus* - God having created the world and left it to run itself, very foreign to the African mind. God is within and not outside of the cosmos. His influence is noticed, and even invoked in concrete terms. God’s effect is as immediate as he makes his presence felt in maintaining socio-cosmic order. Palinder notes that "not only did he make the world, but he established the laws of society and the existence of justice depends upon obedience to him".¹⁶ However, in spite of his profound presence, he still allotted some powers to other divinities who exercise some superior powers in their own spheres. Okolo remarks that "in traditional African thought and practice, God does not seem to be the ultimate and absolute controller of both the physical and moral order".¹⁷ For him, "other gods appear supreme in their own spheres of influence and authority"¹⁸

Little wonder why, in many occasions, the African goes to ask any of the divinities for direct protection or favor, with the full conviction that it has the power to do so. However, God's relationship with man is such that he "rewards men and also punish them when they do wrong. He may be likened to the overlord of society for His is the final Authority in all matters"¹⁹

Compliance with cosmic order becomes most at times the condition for appraisal or disapproval of an human action, as “there is a will which governs the universe and the life of mankind”²⁰ Any action that goes contrary to this universal will becomes evil, and is reprobated, while actions that promote the universal will is considered good , and therefore commendable. Okolo went on to note that the Divine will is "an immutable will, and man generally has to invoke it or accept it in situations that seem beyond human power".²¹

Teleology

The African cosmological vision sees every creature as being purposeful. Actions are rated depending the ability to promote or inhibit the purpose. That is why in Africa, "an action is considered good if it helps to fulfill the purposes"²² and bad if it goes contrary to the purpose for which it supposed to serve. Iroegbu defines teleology as the "description of the factual issues of the universe arising from the fact that one discovers in them: an embedded order, design and consequent purposefulness".²³ He is of the view that due to arrangement or orderliness observable in the world, that there must be reason for that order, which may not be farfetched from purposeful end. He went on to argue that following the orderliness in nature, one arrives at the fact of "an extra-ordinary master-piece of a designer's ingenuity"²⁴ channeling reality to its final end.

The absence of chaos and the ingraining of order indicate that the world has a purpose, a direction it is moving towards. So every movement is a movement towards, that is, towards the final destiny, any action inform of disorderliness is an altercation, and therefore should be prohibited.

In this context, both man and other created things engulfed in inter-dependency are purposeful. This gives the impression that the universe exists for man, while man not only gives meaning to the universe but also provide, and care for the continuity and harmony of other created entities sharing the universe. Mbiti equates this function with priestly function noting that man's task to protect nature, man appears " like the priest of the universe, linking the universe with God its creator. Man awakens the universe, he speaks to it, he listens to it, and he tries to create a harmony with the universe ".²⁵

Their desire to protect the natural environment for the African is seen and considered a divine mandate, as the environment means a lot to the African, as one need to protect ones environment to which one hopes to retire to after existential journey of life. Africans as such do not imagine a total annihilation or consummation of the world, or what in today's word we call 'end of time'. That is why; it is a common phenomenon among Africans to nurture the hope of re-incarnation into existence after physical death. This is contained in the idea of reincarnations, where by one longs to come back to rejoin his kindred by reincarnating once more after death. This ambition pre-supposes the existence of the world, into which one is supposed to re-incarnate. Secondly, man does not also experience total annihilation as his spirit lives on. He dies physically to re-join his ancestors and continues to have link with his kinsmen. Even if he transcends to another level of spiritual existence as regards his kinsmen losing memory of him, he still keeps touch with his people either by being benevolent or malevolent in which case he

becomes either a benign spirit invoked by his people or inimical spirit that needed to be avoided. The inimical spirit is warding off through the special sacrifice which Arinze F. called 'Aja', that is, sacrifice in its strict sense. He noted that 'Aja' is "offered to evil spirits to implore them to leave men alone the offerings are made to satisfy these rapacious goblins and keep them at bay".²⁶

Our contention is that the idea of a purposeful end as being confined to a particular state of bliss as in heaven, or a place of torture as in hell is not African. Also, the idea of a total disintegration in form of annihilation is also not African. The African does not conceive the time he would completely lose touch with his kinsmen. Hence, the purposeful end of man and universe gears towards that fulfillment of spiritual contact with one's kinsmen which the continuous existence of the universe guarantees. This can provide one of the reasons, if not the core reason why preservation of natural environment is of primary interest, otherwise, if distorted, one loses identity.

Evil

Due to the idea of ontological harmony of the cosmos, an act is considered evil if it is capable of disrupting the cosmic harmony. If on the other hand, an act promotes this ontological harmony, it is considered as good. So, for the African, evil is not a positive reality, that is, it has no concrete existence, but seen rather as consequences of an act. Chalk is of the opinion that "Africans see evil as a punishment for some act that disrupt the harmony of the life forces in the universe".²⁷ even though, Megasa disagrees with this position opting rather that evil lies rather in the person as he notes that "It is people who are evil or sinful, whether or not they are aided by invisible forces".²⁸ Responding to this problem, Gunter Wagner agrees that everything which deviates from the normal order of things, both in the natural and in the social world, is regarded as a manifestation of these evil forces, and hence, as dangerous, such acts attracts punishments whether it is associated in the person or in the act. If in the act, punishment serves as a deterrent to future occurrences. If in the person, punishment serves to reveal the evil person. So evil is that which disrupts the ontological cosmic harmony and it is always followed by punishment. To this effect, any act capable of distorting the natural environment by way of desertification, deforestation, toxic pollution should be abhorred as evil.

Environmental Preservation as an obligation

African cosmology advocates for the protection of the ecosystem, and therefore shouldered man with the responsibility of promoting, preserving and taking care of the environment. Man is a being in relation to other beings; he communes with other being, giving other beings their definition and identity.

The existential task to protect the environment goes with value argument, as Karl Marx presented humanity as creative beings, situated in a material world that stands before them as an objective reality. The created is governed by the changing methods whereby humans sought to derive from the natural environment the means of their subsistence and the satisfaction of their evolving wants and needs. The productive relations in which people stand to one another, resulting in such phenomena as the division of labor and the appearance of economically determined classes, gives rise to what Karl Marx termed the superstructure of society. This is dependent upon the shape taken by the ‘material production’ and the ‘material intercourse’ of human beings in their struggle to master nature. The idea that nature is a reality devoid of moral consideration and approach is very foreign to the African. African cosmology subscribes to the central position of man, as man stands at the centre among created forces (dead, animal, vegetable, minerals), however, the African cosmology argues that man’s mime through initiation gives man specific position in the community of forces. Man reserves the right to handle the environment with care as both shares the mutual existential harmony and order. The awareness of this fact, is the beginning of wisdom. Thus, true wisdom lies in ontological knowledge which is the knowledge of forces mutually interacting with each other, acknowledging however, their hierarchy, their cohesion, and their speed of interaction.

Mans intelligence helps him in the manipulation of forces for good or for evil. But in order to ensure stability, boost the moral quality of human action and ensure order in the hierarchy, taboos are placed in order to sustain the desire of being in line with the ontological structure of the entire ecosystem.

Conclusion

We live not in a primeval pure world, but in a world that is known and has been transformed, a world where everything has, as it were, been given a ‘human angle’, a world permeated with our attitudes, our needs, ideas, aims, ideals, joys and sufferings, a world that is part of the vortex of our existence. If we were to remove this ‘human factor’ from the world, its profound intimate relationship with man, we should be confronted by

a desert of grey infinity, where everything was indifferent to everything else. Nature, considered in isolation from man, is for man simply nothing, an empty abstraction existing in the shadowy world of dehumanized thought. The whole infinite range of our relationships to the world stems from the sum-total of our interactions with it. Invariably, no scientifically, let alone artistically, thinking person can remain deaf to the wise voice of nature studied as a vitally necessary sphere of life. Equally true is the fact that no thinking and emotionally developed person can remain indifferent to ones environment as any incursion or distortion of the environment inform of dissertation, pollution or deforestation has a tremendous physical or even psychological effect.. The person who is indifferent to these spheres deliberately condemns himself to a depressing narrowness of outlook.

Inconsideration of the above, it is good that all hands must be on deck to protect our natural environment from being tempered with in our effort to secure food and other facilities, as these can cause ontological disruption of nature leading to untold harm, destroying the present world order and leading to unsecure future for our prosterity. Equally, the Government both Local, State and Federal should establish policies aimed at protecting the environment, and enacting laws to prohibit the unnecessary damages to nature and its environs.

Environmental protection techniques should be indigenized. It should be written and delivered in Nigerian languages. The design should take cognizance of the deferent ecological zone in the country and the people should be the agents. For an enduring legacy, Environmental Educational (which should include environmental protection techniques) should be included in primary and post primary school curricula.

Endnotes

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