The Contribution of the Sacred in Traditional African Societies to Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

The theme of “religion and ecology” comes within the scope of the problematic of the impact of religious beliefs on attitudes towards the environment. In this context, this study aims to show the contribution of cosmic sacred elements of flora and fauna to environmental ethics. Indeed, in the African cosmogony, and especially in traditional Ibovian societies, the spiritual life is linked to visible and invisible beings in nature. This link between man and nature is maintained by the sacred which occupies a prominent place in these societies. It governs the individual and collective life through various functions of security, health or socio cultural kinds.

The fear of the sacred is shown by people’s respect for individual and community taboos or, by default, punishments. That promotes the conservation and protection of biodiversity. This leads to the idea that cultural and religious practices in traditional African societies have ecological features.

Keywords: Environment; Ethics; Sacred; Traditional societies; Religion

Introduction

The consequences of environmental degradation on human health constitute a major challenge for industrialized countries as well as developing countries. The central point about the search of a solution relates to environmental protection, which remains the main goal for environmentalists.

The terms “Ecology and religion,” like those about God and nature, heaven and earth, spirit and matter, no sphere and biosphere are topical issues. That issue raises the fundamental question of the impact of religious beliefs on attitudes towards the environment. Indeed, for some authors, religions are responsible for environmental problems, while for others they can provide solutions to those problems. For the latter, there are ties of affinity between religious ideas and the environmental behavior, while for the former, there is opposition and contradiction. It is in this context that for Ki-Zerbo and Beaud-Gambier “all religions incorporate teachings that relate to environmental issues and nature”[1].

This discussion is not intended to interfere with a philosophical or theological debate. However, it departs from an observation on the contribution of the sacred in traditional African societies to the conservation and protection of the environment. How, indeed, the sacred participates in environmental ethics?

What is the future of the sacred in traditional African societies which are witnessing social change?

To answer these questions, we shall successively analyze the sacred in the traditional Ivorian societies, the relationship between the sacred and the ecology, and the future of the sacred.

The sacred in traditional ivorain societies

The Hachette dictionary in its 2003 edition indicates that the sacred is anything about the absolute respect or anything worthy of worship.

For Emile Durkheim, “sacred things are those that taboos protect and isolate, contrarily to profane items which taboos are applied to, and which must be kept away from the sacred” [2]. Thus, the sacred is what is inaccessible to the profane.

From that definition, one can draw the following question: How is the sacred displayed in traditional African societies? Several cosmic, flora, fauna, and halieutic elements are considered sacred in traditional African societies.

Sacred cosmic elements

Two elements of the cosmos can be identified as regards sacred cosmic elements, namely the land and water.

The land is seen in some Ivorian communities as a divinity, hence its sacred quality. In the Baulé community for example, the land called assié is represented by a stone or a tree capable of hosting spirits because not all the trees are used for that purpose. These elements of representation are usually placed in the center of the village or in the middle of the family yard. They embody the spirit of a genius called assié oussou, that is to say, the genius of the land. It is the landowner that provides or stops the rain, good harvest but also the one that protects the community against evil attacks of spiritual and physical kinds. That is why, there are misfortune days (anan), dedicated to the land, during which no activity is permitted. Serious taboos as homicide and sexual relations in the bush have to be respected. The transgression of the former demands the sacrifice of a cow to the genius assié that was offended. As for the latter, a public ritual purification of the two lovers (the man and the woman) who had sex in the bush is required. The ritual takes place quite exactly where the act of sexual intercourse occurred, through a simulation describing their sexual relations. With thorny stems called ako ouyé, people flight them until they run into the bush. After that public confession, the purification ritual consists of a...
libation with liquor, the sacrifice a chicken and a goat. Any breach of this ritual causes temporary cessation of the rains.

Surface waters (rivers, streams, ponds, etc.) in African societies may be prohibited for fishing or swimming because of their sacred character. People believe that benefactor geniuses live in these waters. Thus, they play a number of functions, including the religions (sacrifice cult, worshipping, etc.), health (procreation) or sociocultural (initiation rites, ritual ceremony). Prohibitions about any access to these waters show that they are sacred.

Sacred floristic elements

In the African cosmogony, the elements of nature (plants, rocks, water, etc.) that would host geniuses are the intermediaries between man and God. Indeed, the plants recognized as having spiritual power are declared sacred. Two examples quoted from the Baoulé culture allow us to elucidate that idea. The first concerns the ‘iroko’ (Ella) and the ‘néré’ (kpale).

The ‘iroko’ is a tree known in Baoulé community as a powerful means of communication between God and man through the geniuses that are supposed to live in the tree. It is a revered tree under which people make sacrifices. In fact, even the young plants of that species are given consideration, and are not cut during land clearing.

The ‘néré’ is a tree that usually grows in the savanna area in Côte d’Ivoire. It is also revered in Baoulé community because of its ability to stop the rain if it is cut down. Thus, it is strictly forbidden in the Baoulé community to cut down that species whatever its size. Therefore, any person who violates this taboo should make a sacrifice of goat, with help of the village elders acting as the notability. That sacrifice is the only way to make the rain come again.

In addition tree species, some forests are declared sacred. But what is the basis of their sacredness?

Sacred forests draw their quality from ritual practices that take place there. Indeed, they are places for the making and storage of masks in some Ivorian communities (the masks ël, dijë in Baoulé community, gla klaa, Téhé gla in Wè community); forests can also be used for initiation rites (por, in Senufo community), for rituals and worshipping ceremonies dedicated to some trees (Ella, that is to say, iroko, in Baoulé community) or to sacred rocks (Akpû oussou, meaning rock genius in Baoulé community), and to burial of the dead (cemetry). Thus, sacred forests are called so because of practices in those places where ordinary people are not admitted. It is the sacredness of such practices that make the forests sacred. That is why, a number of taboos enable people to ensure the safety of the sacred forests. Those taboos include the following:

- The ban on the exploitation of forest resources (cutting the trees, hunting, agriculture, etc.);
- The forest fire;
- The discharging of human or domestic waste.

In addition to floristic elements, animal, and fish species may also have a sacred character.

Sacred fish and wildlife elements

The relationship between man and nature in traditional African societies enables one to highlight the sacred about certain animal or fish species. An evidence of that relationship is shown by the totem that is defined as follows: “the deified animal by the group should not be killed or no single individual is allowed to eat it.” [3]. The myth about these natural species justifies, consolidates their sacred character, and strengthens proportionally their respect as a totem. Indeed, an identity relationship is established between the taboo and the social group in such a way that the natural species is considered a member of the community. It is in this context that the anthropologist Rivers [4] distinguishes three elements in tourism:

- The social (the connection of an animal species or a vegetable or an inanimate object with a given group of the community)
- The psychological (the belief in a relationship of kinship or filiations between the member of the group and a given animal, plant or object)
- The ritual (obedience to the totem in terms of taboo about the consumption or use of the natural item).

Many examples of filiations between human groups and animal or fish species can be observed in various Ivorian communities. The Senufo communities (Gur group) in the northern part of Côte d’Ivoire can be quoted as developing such relationships between humans and animals. These are typified by the following patronymics:

- The Sékongo are related to the squirrel;
- The Silué are related to the monkey;
- The Soro are related to the panther;
- The Tuo are related to the wart hog;
- The Yéo are related to the antelope.

In the north-west of Côte d’Ivoire, a well known example is that of the sacred catfish of Silakoro (Department of Touba) which, according to the legend, embodies the ancestors’ soul. That is why, the fishing and consumption of catfish are prohibited in these communities where the species is regarded as human but not as fish. This perception gives full meaning to the sacred nature of the fish species.

In the east of Côte d’Ivoire, the case about the mythical monkeys of Soko (Department of Bondoukou) living among people is edifying. According to the legend, the monkeys of Soko were humans transformed into monkeys to escape the attack of enemies; but the process turned irreversible. Therefore, the monkey has become the totem animal, the sacred animal that should not be killed or eaten. The mythical nature of these primates causes them to become the sacred animals most protected in the region.

Relationship between the Sacred and Ecology

The objective as well as the scope of the sacred and ecology enable one to establish on the one hand a link of convergence and on the other hand one of a divergence.

The sacred and ecology: a convergent objective

The taboos accompanying the sacred contribute to the conservation and protection of plant species, wildlife, fish species or natural elements considered as sacred. In fact, in traditional African societies, the sacred has made it possible the protection of biodiversity through the sacred forests, sacred rocks, sacred animals or fish, which are closely linked to the sociocultural lives of the people. Such objective of conservation and environmental protection is equally that of ecology. For militants of
ecology, indeed, the development stage reached by mankind requires a
global planning for the use and preservation of nature and its resources.

The sacred and ecology: a divergent range

In formal terms, the sacred and ecology have the same objective. However, a divergent significance can be noted. In fact, in traditional African societies, the conservation and preservation of biodiversity through the sacred is intended to protect all not only natural species but also those recognized as sacred. This means that the natural balance is not always respected. In contrast to this significance, ecology aims to preserve biodiversity, that is to say, natural species as a whole. All in all, ecology has a holistic meaning of the environmental while the sacred has a sector-based objective.

The Future about the Sacred

The sacred in traditional African societies is maintained by a system of three main components, namely nature, culture and religion. Nature is the substrate of sacred species (cosmic, flora, fauna, etc.). This means that the sacred cannot exist without nature. Traditional culture is the element that maintains and perpetuates the sacred through taboos and punishments. Animistic religion is the means through which practices and rituals are operated in association with the sacred. It is in the course of that religion that devotions (sacrifices and worshipping) to the sacred take place.

Those three elements are also the three pillars for the durability of the sacred. But in present days, it is can be noted that environmental issues, including climate change, the effects of the development of traditional societies, and the advent of Christianity have become true menace to the sacred.

Climate change

The effects of climate change caused by disturbances of the atmosphere due to human actions are varied and worrying. One of such effects that are of interest here is the risk of desertification in the regions exposed to lowering in precipitations. Indeed, Ramade sounds the alarm bell when he put: "The climate conditions specific to vast areas currently covered with tropical rainy forests would become so arid that they would turn into Sahelian areas ..." [5]. Ramade's forecasting is worrying when he describes a prolonged dry season and the drying of surface waters. The impact of climate change on ecosystems and their biodiversity also threatens the sacred owing to the close relationship between that sacred and nature. Indeed, there is a relationship of ambivalence between the sacred and nature, a link that reads as follows: without nature, there is no sacred and without the sacred, some natural elements would not come into being. Therefore, climate change may have a trouble-making effect on ecological balance. That is why, it could also be an obstacle to the conservation on biodiversity. In Africa, for example, long dry seasons caused by warming seriously affect the prolonging life of fauna, plant and fish species.

The modernizing process of traditional societies

The development of traditional African societies has changed their political and social organizations. Two major facts can highlight the drastic change within traditional Ivorian societies. Those facts concern first, the attribution of the quality of rural districts or sub-prefectures to some villages, and second the inducing effects of electrification.

On the political plane, it should be noted that the villages that have become sub-prefectures or rural districts are no longer governed by a village chief but by a sub-prefect or a mayor. From then on, the governing of the village is no longer modeled on the traditional but, instead on a modern style. This can lead to a weakening in some sort of follow up of taboos related to the sacred.

With the bringing of electricity power to villages, coupled with Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the effects of globalization on traditional societies are noticeable. For instance, in the education field, children's socialization is provided not only by the community – through initiation in the sacred forest – or the family, but also by means of audiovisual devices (television, video games, etc.). People's meeting with new civilizations leads to the development of a new type of behavior. In short, the modernizing process in traditional African societies gives rise to an acculturation of the rural youth. That state of things leads to an objection to the value of the sacred, or the desecration of that sacred. In fact, some sacred natural species have now become tourist objects.

Christianity

Christianity is a Western religion that has been imposed on Africa. The message conveyed by that religion can be epitomized by love of fellow creators, and the worshipping of the only one living God. The strength of the message is maintained by the gift of the begotten son of God for the forgiveness of mankind's sins and his resurrection that gives hope to all Christians. However, the practice of this religion is in contradiction with that of Animism which remains one of the largest and most practiced one in traditional African societies. The foundation of Christianity is not fetish but the Bible considered as the word of God. The evangelistic message of prophet Harris was clear about that: "all fetishes must be destroyed. Burn them all into the fire. That the evil besieges whoever keeps them secretly in his house! ... Read the Bible, it is the word of God." [6].

Today, in its various forms, Christianity is firmly set up in Africa. That development of Christian religion has contributed to the loss of the sacred value in many traditional African communities.

Conclusion

The issue of the environment is worrying due to present climate warming. Ecological actions in favor of the conservation and protection of biodiversity are varied in such a way that they have reached more sensitive domains such as religion. Therefore, the fundamental question in the religion / ecology relationship is to know the impact of religious beliefs on attitudes towards the environment. In this framework, the contribution of traditional African religions through the sacred to the protection of the environment has been examined. In this respect, several sacred natural elements (flora, fauna, mineral, etc.) have been focused on, the preservation of which is ensured by taboos and punishments. The various functions of the sacred (religious, health, sociocultural, etc.) consolidate its importance and place in those communities. As a result, the protection of natural species through an obedience to the sacred becomes an ecological action. However, climate change today, the modernizing process and Christianity pose as a threat in terms of extinction of the sacred in traditional African societies.

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