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THE ROLE OF RAINMAKERS IN AWAKENING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A postcolonial ecocritical analysis

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Abstract

The most stressful periods in Setswana cultural history are mostly those that were dominated by extended drought. The cosmological interpretation of the cause of droughts is that the ancestors were displeased with the condition of the land and the harm inflicted on it had to be atoned for. In Setswana cosmology, the only person who could perform this act was the rainmaker. His/her role involved appeasing the ancestors and educating the people on the importance of ensuring harmony between nature and the ancestors. Under the direction of the rainmaker, the ceremonies and associated dances were practised and executed at specific times in the natural cycle, thereby expressing the community's gratitude for the roles of the environment and the ancestors, as well as promoting the understanding of cosmological interconnectedness. Following their mid-nineteenth century arrival in the Batswana tribal territories that constitute modern-day Botswana, the missionaries abolished the rainmaker leadership role, replaced it with Christian prayer meetings, and initiated environmental injustice in the land. This chapter utilises postcolonial and ecocritical theories to examine the cultural and environmental impact of this abolition and the waning of environmental ethics in Botswana.

Introduction

Our current global environmental crises are dynamic, demanding diverse approaches to conservation and sustainable solutions that differ from one region to another. Thus, ecological solutions employed in one country may differ from those applied in another country. However, contemporary ecological solutions to environmental conditions are mostly Western in conception and argue that traditional African ecological solutions, as utilised by indigenous cultural groups in order to reduce

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the impact of environmental crisis, are inadequate to address our current African ecological crises. Moreover, some have even suggested that African religions have nothing to offer in the domain of solutions to environmental degradation. In consequence, this has led Africans to neglect the preserved wisdom of practices, which their forefathers imparted from generation to generation to reduce the negative environmental impact of routine procedures on their societies. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that in the precolonial era that preceded the Bechuanaland Protectorate and independent Botswana, it was acknowledged by the people that there was one person entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the environment – for the purpose of this chapter this person is defined as the man or the woman of nature, referred to as the rainmaker. Furthermore, the rainmaker's role was not only limited to the nominal rainmaking, but covered a range of environmental functions that included: atoning for the land when the environment was harmed, raising ecological awareness amongst the people, and promoting a general preoccupation with harmonising society and nature “lest the land would vomit them out from the earth”. Be that as it may, the missionary agenda in Setswana communities as outlined by John and Jean Comaroff (1991:190) was “seizing the hearts and minds of its wild inhabitants, rousing them from a state of nature by cultivating their self-consciousness”. The description carries several ironies. Here were the missionaries rejecting the rainmaker's role of introducing to his/her people an awareness of their oneness with nature and categorising this awareness of the existing order of the Setswana world as primitive. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:190) suggest, the missionaries interfered with the Setswana sense of oneness with nature by promoting a state of self-consciousness that the ecological techniques of the rainmaker and the unity of the Setswana community with nature were uncivilised. From a modern perspective, there is the additional irony in that back in England industrialisation had unleashed a massive negative force on the environment and destroyed the agrarian existence of a large part of the population. In consequence, the transformative Christianity of the missionaries sowed the seeds of environmental degradation and immorality in Batswana society. This chapter uses a postcolonial ecocritical analysis to examine the historical encounter between the traditional role of the rainmaker in Setswana cosmology and the historical impact of the dismissive view of that role in the Western world view imposed by the missionaries in relation to the environment and the subsequent colonisation of indigenous ecological knowledge.

Postcolonial ecocritical analysis

The African colonisers were interested in replicating their own image in the nations they conquered and subdued. This implies that they represented and carried their cultural ideas and aimed to instil them into the people whom they had subjugated

and triumphed over. Moreover, their world view was generally different from the African world view, including what the relationship between humans and the natural environment was. This led not only to the colonisation African nations but the colonisation of African environmental thinking. This interdisciplinary chapter consequently draws on postcolonial and ecocritical theories. These theories show the unavoidable link between humanity and the environment, and that the influences that have harmed the people are fundamentally linked to those that have harmed the environment (Mason, Jones & Steenkamp, 2014:2). The correlation between nature and people in the African world view implies that colonisation affected both the environment and African people. This presupposes that an African environmental consciousness preceded colonisation and was eroded by Western philosophies concerning nature and man in nature. Postcolonial theory is concerned with “excavating or reimagining the marginalised past: history from below and along borders, such as transnational axes of migrant memory” (Mason et al., 2014:2). Furthermore, postcolonial theory investigates the reverberation of colonial themes and their re-emergence in the “post”-colonial era. In effect, colonialism cannot be archived simply as a record of the past, because it continues to reverberate in the inextricability of the past and present (Dube, 2012:3). Ecocriticism, according to Mason et al. (2014:2), is concerned with “examining the relationship between the biophysical environment and the texts such as climate change, soil and water through the lens of environmental theory”. Ecocriticism studies ecological knowledge and the experiences of the people relating to nature in order to examine the ethical issues inherent in our concept of the environment. Ecocriticism may be distinguished from postcolonial theory in its concern with humanity as a component of the biophysical environment. Thus, in this chapter postcolonial theory is used as a historical tool to evaluate the impact of the missionary movement on the Batswana, while ecocriticism is used to investigate the precolonisation relationship between the Batswana people and nature.

Setswana community in harmony with nature

In Setswana cosmology, nature encapsulates the entire world and includes both living and nonliving things, visible and invisible powers, the natural phenomena, land, rivers, bushes, forests, animals, birds, insects, minerals and whatever they perceived was not of human origination, but created by God (*Modimo*) to whom they owed allegiance. Batswana were surrounded by nature, lived in nature and were defined by nature. Consequently, they perceived the natural world as an immense womb that they relied on for food, shelter and medicine. As Edward Kanyeki (2018:1) notes, “nature to Africans was a womb, warm and pulsating with life and reality.”

The Setswana cultural concept of the harmony of nature and humanity cannot be overemphasised, for it is through this that the community perceived their entitlement to benefit and enjoy the goods derived or sourced from the environment. True communal spirituality in Setswana culture entailed being in tune with one's surroundings. The ecotheologian, Sallie McFague (2013:35) defined the term 'communal spirituality' as "recognizing that all life is interrelated and interdependent". This term also refers to the spiritual union that exists between nature and humanity at large. Therefore, a 'spiritual connectedness' is created when this communion is harnessed in the society. The ultimate goal of the community in Setswana cosmology is to be in tune with nature or of continuously being at one with nature. This harmonious relationship between nature and the community is perceived to constitute a blessing upon the community and nature at large. The concept of being in tune and at one with nature is encapsulated in totems and phrases such as "I'm an elephant" or "I'm a monkey", which are used by individuals to introduce themselves to another and exemplify a society which strives to be continuously in harmony with nature. This state of being in tune ensured mutual respect in engaging with other clans to which they verbalised their interconnectedness being in harmony with nature. It is this 'interconnectedness' to which the Comaroffs (1991:194) point in stating that the Tswana people were in a state of nature before the missionary influence was initiated. The implication is that the people could not be separated from nature, and it was nature that defined them and gave them an identity. Gabriel Setiloane (1985:4) notes that the Bantu phrase "I'm the son of the soil" deserves a literal interpretation and that in the uncontaminated African world view, human beings constituted a part of the soil in body, soul and mind.

Three factors are intertwined in the importance of being in harmony with nature in Setswana cosmology: (i) the scarcity of rain, (ii) interconnectedness with the ancestors, and (iii) spiritual communion.

The scarcity of rain

Rain in rural Botswana is critical for survival and constitutes a sign that the ancestors and nature are satisfied and happy with the people. However, it should be borne in mind that in the Botswana ecological system rain is scarce (Landau, 1993:1). Paul Landau points out that a good harvest requires approximately 250 mm of rain during the agricultural season and that for fifty years this level has not been received in the village of Molepolole (1993:1). The natural shortage of rain enhanced the desire to live in harmony with nature as the belief structure conveyed the conception that rain was provided by the ancestors and God (Modimo). Therefore, the community is supposed to respect and honour the taboos of the ecological traditions that maintain the society in a condition that is favourable to the ancestors and environment.

Failure to do this has an inherent implication that the society is morally degenerate, resulting in drought and famine in the land. For example, in 2000 Botswana was blessed with extensive rains. Towards the end of that year, the nation welcomed home the physical remains of El Negro, a Tswana man of unknown tribal origin who had died c.1825 and whose bones had been exhumed and displayed in parts of Europe. The arrival of El Negro's bones was followed by a drought which began in 2001, the cause of which was interpreted in several ways by the Batswana. Jan-Bart Gewald (2002:38) noted four interpretations, which included one that reasoned that El Negro had been a man whose burial had either angered the ancestors or that he, personally, was angry. This disrespect had interrupted the social harmony with nature. In general, the natural scarcity of rainfall encourages Setswana communities to be alert and vigilantly to examine their relationship with their environment.

The interconnectedness with the ancestors

James Amanze notes that in Setswana culture the ancestors are buried in the ground (2002:68). They are not perceived as 'dead', but their state is alluded to in phrases such as "those who have left us" and "those who are no longer with us" (2002:68). The ancestors are concerned with the fabric of their society and its productivity. Amanze (2002:68) writes: "The ancestral spirits are also concerned with the fertility of their descendants, the fertility of the soil, and the availability of food, upon which the other two are dependent." Thus, the ancestors are interconnected with nature because of their final resting place in the soil, and hence society must be in tune with nature to maintain harmony with the ancestors. To be in harmony with the ancestors is to be in tune with nature and tampering with nature implies tampering with the environmental ethics granted at the behest of the ancestors. Environmental malpractice may cause misfortune to come upon a man's family in the form of miscarriages, livestock reproductivity of only male calves, and crop failures. Furthermore, some Setswana communities such as the Babirwa believe that the ancestors inhabit and surround the places where they live. Paul Landau (1993:8) writes: "They also believe the ancestors traverse the Tswapong Hills and police the use of the natural resources of the district. Consequently, placating the ancestors refreshed the Pedi's relationship with the land, by mapping the contentment of the human community in natural and geographic terms." The ancestors are the true owners of nature, which entails that those who are alive are to be good stewards of the environment. Failure to adhere to these ethics implies that the living are living in disobedience to the indigenous ecological ethics which govern the community. Consequently, this can harm the environment.

Spiritual communion

Nature in Setswana cosmology is synonymous with spirituality and is not perceived in the Western abstract form, but as it manifests in material form. It is believed that nature is the abode of spirituality; hence, the ancestors and ancestresses engulf the environment in sacred places such as rivers, hills and trees. Therefore, the environment is the place of worship and worshippers may enhance their spirituality by visiting these sacred places to commune with the living dead. This spiritual communion is central to the survival of an individual in a collective group because one's spirituality connects one with the guardians of the community, namely the ancestors.

One of the requirements of the person who has been called by the ancestors to be a traditional healer is being able to live in nature for many weeks without the assistance of or interference by others. The apprentice is tested on whether he is able to gain experiential knowledge by being intimate with nature. Thus, the traditional healer's role is to guide those who seek spiritual intimacy with nature, a calling that demands that the practitioner of traditional medicine must be capable of seeking spiritual guidance from nature. The indigenous worshippers' insights into the future through nature and the signs depicted require interpretation by a skilled traditional healer trained to read these signs (Kanyike, 2018:1). Hence, nature is an ally or colleague in this world, assisting the people in the avoidance of bad luck and death.

Since Setswana culture relies on nature for survival, it adheres to environmental ethics such as controls on overgrazing and the exploitation of forests and rivers. These indigenous environmental ethics were fundamental in maintaining the biodiversity central to preserving ecological systems and functioning (Kanyeki, 2018:1).

The role of rainmakers in the Setswana community

John Mbiti (1989:174) observed that rainmakers are regarded as having major status in almost all African societies. They are described by various names that translate as, for example, the shepherds of heaven, implying that they shepherd men, cattle and the society for God. In Setswana communities, where the rain is the most desperately needed commodity for survival, rainmakers are consequently central to the survival of the community (Mwakakigile, 2009:199). The underlying concept is that rainmakers shepherd the society into a harmonious relationship with nature. Hence, rainmakers are men of nature required to be in tune with nature if the society is to remain in tune with nature. They are the compass which determines whether the society is retracting from its unity with nature and they provide the ecological ethics to which the society must adhere in order to receive the abundance of the blessing of the land. According to John S. Mbiti (1989:176): "Those who are engaged in the art of rainmaking are well versed in weather matters and may

spend long period acquiring their knowledge. This they obtain from observing the sky, from studying the habits of tress, insects and animals, from studying astronomy and the use of common sense.” This would appear to indicate that natural science was vital for their craft. They spend hours studying environmental behaviour and teaching the traditional ecological ethics to their communities. Furthermore, they observed the behaviours of their communities that they might give wise counsel in how the land should be treated and also prescribe the necessary ingredients that can heal the environment when it has been harmed by misuse.

The rainmakers did not only teach the society on how to live with nature. James Amanze (2002:116) points out: “One who was chosen to be a rainmaker was supposed to lead an exemplary life. For example, he or she is expected to be self-respectful, not drunkard, not violence and not to do anything which can bring shame to the community.” This points to the fact that correct social behaviour and the people’s relationship to the environment have always been at the core of environmental preservation in Setswana cosmology. Moreover, the rainmaker was supposed to exemplify this to the community in his/her personal conduct.

The rainmaking ritual

Several studies have focused on the rainmaking ritual. This chapter seeks to analyse and demonstrate from an ecological perspective that the ritual is essentially an ecological technique that lifts the community to the state of being in harmony with nature (Landau, 1993:3). By restoring the rainmaker to his/her practice, it may be proven that rainmaking is an ecological technique, which was utilised not only for bringing the rain but also to respond to ecological crises experienced by the community (Landau, 1993:3). Furthermore, rainmaking has also been depicted and perceived as a form of environmental religion, and so using this term to refer to the rainmaking ritual implies the connecting of the community to the environment (Landau, 1993:6). The major cause of shortage of rainfall results from the community failure to adhere to the ecological ethics that guide the community’s behaviour towards the environment. Therefore, it is the duty of the rainmaker to detect the transgressed taboos that the land might be cleansed. An example of unethical behaviour is the use of certain plants known to cause air pollution for firewood and thereby polluting or harming the land. The lack of rain indicates the result of the degrading of the environment.

This chapter argues that rainmaking should be regarded as an ecological technique in the sense that the rainmaker’s responsibility is to ensure that the community is in tune with the environment (Landau, 1993:10). In Batswana cultural history, the rainmaking practitioner was additionally at one with nature and able to raise

an ecological consciousness in Setswana communities. Therefore, the process of rainmaking incorporated traditional dancing, which amongst the Batswana was primarily not performed merely for entertainment but in recognition of seasonal agricultural rites under the guidance and leadership of a rainmaker, fulfilling his overall environmental role.

Maele, performed mostly in Maphoka village, is a dance performed by women around the month of September to ask the ancestors for rain during the dry season. Another dance primarily associated with the environment is *Ndazula*, which expresses gratitude to the ancestors for a good harvest and is accompanied by beer drinking. Ceremonies associated with rainmaking such as these two are considered important in the Setswana world view, because it is during the pouring rains, ploughing and harvesting that the consciousness of the value of the Earth is heightened. If the environment is not kind to the Sotho-Tswana peoples, they will offer appeasement through rituals such as the rainmaking dances and the sacrificial slaughtering of sacred animals, which are kept for these ritual events (Masondo, 2014:85).

In Botswana, people observe agricultural rites such as *Letsema* (commencement of ploughing), *Molomo* (tasting of the first fruits) and *Dikgafela* (Thanksgiving festival for rain after harvest) (Nkomazana, Kealotswe & Amanze, 2010:123). Monkagadi Gaothobogwe (2009) states: “*Dikgafela* is a traditional harvest festival, [which] is meant to appease the skies or ancestors (*badimo*) to release the rains, well in time before the looming ploughing season beckons.” For *dikgafela*, the women prepare beer, which is handed to the chief during the celebration. The chief takes a sip and pours the remainder onto the ground. Kenosi Molato and Musa Dube (2019:5) note: “The reasons for performing this act have various interpretations, one being that the chief recognizes the covenant which they have with the Earth and by doing so he acknowledges the interconnectedness between the Earth which has been given to them by God.” Moreover, they point out that an alternative interpretation of the chief pouring traditional beer onto the ground is that the chief venerates the ancestors who have given them rain and indicates that they, therefore, deserve to test the first fruit from their land (Molato & Dube, 2019:5). Some argue that by pouring the beer onto the Earth, the Chief acknowledges that the ancestors are part and parcel of the Earth and feeds them.

At the heart of the role of the rainmaker and the rainmaking rituals is the relationship between the people and the environment. The rainmaker led this procession of environmental consciousness in the community. His removal from performing his craft left the community without a leader and environmental educator, and hence environmental degradation became inevitable.

Missionary enterprise

The missionary enterprises into Africa were characterised by three Cs, “namely by the introduction or the imposition of the so-called legitimate commerce and Christianity as a key to civilization and eventually colonization was seen by most abolitionists, humanitarians, philanthropists and missionaries as the only remedy” (Vilhanová, 2007:252). The underlying argument is that the missionary movement perceived Africans as trapped in ignorance, and as disorganised and superstitious; they were cannibals and barbarians who needed to be redeemed from debauchery and, consequently, in need of civilisation. Therefore, it is no surprise that some of the missionaries perceived some of African tribes as a link between rational and irrational creatures (Moffatt, 1842:6).

It should be noted that missionaries were men who came from and represented Western civilisation. Disciplines such as Western philosophy and science, which were used to bring civilisation, failed to unite the African continent with the ‘civilised nations’, and Robert Moffatt noted that the only hope of imparting civilisation in Africa would be attained through the gospel (Moffatt, 1842:iii). Hence the gospel became the sole instrument of the missionaries’ goal to convert Africans to Christianity. Furthermore, in converting Africans, they built schools, which resembled those in the Western education model, as well as boarding schools, which provided a means of isolating children from the values of a “pagan” life, where they could impose on learners European values and Western thoughts. Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:xi), in their study of the colonisation of consciousness amongst the southern Tswana, argue that the main objective of the nonconformist missionaries was to change not only the hearts and minds, but also the signs and practices of the southern Tswana. This objective was described as “seizing the hearts and minds of its wild inhabitants, rousing them from a state of nature by cultivating their self-consciousness” or “to reconstruct them into their own image”.

The missionary targeting of rainmakers

The first major compact of the missionary enterprise was the role of rainmakers. Jan Gewald (2002:3) says: “The central importance of access to and control over rain was an issue that soon became apparent to European missionaries who started working within Tswana society in the early nineteenth century.” The missionaries observed that the rainmaker held a high status in Setswana cosmology. Robert Moffatt noted that the rainmakers “are our inveterate enemies, and uniformly oppose the introduction of Christianity amongst their countrymen to the utmost of their power”. Missionaries described the rainmakers contemptuously as a “vile imposture” and “transparent deception” (Moffatt, 1842:6).

The core of the power struggle was the missionaries' desire to control the community and, thereby, to reconstruct the Batswana in their [the missionaries'] image. The nonconformist missionaries, representing English Protestant denominations and sects who did not conform to the doctrines and practices of the Church of England, realised that if they were to seize the Batswana consciousness and control their communities, it was necessary to eradicate the rainmaking rituals.

In the recorded debate between David Livingstone and the rainmaker of the Bakwena, David Livingstone referred to the rainmaker as 'doctor', which "implies an ironic conviction that the contest is being waged on equal ontological ground" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1994:210). Thus, he allows his interlocutor to suggest a functional correspondence between Tswana material icons and European verbal signs, and to call into question the Christian distinction between sacred and secular activity.

The abolition of Bakwena rainmaking led to its replacement by the Christian prayer meeting, generally held in the homes of the missionaries. A similar transfer of community activity followed amongst the Babirwa and most other Botswana communities. The years 1821-1823, 1845-1847 and 1862-1863 were characterised by serious droughts throughout southern Africa. In the land occupied by the Bakwena, the drought of 1845-1847 extended into 1848, the year of the Christian baptism the Bakwena chief, Sechele, by David Livingstone. Similarly, the abolition of rainmaking amongst the Babirwa was followed by drought. The question arises: What led to the extension of these droughts in specific territories? The logical conclusion of the researcher is that the natural order, under which the society had functioned, was disturbed by a permissive attitude that facilitated missionary intrusiveness. The indigenous ecological knowledge was targeted and colonised by Western religion, destroying the harmony between human beings and the environment. The long-term impact on environmental degradation caused by the missionaries' unilateral exploitation of Batswana communities and the scorn shown for indigenous ecological knowledge demands an interdisciplinary historical ecological and anthropological examination.

The implications of the abolition of rainmaking in Setswana communities

It was established that the rainmaker was the man/woman of nature who was in tune with nature and functioned as the compass of the society, directing it towards a harmonious union with the environment. The abolition of this leadership and educationalist role left a vacuum in the Setswana societal relationship with their environment. The environmental consciousness gradually dissipated, and the vacuum was filled by a Western environmental approach that became implemented

in the culture. The indigenous people relinquished the conception of being one with nature and the environment became viewed as a resource that could be used for financial gain, as in the Western perspective.

Secondly, the objective of missionary enterprise was to destroy the Setswana community state of interconnectedness with nature and instil a state of self-consciousness. To achieve their goal, the missionaries realised that the removal of the nature man/woman was imperative. The consequence was that Batswana communities that had existed in tune with nature turned from their ecocentric state to individualism and the rise of consumerism. The environment was no longer viewed as community property and the individual could use it in any way, he desired without consulting the community. Sacred places that had been used for spiritual communion by the rainmakers became the property of individuals. The practices of overgrazing and deforestation have their historical roots in the seeds of individualism, sown in Batswana society by nonconformist missionary teachings.

Thirdly, while the land had been harmed or polluted, there was now no one capable of directing her cleansing, let alone to atone for the injury inflicted. Thus, the land continues to cry for help and will finally spew out humanity. Thus, the important role of cleansing remains unfulfilled as the rainmaker has not been replaced. Although the missionaries implemented the practice of praying for rain in church, this was by no means an equivalent to the cultural concept of the cleansing of nature from pollution. Praying for rain does not entail the incorporation of traditional environmental ethics, which was the foundation of Setswana systematic cosmology.

Fourthly, the new teaching of the missionaries disrupted the natural order in Setswana cosmology and promoted adherence to the Western view of the relationship between nature and the environment. One consequence was the implementation of irrigation systems, which disrupted streams and rivers. The natural movement of streams was diverted and channelled to water the fields. This may be seen as beneficial to the community, but it is ecologically wrong in the sense that nature is disturbed or disrupted. The nonconformist missionary objective of promoting individual self-consciousness resulted in the replacement of Batswana ecological traditions with a European perspective.

Fifthly, the abolition of the rainmaker also introduced a gender factor as rainmaking gave women a voice in a patriarchal society and served as an example showing that women could play a role in the direction of the community.

Conclusion

The chapter presented the theory of interconnectedness between the environment and the human-ancestral relationship in Setswana cosmology. It then covered environmental practices, focusing on the importance of environmental knowledge, and leadership by example, of the rainmaker in leading the community to experience the natural cycle through the symbolic celebratory and thanksgiving rituals and associated dances.

Thus, the rainmaker was established as the pivotal role in the cosmological interconnectedness of humanity and environment at the time of the arrival of the non-conformist missionaries, who set about abolishing the role and replacing it with prayer meetings. This chapter then discussed the implications of the abolition of rainmaking in Setswana community.

The reverberations of the colonisers' misjudgement of the role of the rainmaker and environmental rituals can still be felt today through the reality of environmental degradation in Botswana, which is essentially linked to the missionary promotion of an individual consciousness and its potential to exploit, together with the disappearance of the concept that the environment and community were interconnected.

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