MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

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RETHINKING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH THE NDAU NOTION OF COMMUNAL EXISTENCE

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Abstract

The twenty-first century faces a life-threatening environmental crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Scientists posit that the balance of life on the planet Earth is in danger as a result of human activities. Religions have not been seriously considered as potential partners in providing solutions to the crisis, but are in fact often blamed for causing it. This can be explained by the misleading disenchantment theory that holds that religions expose nature to exploitation by humans, as they teach that humans are distinct from nature and have a divinely sanctioned right to exploit it. A rethinking of religion in environmental discourse proves otherwise. African Indigenous Religions, for instance, are biocentric as they see all living beings as elements of one interdependent spiritual community. In this chapter, I use the Ndaun notion of communal existence to pursue themes of interconnectedness, reverence, embeddedness and reciprocity with nature that can advance the agenda for environmental sustainability. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the identity of the Ndaun and a description of their religio-cultural value system, and finally unpacks the notion of communal existence in the Ndaun religious world view, finding synergies with the wider environmental protection agenda. The approach in the chapter is qualitative for it seeks to access the meaning embedded in the rich religious and or spiritual life of the Ndaun in the context of the environmental crisis through in-depth interviews.

Introduction

The twenty-first century faces a life-threatening environmental crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Humanity worldwide faces a litany of serious threats to the environment that include, amongst other things, ozone depletion, emissions that produce the 'greenhouse effect' and global warming, pollution of the air, Earth and

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water, deforestation of important tropical rain forests, and extinction of species due to habitat destruction and climate change (Young, 2013). Scientists posit that the balance of life on the planet Earth is in danger as a result of human activities. Recently, in March 2019, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe experienced the devastating effects of cyclone Idai. Many lives were lost and important infrastructure damaged, and the livelihoods of the survivors were affected drastically. Cyclones are one negative consequence of the 'greenhouse effect' and global warming as a result of climate change.

Religions have not been seriously considered as potential partners in providing solutions to the crisis, but in fact are often blamed for causing it. This can be explained by the misleading disenchantment theory which holds that religions, especially Western religions, expose nature to exploitation by humans as they teach that humans are distinct from nature and have a divinely sanctioned right to exploit it. As a result, this perspective has been applied to every religion. A rethinking of religion in environmental discourse proves otherwise. Religions hold great potential in managing the environmental crisis. African Indigenous Religions, for instance, are biocentric as they see all living beings as elements of one interdependent spiritual community.

In this chapter, I employ a socioreligious and cultural analysis of the Ndaau notion of communal existence to pursue themes of interconnectedness, reverence, embeddedness and reciprocity with nature that can advance the wider agenda for environmental sustainability. I settled on a specific group of people, the Ndaau in Zimbabwe a society that is characterised by diversity, ethnically and historically. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the identity of the Ndaau and a description of their religious and cultural value system, and it finally unpacks the notion of communal existence in the Ndaau religious world view, finding synergies with the environmental protection agenda.

Methodological concerns

The approach in the chapter is qualitative for it is informed by a constructivist paradigm that seeks to access the meaning embedded in the rich religious and/or spiritual life of the Ndaau in the context of the environmental crisis. Data were collected through interviews with purposively selected informants and accessing available secondary sources on the Ndaau religion. Interviews required cultural familiarity as a key requirement to get the best from the target population. Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest and Namely (2005) state that in qualitative research scholars with a solid base of cultural awareness stand a better chance of gaining the confidence of the community under study, since they are more likely to get the

informed consent of the potential informants. I am Ndaau myself and my ethnic identity gives me some advantage because I am familiar with the culture of the researched community. However, I am also cognisant of the fact that familiarity with the researched community may lead to biases in the data gathered. In the light of this awareness, I commit myself faithfully to the phenomenology of religion's methodological principle of *epoché* (I hold back) that calls for the bracketing of preconceived ideas about the phenomena researched (Chitando, Mapuranga & Taringa, 2014).

Theoretical framework

The chapter employs the re-enchantment or re-imagination of nature theory as a lens in rethinking environmental sustainability through the Ndaau notion of communal existence. The theory counters the disenchantment theory that accuses religion of complicity in the degradation of the environment (Watling, 2009). The disenchantment of nature theory has been driven by the modern Western world view that reduces nature to 'material' without life or spirit. Premodern ways of perceiving it as alive, interdependent and sacred are replaced with a mechanical understanding, seeing it as a secular repository of resources to be exploited (Watling, 2009). The re-enchantment or re-imagination theory holds that positive or negative attitudes for or against the environment are a result of a way of conceptualising the world that stimulates either constructive or destructive actions towards it. Re-enchantment theory revalues nature and disenchants humanity and the modern world view, creating human moral and spiritual reorientation in relation to it and re-roots humanity in and revaluing nature, evoking a wider environmental identity. The theory emphasises the need for new imaginations about nature that give it meaning, subjectivity and sacredness. One noted limitation of the theory is that it has the propensity to essentialise the sacredness of nature to the extent that it overshadows its utilitarian value, forgetting that although nature has an equal need to survive, humans need food, shelter and energy. Its focus, however, has to be understood in terms of a give-and-take relationship between people and nature: "We take care of the land and the earth also takes care of us" (Merchant, 2005:85).

Literature review

In this section, I review some available literature on African Indigenous Religions and the environment in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular, in order to get the necessary background information on environmental sustainability through the said religions. I am doing this to widen the appreciation of the interface of Ndaau indigenous religion and environmental sustainability. This

is in line with Michael and Isaac (2000), who posit that a literature review helps the researcher to articulate the research problem more precisely. A literature review also helps the researcher to make the right decisions about the methodology to be used in light of the success and failure of other methodologies used in an area of interest (Peter, 1994). Some of the relevant works from sub-Saharan Africa are reviewed below.

Okyere-Manu (2018) posits that ecological degradation is on the increase and the most vulnerable communities, particularly in Africa, are suffering the consequences; this includes ravaged farmlands, polluted river bodies, climate change, low food production, and many others. Okyere-Manu (2018) strongly stresses that the search for effective sustainable ecological conservation strategies can never be more relevant than now. Her work assesses the processes and practicality of the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, which include religious beliefs and practices, with modern ecological conservation strategies, and she also outlines the ethical implications of this. She employs the theoretical lens of consequentialism, which prioritises acts in which the results will produce the greatest level of happiness for the greatest number of people. The theory is in line with the need to come up with effective sustainable ecological conservation strategies to save vulnerable communities. Her findings are that there is a need to deconstruct and reconstruct the values embedded in the two approaches for meaningful integration to occur. This work provides some insights that help my exploration of the Ndau indigenous religio-cultural notion of communal existence and sustainable environmental conservation strategies.

Awuah-Nyamkeye (2014) examines the methods of knowing and transmitting indigenous knowledge in the Berekum traditional area of the Brong Ahafo region in Ghana. He argues that a society's level of development, in terms of its socio-cultural political and economic lives, depends on how knowledge is generated and disseminated within that society. Employing a qualitative methodology, he identified the main means through which indigenous ecological knowledge is transmitted to students, namely proverbs, myths, folk tales and rituals. His findings indicate that indigenous ecological knowledge is a potential resource that can complement scientific means of dealing with the region's environmental problems. In another related work, Awuah-Nyamkeye (2009) is concerned about the rate at which Ghana is experiencing environmental degradation. He posits that researchers, individuals, eco-conscious groups and governments have made tremendous efforts trying to salvage the situation over the years without success. In his view, the failure can be attributed to the neglect of two important related areas, namely African religious traditions and cultural values. Awuah-Nyamkeye (2009) brings to the fore some of the means that Akan indigenous religion and culture have used over the years to

sustain the balance of the ecosystem. He argues that there has to be an integration of the perspectives of science and of indigenous spiritualities and culture to provide a lasting solution to Ghana's environmental problems.

Amoah (2006), in a preface to a work titled *African women, religion, culture and health: Essays in honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, describes the circumstances of Mercy Oduyoye's birth and the historical context in which she grew up as having shaped and directed to a large extent what she ultimately became. According to Amoah, Mercy's life was marked by a bumper yield of yams, which followed the planting of seed together with her placenta and umbilical cord on the Yamoah farmstead (Phiri & Nadar, 2006:xviii). This cultural and religious practice of planting an umbilical cord and the afterbirth of a newly born baby together with a food crop is still practised amongst the rural Akan. Amoah (2006: xviii) says that the "ritual act symbolically links and spiritually identifies individuals with the land, the family and the entire community". Her conclusion is that through this act, nature in its infinite wisdom was already carving a path for Mercy Oduyoye's role in religion and society. This work provides some insight into how in most African traditional religious and cultural beliefs nature is intricately entwined with human life. This kind of relationship means that from the African indigenous perspective, nature is not lifeless and material; it is alive. The belief cultivates a relationship of reverence for nature that is positive for the environment.

Taringa (2014) offers a critical comparative study of Shona and Christian attitudes to nature. He sets out to review the existing attitudes to nature in the two religions. This has important implications for the formulation of a public environmental ethic in which traditional Shona and Christian adherents participate in the context of the deteriorating ecological situation in Zimbabwe. The work raises the issue that the environmental crisis in Zimbabwe, as in many places throughout the world, could be fundamentally a moral and religious problem. He examines various beliefs and concerns that are central to attitudes to nature in the two religions. He does this in order to establish the possible reference points for an interreligious discourse aimed at formulating a framework for an interreligious environmental ethic. For him, this framework is open to redefinition and reorientation of traditional attitudes and even to the evolution of new attitudes to nature. The flexible traits of the framework resonate with the focus of the theory of the re-imagination or re-enchantment of nature that I utilise in this chapter in a bid to find some effective sustainable environmental conservation strategies.

Chirongoma (2012) discusses the critical challenge of ecological degradation confronting the Zimbabwean community from an ecofeminist perspective. She looks at the gendered impact of ecological degradation, highlighting that women

suffer most when the water source dries up or when firewood becomes scarce, because they need to walk long distances to fetch water and firewood to prepare food for the family. Her views resonate with those of Merchant (2005:213), who argues that “[t]hird world women have borne the brunt of environmental crises ... As subsistent farmers, urban workers, or middle-class professionals, their ability to provide basic subsistence and healthy conditions is threatened.” Chirongoma (2012) notes the patriarchal nature of Shona society and highlights the twin domination by men of nature and women in patriarchal settings. Chirongoma argues that if nature is to be saved, there is a need for a change of heart and attitude, especially on the part of some men who are on the forefront of exploiting both women and the ecological order. Chirongoma posits that men have to learn a new kind of maleness that puts up with some qualities that they have always deemed fit only for women, which include empathy and yielding in love. She sees women, especially mothers, as the best teachers. Chirongoma is reflective of the living reality in patriarchal societies where nature and women often suffer domination by men much to the disadvantage not only of the victims but of humanity in general, since women and nature are at the centre of life. However, the work is silent on the weaknesses of the ecofeminist perspective in ecological discourse. For example, ecofeminism assumes that “women and men ... have an essential human nature that transcends culture and socialization. It implies that what men do to the planet is bad, and what women do is good” (Merchant, 2005:204). Secondly, the ethic of care associated with women falls prey to the essentialist critique that women’s nature is to nurture. In this regard, ecofeminism essentialises the caretaking and nurturing traits that are assigned by patriarchy. It would appear that by these actions women cement their own oppression in a patriarchal society. Chirongoma (2012:121) seems to concede to this view when she says: “It is women who stand out in this ecological ministry because they have been ascribed the role of mothering, preserving and nurturing mother-earth, which is the main source of their livelihood.”

Maposa and Mhaka (2013) examine the role and significance of the Shona culture in relation to the management of water resources against the backdrop of the challenges posed by climate change in Zimbabwe. They are concerned that in the postcolonial era, no African country has done enough to salvage whatever has remained of the indigenous environmental culture to address the water management techniques. Arguing from the perspective of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), they aver that in the indigenous Shona culture, water management technology hinges on the proper and sustainable management of the environment. They concur with Rusinga and Maposa (2010), who argue that prior to the colonisation of Zimbabwe in 1890, the indigenous methods of natural resources management imposed little stress on the environment. Some political, economic and social developments in Zimbabwe have

led to the country's deep environmental crisis in recent years. This work advances the agenda of returning IKS to the centre, integrating it with the modern ways of conserving the environment for the good of human and nonhuman lives.

Murove (2009) notes that much of the African continent is experiencing levels of environmental degradation and wildlife depletion that are alarming for the welfare of future generations. His argument is that environmental degradation is an ethical problem that, therefore, should look to ethical principles for its solutions. He thinks that African ethics, as espoused in the concepts of *ukama* (kinship/relatedness) and *ubuntu*, offer a plausible paradigm that can help the present generation, and humanity at large, to harmonise their behaviour with the natural environment. He concurs with Ramose (2009), Bujo (2009) and Prozesky (2009). The concepts that Murove (2009) raises are important in that they provide the basis for understanding the themes of embeddedness, reciprocity, interdependence and interconnectedness that I deal with in this chapter in the context of the Ndaau to find effective sustainable environmental conservation strategies.

The Ndaau people

The Ndaau people are a minority ethnic group found in the Manicaland Province in the eastern parts of Zimbabwe. They are concentrated in Chipinge and Chimanimani, sprawling into the central parts of Mozambique (Konyana, 2014). The Ndaau have always been grouped together with other Shona ethnic groups, which include Manyika, Korekore, Karanga, and Zezuru, but scholarship on the Shona has often focused on these other ethnic groups, sidelining the Ndaau. Ndaau had been a dialect of Shona prior to the adoption of a new constitution in 2013. The new constitution of Zimbabwe (chapter 1, section 6), recognises Ndaau as an official language independent of the Shona (Zimbabwe, 2013). This has increased interest in research on the Ndaau. The Ndaau had wanted this separation for a long time. For example, they had for long lamented the imposition of a language on them, especially through the school system, where Ndaau children were expected to learn some Shona dialects at the expense of their own Ndaau dialect. For the Ndaau, it was dehumanising to have a language imposed on them.

Secondly, the use of the term 'Shona' for the people living in Zimbabwe and central Mozambique is problematic. Shona is neither an ethnic nor a tribal label, as often assumed, but it is an accepted linguistic term that identifies speakers of the Shona language, which falls within the south-central zone of the Bantu language group. Doke (cited in MacGonagle, 2007), the linguist who recommended the term, however, noted the challenges associated with the term. According to the Doke's report:

[i]t has been widely felt that the name 'Shona' is inaccurate and unworthy, that is, it is not the true name of any of the peoples whom we propose to group under the term 'Shona-speaking people', and further that it lies under a strong suspicion of being a name given in contempt by the enemies of the tribes. It is pretty certainly a foreign name and as such is very likely to be uncomplimentary. (MacGonagle, 2007)

Settling on a specific group in this chapter limits confusion that might be caused by the ambiguity of the term 'Shona'. The Chipinge area comprises seven Ndau chiefdoms, namely Garahwa, Gwenzi, Mahenye, Mapungwana, Mupungu, Musikavanhu and Mutema, while the Chimanimani area is home to five Ndau chiefdoms: Chikukwa, Mutambara, Muusha, Ndimba and Ngorima (Sithole, 2019). This chapter focuses on three chiefdoms in Chipinge on the Zimbabwean side, namely chiefs Gwenzi Mapungwana and Musikavanhu. These chiefdoms were selected because of their accessibility in the aftermath of the devastating cyclone Idai that destroyed the road network in Chimanimani and some parts of Chipinge in 2019.

Ndau indigenous religion

The value system of the Ndau, like in many African societies including the various Shona subgroups, is underpinned by an elaborate indigenous religion (Gelfand, 1973). It is imperative, therefore, to outline the Ndau indigenous religion for this will help in identifying the synergies between the Ndau religio-cultural values and sustainable environmental conservation.

The Ndau world view, like many other African indigenous religious world views, is a three-tier structure that comprises the spiritual world, the natural world and the human world. The spirit world (*Vari kumhepo* literally meaning "those in the atmosphere") constitutes the community of the unseen spiritual beings that include Mwari (God), ancestral spirits, alien spirits and many others. The exact location of this world is not clear, but it is believed to exist in the midst of the community of the living (Mhlenga, 2019). The human world is the realm of human beings and their social interactions located in the physical world. It is Nyika, meaning the land of the living. The natural world is part of the physical world that comprises all forms of natural resources that include land, rivers, mountains, flora, fauna and many others that can operate as the objects of the manifestation of the spirit world in the human world.

The three worlds are intertwined and make up the cosmic totality of the Ndau conception of life. The existence of each world is dependent on the other, but ultimately the spiritual beings are more powerful than the physical beings, because Mwari created all things. Okoye (2006) puts it succinctly when he says that amongst

Africans nature, persons, ancestors and the unseen world are bound together in cosmic oneness. They cannot talk of well-being unless there is harmony in the cosmic totality. The Ndaui have respect and a strong belief that the natural world provides a habitat to the spiritual world and it is the provider of foods, minerals and other resources. The sacred shrines, wetlands and woodlands are spiritual habitats and the foundation of survival.

Ndaui society depends heavily on the spiritual world for guidance. The spirit world also punishes and blesses the human world in cases of misbehaviour and obedience respectively. Like many African societies, the Ndaui hold that every plant, animal and natural phenomenon is a bearer of the divine. It is taboo amongst the Ndaui to pass negative comments about any aspect of natural phenomena lest one provokes the ire of the divine. This means that everything in the universe has life. Therefore, the world is not lifeless and material; it is alive. To maintain the balance, the Ndaui have to relate meaningfully to both the natural and spirit world. The flora and the fauna are entities in the natural world that play a hierophantic role as they indicate the route through which messages are transmitted between the spiritual and human world.

The spirit world is fashioned in a way that reflects how the society is structured. In Ndaui society, the most senior person, usually the chief, is at the top. He is approached through a mediator and only in cases of emergency is he addressed directly. Requests to the chief or the most senior person go through a process known as *kusuma* (presenting a request). The most junior member in attendance is the one who is told what the request is all about. Mwari (God) is at the apex of the hierarchy, followed by the royal ancestral spirits down to the level of the family in a way that mirrors the hierarchy of power present in Ndaui society. For the Ndaui, Mwari (God) is not perturbed by the petitions of the people; rather the family and territorial spirits are the busiest of the constituents of the spirit world. It is the duty of the living to maintain a relationship with those in the spiritual world. This is underpinned by the belief that life continues in spiritual form after death, during which the dead continue to influence the community they left behind (Mbiti, 1969).

The notion of ancestral spirits expresses the common African idea of the increased power of the dead in their role as the guardians of the land and the people (Schoffeleers, 1979). They are at their best when they have been accorded proper funeral rites by their living descendants, which include decent burial and traditional ceremonies in their honour. Amongst the Ndaui, as in most African societies, ancestral spirits are the kingpins of the society. They influence the activities and lives of the living descendants of their community. Ranger (1991) concurs when he posits that "African religious ideas were very much ideas about relationships, whether with other living people or with spirits of the dead or with animals or with cleared bush

or with the bush". The involvement of the ancestral spirits in the life of the living constitutes the spiritual nature of the Ndaun community.

Ndaun religio-cultural values as the bedrock of their communal existence

African Indigenous Religions, in general, are all about relationships. The Ndaun are not an exception. They have a value system that clearly outlines virtues and vices in society. The Ndaun regulate conduct and mould commendable human character (Ndaun: *Untu*; Shona: *Unhu*; Ndebele/Zulu: *Ubuntu*) intricately linked to religious beliefs. *Untu/Botho/Buthu* are Bantu words that denote the same concept. The notions of *Botho/Ubuntu/Buthu* provided by Gaie (cited in Dube, 2009:200) are defined as "the capacity to live responsibly and respectfully with and among other people", which also applies to *Untu*. These concepts emphasise relationships, as these concepts are about concern for others. This is expressed in Mbiti's (1969:108-109) axiom: "I am because we are; since we are, therefore I am." A person with *Untu/Ubuntu* is referred to as *muntu kwaye* in Ndaun, meaning a good person. *Untu/Ubuntu* and other Bantu variations entail the capacity to live humanly with others in accordance with beliefs held by the community. *Muntu kwaye* (a good person) exhibits good behaviour towards others and every element that constitutes the cosmic totality of the Ndaun community. Murove (2009:315), writing about the Shona, says that "human well-being is indispensable from our dependence on, and interdependence with, all that exists and particularly with the immediate environment on which all humanity depends".

The web of relationships amongst the Ndaun goes beyond the living beings. It is rather a cosmic totality that includes the living, the living-dead, the unborn, the flora and the fauna, and the rest of other inanimate elements comprising the environment. This interconnectedness is best explained by the Ndaun concept of *Ukama* (kinship/relatedness), shared with the Shona groups (Murove, 2009). *Ukama* (kinship/relatedness) expresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human and nonhuman within their environment. The Ndaun do not talk of well-being when there is no harmony in this cosmic totality. It is not uncommon for the Ndaun indigenous communities to call nonhuman living beings 'people' or confer human traits on nonhuman entities. For example, birds may be referred to as 'winged people' and the Earth may be personified as having a sharp appetite for food: *pashi ari guti* (the Earth has an insatiable appetite) or *pasi panodya* in Shona (the Earth eats) (Taringa, 2014). In this sense, the Ndaun cosmology is biocentric as opposed to being anthropocentric. This means that the Ndaun indigenous religion embraces the interconnectedness and ultimate identity of all life. A good person owes their sound character or personality to their parents, but principally to their family

spirits. This means that the source of values amongst the Ndaun is the effective social institution and an elaborate indigenous spirituality. The religious-cultural values of the Ndaun, therefore, are the bedrock for the communal existence expressed through interconnectedness, reciprocity, reverence and embeddedness with all elements that constitute their community.

Ndaun communal existence expressed through interconnectedness

The theme of interconnectedness assumes a strong sense of kinship with all aspects of the Ndaun cosmic totality. As has been said before, the world of the Ndaun is not lifeless but is very much alive. As a result, all aspects of the Ndaun community are just as alive and conscious as humans, and with humans form a single community that enjoys unity in diversity. The nonhuman aspects include land, fauna, mountains, rocks/stones, flora, air and water bodies. I find Young's (2013) writing about the Native Americans resonates with the Ndaun cosmology. Young (2013:310) posits that

[a] sense of kinship with all beings has caused Native Americans to approach other beings as brothers and sisters. Other animals are considered fellow 'people' whose rights must be honoured and who have a great deal to teach those who are attentive. Stones, trees, mountains and all other 'natural objects' also are alive, and can educate those willing to listen to them.

Like other African indigenous communities everywhere, the Ndaun develop a spiritual relationship with particular animals, plants or even inanimate objects.

The principle of totem animals amongst the Ndaun, for instance, summarises this interconnectedness in a convincing manner. Ndaun clans identify with particular animal species as their *mutupo* (totem animals). For example, the Muyambo clan is associated with aquatic species, especially the Mvuu (hippopotamus). Additionally, the water body, in this case Dziya (Great Pool), is viewed as the source of their origins. Other totem animals include Dhliwayo (termites), Simango (monkey/baboon), Dube (zebra), Mterwa (birds/chickens), and many others. Each clan has its own taboos and restrictions related to their particular totemic animals. The Ndaun believe that if they partake of their totem animals, their teeth will fall out, and that if totemic animals are killed, the culprit will experience *mashura* (mysterious occurrences) that include mysterious diseases. Besides the totemic principle, the Ndaun hold that animals are hierophanies through which spirits manifest in the human world. They convey both negative and positive 'messages' depending on the circumstances. Some 'messages' may be a warning of impending danger and the Ndaun may ignore them at their own peril. Baboons and snakes are some of the most reliable spirit mediums. Totem animals have a mythical and religious significance, and because of that, they feature in praise poetry of respective clans.

Domestic animals are equally important. Besides their social and economic value, domestic animals amongst the Ndaus are also important in the spiritual sense. Death is the fundamental human problem amongst the Ndaus and they are always keen to identify the enemies of life to defeat death. Bujo (2009:282) concurs when he says that “Africans believe life to be most sacred but life is permanently threatened by death. The human person’s task is to identify the enemies of life to defeat death”. Witchcraft is often suspected as lying behind any inexplicable health challenges. The Ndaus believe that livestock provide a buffer between them and anti-life forces. Mysterious deaths of livestock are construed as warnings from enemies or offended ancestral spirits and appropriate ritual action is taken to avoid a further deterioration of the situation (Mhlanga, 2019). As a result, for the Ndaus, there has to be a justification that meets the approval of the spirit elders for slaughtering a beast or chicken.

Ndaus communal existence expressed through reciprocity

Another important aspect of the communal existence of the Ndaus indigenous world view is reciprocity, a theme that assumes a sense of living in harmony. It is inspired by the underlying belief that the cosmos exists in a delicate balance. The only way to ensure sustenance of this balance is through forging and maintaining a relationship of reciprocity with all the aspects of the cosmos that include nature. Young (2013:311) avers that “reciprocity means that if humans show proper respect, the spirit beings will respond favourably and assist humans as they seek to live harmoniously”.

The Ndaus’ interaction with the wetlands/water bodies expresses a sense of reciprocal exchange with the spirit world. The 1971 Ramsar Convention (cited in the Environmental Management Authority [EMA], 2014) defines wetlands as

including a wide variety of habitats such as marshes, peat lands, flood plains, rivers, lakes, coastal areas such as salt marshes, mangroves, sea grass beds, coral reefs and other marine areas no deeper than six metres at low tide, as well as human-made wetlands such as waste water treatment ponds and reservoirs.

The EMA (2015) defines wetlands as “areas of land that are flooded with water, either seasonal or permanently”. It further categorises wetlands into three types, namely inland wetlands, coastal wetlands, and man-made wetlands. Inland wetlands include marshes, ponds, lakes, fans, rivers, floodplains, and swamps. Coastal wetlands comprise mangrove, salt-water marshes, estuaries, lagoons, and coral reefs. Man-made wetlands include fishponds, salt pans and rice paddies.

For the Ndaus, *matoro* (wetlands) are sacred places since they provide habitats to animals and reptiles associated with the spirits. For example, some pools in wetlands are the abode of *njuzu* (mermaids or water spirits) and some big snakes like the python. They are the guardians of the wetlands on behalf of the spirit world. The

Ndaou approach such places with caution and strict observance of the taboos. Earthenware, gourds and wooden containers are the only utensils allowed to be used to draw water. Metal utensils and any items that have been used for cooking are not permissible there. Use of such items may cause the water to dry up because it angers the guardians of the wetlands. Nature will have spoken. This assumes that nature has a voice and can share a message that all human beings can hear (Bauman et al., 2011). Fragrant toiletries are not permissible in these places in the same way that emissions from combustion engines are unwelcome in the sacred space because they choke the spirits (Lan, 1985).

The wetlands are not always dangerous to the Ndaou. The wetlands around the Murimbira pool in Chief Mapungwana, Bonyongwe village are a source of livelihood for the Ndaou. The Ndaou hold that if proper conduct is observed through respecting taboos and prohibitions, the wetlands will provide rich supplementary foods (Machowiro, 2019). For example, they are a source of fish and other small aquatic animals, especially in the dry season, but only if people take what is truly needed and spare the rest to meet future needs. This partnership ethic is also applied to wild fruits and other edibles in the forest. The Ndaou also cultivate yam, banana, sugarcane (grass crop) and a variety of vegetable crops that help them in times of drought. They believe that they owe their success to their ancestors.

River valleys and flood plains are also regarded as sacred. These are habitats of the ancestral spirits. Amongst the Ndaou, children who die before the teething stage are buried in river valleys. They are believed to have been returned to the spirit world to regenerate the lost life. The burial is conducted exclusively by postmenopausal elderly women who are believed to be in clean ritual condition. Writing on gender flexibility and African Indigenous Religions in general, Grillo, Van Klinken and Ndzovu (2019:196) express this belief:

As persons age, they are believed to take on greater spiritual power. Female elders past menopause occupy a transcendent status as human beings who have surpassed gender. This widespread conception of their special nature is most clearly expressed in ritual performance.

From a gender perspective, we have to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion when engaging with this belief because of the patriarchal privileges that often lurk behind such beliefs. The Ndaou, like many other African societies, also struggle with overt and covert privileges extended to men courtesy of patriarchal structures. The belief may be a patriarchal ploy to 'accept' women elders past menopause as 'men'. They have ceased to be 'women' but have become 'men' and, therefore, can preside over ritual practice without threatening men's monopoly of power. In this sense, ritual performance by this category of women is a duty ascribed to them by patriarchy to advance patriarchal interests. Be that as it may, unsanctioned movements in sacred

river valleys and flood plains often put the ‘trespassers’ at risk of *chahwihwi* (losing direction temporarily and wandering about in the valleys) (Salani, 2019). Proper behaviour by a selected category of elderly women keeps the sanctity of these sacred places intact.

Ndau communal existence expressed through reverence

As noted earlier, the communal existence of the Ndau indigenous world view holds that all of life is interrelated and therefore spiritual. The spiritual aspect of the cosmic totality of the Ndau draws a response of reverence in all interactions between humans and nonhumans within the community. It is from this perspective that the Ndau are not only biocentric, but more importantly ecocentric. Forests, mountains, caves, rivers, big trees, rocks and many other aspects of nature are alive. This belief in pan-vitalism inspires deep respect for nature. In the Ndau community, for example, big trees are regarded as resting places for ancestral spirits. On such premises, the Ndau are wary about the language they use as they want to avoid offending ancestral spirits. Big trees are often meeting places for rituals. *Muhacha* / *Muchakata* (*Parinari curatellifolia*) is the most commonly used tree for rainmaking rituals. *Muhacha* thrives throughout drought spells owing to their deep roots that access the water table. So, it symbolises abundant life, since it nourishes life during drought through the provision of fruit. The ancestral spirits are believed to stay in the forests. The forests become a place of refuge for the Ndau in times of an attack from enemies (MacGonagle, 2007). Dumping of litter and relieving oneself in the forests is prohibited. The Ndau hold a belief that anyone who breaches the taboo would be followed by the litter and/or human waste wherever they go.

Access to the sacred forest that is not sanctioned is dangerous, because it may result in death. Unwarranted comments about the quality of trees and vegetation, let alone wanton destruction, are believed to infuriate ancestral spirits who may respond with the disappearance of the culprit (Taringa, 2014:53). Gluttonous behaviour is punishable by endless uptake of the resource regardless of being full. The Ndau are encouraged to take only what is needed to avoid embarrassment by the vengeance of ancestral spirits.

Ndau communal existence expressed through embeddedness

The notion of the communal existence of the Ndau emphasises embeddedness in all aspects of their spiritual community, and in particular the land. The land is alive and must be treated with respect. Young (2013:310) avers that “although sometimes male, or often sexless, the earth is indeed widely linked to femininity and motherhood”. The Ndau are a people with a strong sense of belonging to their territorial space. They identify with everything that is on it. The name ‘Ndau’ means

not just a place, but a sacred geographical territory entwined with the Ndaun people's sacred history. For the Ndaun in particular, and many Africans in general, the land symbolises belonging, connectedness and continuity. In support of this conception of land use and importance, Bakare (1993) thinks that "[l]and (house) is a place of connection with mother earth, where one's roots are, where one's umbilical cord has been buried, where one's ancestors are deposited, a place of connection and orientation". For the Ndaun, land is priceless; it offers them an identity, a livelihood, and it is sacred because it forms a close and enduring bond between the living and the dead (Mbiti, 1969). For this reason, the Ndaun believe they have a sacred duty to protect the land and work responsibly on it to bequeath it to future generations in good shape. Most Ndaun men prefer to be buried on their piece of land as a guaranteed indigenous title deed for posterity. Their women would be buried by their husbands' sides.

The Ndaun share a particularly strong relationship with vegetation. Several tree species serve various purposes in the Ndaun community. Some tree species scare away witches, wizards, lightning and all forces with evil intentions. They are employed in rituals to protect homesteads. Such trees are grown around the homes. The healing paraphernalia of the Ndaun traditional healers often include various ingredients from nature to express this holistic approach to life. As a result, unpleasant comments on nature are unwelcome and it is feared that nature will respond through some punishment in the form of disappearances or insanity.

Synergies between Ndaun communal existence and the agenda for environmental sustainability

Themes of interconnectedness, reciprocity, reverence and embeddedness espoused in the Ndaun notion of communal existence provide neat synergies with the United Nations' (2015) call for sustainable environments enshrined in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 vision as well as the tenets of some environmentalist movements.

The Ndaun's notion of communal existence and the United Nations' SDGs

The United Nations' SDG number 13 calls for climate change action to mitigate one of the worst environmental crisis of our times. Climate change gives rise to extreme weather, including intense rains and stifling temperatures. The increase in the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide is the main cause of climate change. The mitigation efforts are enshrined in SDG number 15, whose main objective is to ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains

and dry lands (United Nations, 2015). Wetlands vegetation helps in mitigating climate change as it acts as a carbon dioxide reservoir and assists in reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, mitigating the greenhouse effect and leading to a more stable climate. Proper management of wetlands is, therefore, crucial as they offer a variety of ecosystem services that contribute to human well-being. These services include, but are not limited to, climatic stability, flood control, erosion prevention, fire control and improvement of water quality, as well as cultural services such as aesthetic satisfaction and spiritual values (EMA, 2014).

Wetlands control floods in that their vegetation regulates stream and river flow. Vegetation in and adjacent to wetlands and rivers slows water flow and holds soil together, preventing soil erosion. As a fire control mechanism, the soil and vegetation in the wetlands are wet most of the time and discourage the spreading of veld fires. Wetland ecosystems also improve water quality, as they filter pollutants and break down decaying material. They are the kidneys of the ecosystem (EMA 2014). There is a rich synergy between the Ndaou attitude to wetlands and the United Nations' call for proper management of the same. The Ndaou attitude to wetlands provides a spiritual resource that can partner with the agenda for a healthy environment for all by 2030.

The Ndaou's attitude to aquatic life, in particular fish, finds resonance in the United Nations' SDG number 14 that calls for the conservation and the sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Target number 4, in particular, aims to regulate harvesting, and end overfishing and other destructive fishing practices by 2030. The Ndaou ethic on harvesting natural resources, which include fishing, is that people must take what is truly needed and spare the rest for future needs. The Ndaou's attitude to forests and flora, in general, encourages the spirit of protecting and maintaining ecosystems. The spirit implicit in this attitude coincides with the United Nations' SDG 15, whose aim it is to manage forests and to combat desertification, as well as halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss or the extinction of threatened species.

The Ndaou's notion of communal existence and the tenets of Deep Ecology

The Ndaou's attitude to aspects of nature echo some tenets of some environmentalist movements such as radical ecology. Within this movement are various sub-environmentalist movements that include Deep Ecology, Earth First, Eco-Feminism, Social Ecology, Animal Liberation and environmental liberation. The bottom line is that these versions have a common point of contact in that the environment is in a deep crisis that requires urgent action. Bornhill and Gottlieb (2010) assert that Deep Ecology is an ecological and environmental philosophy promoting the inherent worth of living beings, regardless of their instrumental utility in meeting human

needs. Carter (1999) posits that “the movement describes itself as ‘deep’ because it regards itself as looking more deeply into the actual reality of human relationship with natural world arriving at philosophically more profound conclusions than of the prevailing view of ecology as a branch of biology”. Like the Ndaun’s communal existence, Deep Ecology’s basic principle is that the natural world is a subtle balance of complex interrelationships in which the existence of organisms is dependent on coexistence of others within ecosystems.

Deep Ecology’s core principle is the belief that the living environment as a whole should be respected and regarded as having basic moral and legal rights to live and flourish, independent of its instrumental benefits for human use. The movement does not subscribe to anthropocentric environmentalism that is concerned with the conservation of the environment only for exploitation by humans for human purposes. The movement holds that the ecological problems faced by the world today are a result of the loss of traditional knowledge, values and ethics of behaviour that celebrate the intrinsic value and sacredness of the natural world and that considers the preservation of nature of prime significance. They posit that learning how to live in harmony with the surroundings is beneficial, because stopping the global extinction crisis and achieving ecological sustainability requires rethinking our values as a society (Daniel, 1980). Taylor (1998) contends that radical environmentalism is best understood as a new religious movement that views environmental degradation as an assault on a sacred, natural world.

Challenges of the Ndaun’s communal existence in advancing sustainable environment

The Ndaun’s communal existence is based on a metaphysical dimension that mobilises respect for the environment. The argument is plausible and deserves respect, but the premises on which it is based are only accessible to believers and may not be accepted by people who do not subscribe to the religious, cultural and ethical values and beliefs of the community. Some tenets of the Ndaun communal existence are detestable and offensive to people who profess other religious beliefs. Need and greed are lethal forces that are detrimental to the environment. The poor do damage to the environment out of need and the rich do the same out of greed. The killing of game and destruction of forests and wetlands for monetary gain are also prevalent amongst the Ndaun community. The Ndaun’s notion of communal existence has been shaken over the years. *Untu/Ubuntu* and *Ukama* (kinship/relatedness) are home-grown values on which this communal existence is based. These values can inspire the emergence of strong and vibrant communities, but they are overwhelmed by an emerging society that is obsessed with a “rapid material advancement of the few with no great concern for the rest” (Prozesky, 2009:302). In this stampede for material advancement, the environment is the greatest loser.

Conclusion

The chapter has discussed themes of interconnectedness, reverence, embeddedness and reciprocity with nature in the Ndau cosmology that are inspired by the Ndau's notion of communal existence. This communal existence is based on the religio-cultural and ethical values of *Untu/Ubuntu* and *Ukama* (kinship/relatedness). What has emerged from this chapter is that these themes have several points of synergy with the wider agenda for environmental sustainability espoused in, for example, the United Nations' SDGs and some environmentalist movements such as Deep Ecology. Like many Africans, the Ndau are characterised by a holistic type of thinking in which they conceive of themselves as being in close relationship with all aspects of the entire cosmos. This thinking does not recognise any dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Their self-consciousness is incomplete without peaceful coexistence with the land and everything on it that includes vegetation, animals, water bodies and many other aspects of their biosphere. The chapter has also highlighted challenges with the Ndau's notion of communal existence. I concur with Chirongoma (2012:142), who notes that "most of the problems affecting the country are a result of the economic difficulties that force people to engage in activities that damage the ecological order". The current incessant power outages experienced across the country promote massive destruction of forests and woodlands for alternative sources of fuel. Firewood has become a brisk business in towns and cities of Zimbabwe. Notwithstanding these challenges, the chapter concludes that, in the face of a threatening environmental crisis, there is a critical need for the revitalisation of an awareness of the interdependence of human beings and the natural environment – a type of thinking that does not dichotomise the sacred and the profane, but is more like the views espoused in the Ndau's notion of communal existence.

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