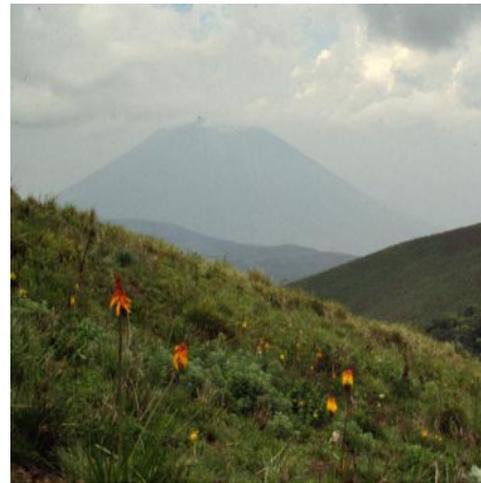


Searching for the Spiritual Roots of an African Conservation Ethic

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Humans, which the British biologist Sir Alister Hardy liked to call *Homo religiosus* instead of our actual scientific name, *Homo sapiens*, evolved in Africa around a million or two million years ago. The first archeological evidence for what could be interpreted as the spiritual impulse in our species comes from a burial site around 70,000 years old in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan, Shanidar Cave, where the body of an adult male may have been buried on a bed of flowers. Our ancestors, moving out of Africa to eventually span the globe, undoubtedly carried their spiritual beliefs with them.

Hunter-gather cultures, many speaking languages with clicking sounds in them, like present day San in the Kalahari, once occupied the entire African continent. Today the beliefs of the surviving remnants of these cultures are pan-nature animism, in which spirits are felt in trees, rocks, waters, hills and mountains, and other animals. Surely these spiritual beliefs are the deepest roots in all human spirituality, with an age of between 100,000 and 1 million years, dating to our oldest human ancestors.



Ol Doinyo Lengai volcano, northern Tanzania

Indigenous African agriculture developed in West Africa, in what is now the border region of Nigeria and Cameroon. Bantu speaking agriculturalists growing groundnuts and yams spread eastward across the continent south of the Sahara and north of the deep wet central African forest of the Congo Basin, pushed to the Indian Ocean coast of Kenya, incorporating arid land crops from the north such as finger millets and sorghums, and then turned south, sweeping through the coastal and miombo woodlands, pushing to the southern shores of the continent, and arcing back west to the edge of the Kalahari, where aridity and a cold-wet-season temperate climate prevented the advance of their warm-wet-season African crops. Pan-nature animists also, like the click-speaking hunter-gather cultures they overwhelmed and mostly converted to agriculturalists, their spirituality held a special place for rain. Much of Africa is an arid place, or at least has long dry seasons. Spirits connected with rain were critical to crops. Sacred

forests, pools, springs, mountains, and animals - the abodes and habitats of ancestral spirits who could influence the rain - all played a role in the belief systems of these people.



The spiritual roots of the Bantu peoples reach back 10,000 years to their West African point of origin, but by 2,000 years ago Bantu cultures had spread over all of sub-Saharan Africa except for the inhospitable lands of the Kalahari, Namib, and Cape region of South Africa. In a few pockets the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, worldviews, and sometimes even the click-language, held out amidst the overwash of Bantu, such as among the Hadzabe or Dorobo of the Lake Manyara area of Tanzania, or the Ogiek of the Mau Forest highlands of Kenya.

Rukonde Sacred Forest, Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe

In the overlaying of agriculturalist spiritual worldviews over those of hunter-gatherers, it is probable that the absorbed hunter-gatherer cultures retained their previous worldviews, adapting them to fit within the new belief systems carried by the invading cultures. Perhaps their autochthonic worldviews also influenced those of the invading cultures.



Manhango Village on the edge of Rukonde Sacred Forest, Zimbabwe



Maasai, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, northern Tanzania

Pastoralists herding cattle and goats pushed south through the Sahel to the fringes of the African forest, and even farther south in the savannas of East Africa, until their momentum was slowed by the tsetse fly and the trypanosome it carried, which was deadly to their cattle, and harmful to humans too.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago speakers of a Southern Cushitic language, probably similar to that of the Turkana, Samburu, and Maasai peoples, pushed through Kenya and into northern Tanzania with their livestock.



Maasai shrine, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania

What about the spiritual worldview of these East African pastoralists? Present day Maasai believe that there is a most-dominant spirit, Lengai. When it doesn't rain and the grasslands dry up and cattle die, Lengai must be appealed to. The Dalai Lama has said "my religion is kindness." I have heard a Maasai say "my religion is grass." Many times I've passed a shrine at the foot of a giant fig tree on the rough road that drops down from the rim of the Ngorongoro Crater to Endulen, where the base of the tree is always covered with offerings of handfuls of grass, made by passing Maasai.

The pastoral cultures pushing from the north generally exploited ecosystems not suitable for traditional African agriculture, so at least until the 1890s, when the rinderpest epidemic decimated their herds and forced many pastoralist cultures

like the Maasai to settle with agriculturalist neighbors for survival, pastoralist and agriculturalist worldviews did not have to adapt to each other.



Maasai, Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania

Of the extant Middle Eastern monotheisms, as they have been called - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - the only true "god" religions that seem to have developed among humans, as far as we know - the first to arrive in sub-Saharan Africa was probably Islam, brought down the East Africa coast with Arab traders beginning almost as soon as Islam came into being in the 7th Century CE. These monotheistic worldviews developed in the desert pastoralist cultures of the Middle East beginning perhaps around the time of the domestication of animals, 10,000 or so years BCE. Islam came to Africa with a trading, rather than colonizing, culture, so its influence on traditional African cultures and their spiritual worldviews was generally superficial.

Christianity arrived in the highlands of Ethiopia in the 4th Century CE, but did not spread to the African lowlands either eastward or southward. Christian influences first reached sub-Saharan African coasts with the Portuguese explorers beginning in the 15th Century CE, and continued with the establishment of the Dutch colony at Cape Town in 1652. They continued in the 1800s with the exploration of interior Africa by the Protestant missionary-explorer David Livingstone. Unfortunately, all of the European Christian influences were carried by colonizing cultures, which soon led to the exploitation of African peoples in the slave trade, and African wildlife in the ivory trade. Islamic traders had begun this exploitation of the African human and natural environment much earlier, tapping into indigenous cultural tendencies as well. Christian worldviews, especially, were carried by exploitative colonial powers who sought to disempower and destroy traditional

African cultures and leaders. The Middle Eastern monotheisms are characterized by a worldview that holds that humans are God's favored species, and that humans should "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." This worldview is strikingly different than that of indigenous African worldviews, whether hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, or pastoralist, which see humans as only one small, weak, vulnerable part of the ecosystems they inhabit and depend upon.



Rukonde Sacred Forest, Zimbabwe

Islamic and Christian worldviews and belief systems came to overlay the older layers of indigenous African hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, and pastoralist spirituality. In the process, in most cases, the older, deeper layers were retained, and the newer layers carried by more recent and colonizing cultures were overlain superficially. Some research indicates that where the older indigenous layers were lost, conservation of nature has suffered.

Seeking to understand the rich cultural-evolutionary history of African spiritual traditions, and to use that understanding to influence environmental and conservation behavior in the modern context, will require taking into account the history of spiritual traditions in Africa. Searching for the spiritual roots of an African conservation ethic that can sustain personal commitment to conservation of nature and biodiversity among Africans is a first step in designing effective interventions and investments to conserve and empower those spiritual values.

Nature conservation is motivated by a large range of factors, however, and spiritual and cultural values are only a subset of them. Social norms and economic factors can also motivate conservation behavior. Faith communities that do not

necessarily have ecocentric worldviews can nevertheless engage in behaviors that benefit nature and conserve natural resources. It is possible to imagine, for example, that a well-organized African Christian or Islamic community could undertake, under the influence of strong leaders, and the pressure to conform to social norms that those leaders create, a forest restoration project for which they would be paid for carbon credits from the voluntary carbon market, or a wildlife conservation project, for the economic benefit of the faith community. Although this would not be an example of spiritual values motivating the conservation of nature, it would be an example of social norms and economic values within faith communities motivating the same kind of behavior.

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