

Exploring African Agrarianism

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Abstract

African Agrarian philosophy encompasses the peculiar worldview, beliefs, norms and values that characterize traditional agricultural practices in Africa. Deeply enshrined in a profound connection to the land and a deep respect for nature, African Agrarianism can be deemed as a holistic approach to farming that globes spiritual, environmental and cultural considerations with practical strategies. This paper portrays the profound interconnection among humans, plants, land, animals and nature, emphasizing the value of maintaining interconnected and friendly links with all other living beings. I argue that humans are not merely separated from land (nature) but are an integral part of a greater web of relations. I demonstrate that human interconnection shapes the agricultural practices of traditional African farmers, directing them to work harmoniously with nature rather than attempting to suppress, dominate, or exploit it. This method is reflected in spiritual rituals involving activities like planting and harvesting, deemed as avenues to show deep respect for land and its values. The communal approach involving collective effort and the entire community reflects mutual assistance, harmony, solidarity and propagates the idea according to which the wellbeing of both the land and the community are interwoven. I conclude that traditional farming techniques should be revisited since they are more environmentally preferable (friendly) and harmonious with the ecosystems. African farmers are expected to readopt traditional farming methods and to scrupulously respect natural seasons, practice crop rotation, soil preservation and other techniques in order to ensure a healthier land for present and subsequent generations.

Keywords: Africa, African Agrarianism, Environmental Philosophy, Environmentalization of Agriculture, Land, Nature, Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

African Agrarianism focuses on the nature of varied indigenous sub-Saharan African practices and systems, which include traditional African beliefs, land use patterns, labor, capital, man's relationship with the environment and nature in general, agricultural practices, values, etc. It is worth pointing out that the African Agrarian activities on land have developed from a passive method of extraction from the natural environment to an active process, evident through the practice of other forms of agriculture, such as modern agriculture. This mutation in the African Agrarian system also witnesses a decrease in biodiversity due to "monoculture production" (the act of draining former wetlands, as well as the use

of chemicals in various agricultural activities to boost growth and ensure higher productivity). The mutations that comprise African Agrarianism serve as mixed blessings to Africans in particular and the world at large because it has created much wealth. According to Roberts (1997, 6), “African Agrarianism has created much wealth, but paradoxically, it sustains fewer people in the land”. It has created wealth in the sense that, initially, it focused mainly on subsistence agriculture for home consumption. Later, it developed into cash crop production of products like cocoa, coffee, banana, rubber as well as keeping of domestic animals and birds. Moreover, modern practices such as the use of fertilizers especially on vegetables have contributed in boosting productivity, ease marketing and increased income. Agrarianism has equally rendered most African female farmers financially independent since the selling of vegetables, rearing of domestic animals, fowls and other products serve as supplementary sources of income.

Although there exists more ongoing interest in modern agricultural practices in Africa, modern agriculture, which also involves the use of chemicals in the production process, presents a huge threat to the existence and survival of other species of the ecosystem (LEECH 1996, 4). Leech equally emphasized the increase in vegetarianism and demand for chemical farming products to enhance and realize industrial agriculture. It is believed that the outbreak of different diseases affecting plants, animals, soils, and biodiversity at large, results from a faulty interaction and improper interference with nature. The future generations may likely experience more damages if stringent measures are not implemented to address human-related crises and African *agrarianization* locally, nationally, and globally. Environmental degradation, through excess extraction, vegetative destruction, exploitation, and other forms of destruction still exist, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, presenting a huge risk to the present and future generations. A clear-cut panacea to these perennial problems is far-fetched (especially from the African perspectives) as any attempted answer provokes many more questions from the appeal to the expertise of various fields.

For instance, traditional ethical theories are insufficient in determining exactly what ought to be done in any given situation concerning environmental problems, as well as the incapability of identifying the best manner of treating the environment, nature, food safety, productivity and human relations with them altogether. The African traditional view involving the distinction between plants, animate and inanimate entities, distinguishing the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the community and the individual, is insufficient. For example, the belief that humans, in some cases, can become animals or plants or transform into forces like the wind is very common in this system and has very remarkable consequences in the manner nature is confronted and tackled (TANGWA 2004, 389). Therefore, adopting very pragmatic environmental perspectives is salutary for assessing theories and policies connected to food production, food crises, food safety, and higher yields of different natures with more emphasis on agrarianism.

Pragmatic environmental perspectives consist in respect for moral codes or values that promulgate and guarantee land/nature preservation, conservation and respect for non-human entities as a whole. For instance, the moral code of the Oromo people does not tolerate irresponsible and indiscriminate exploitation of

resources and human beings. It portrays profound respect and moderation, among various things. They do not merely consider justice, integrity and respect as human values meant for human beings only, but they extend the virtues to all other non-human species and the entire mother Earth” (KELBESSA 2005, 24). Consequently, what is expected here is “recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans” (TANGWA 2004, 100). Tangwa opines that, the African traditional context describes human beings as more cosmically humble, more respectful of other people, and more cautious in their actions toward plants, animals, and other inanimate things, not leaving out varied invisible forces in the world. In other words, they are more concerned about the philosophy of live and let live.

The main preoccupation of this paper is to portray the features, mutations, challenges and perspectives of African Agrarianism on human-nature relationship and their relevance for current ecological debates. How can African Agrarianism be developed in African environmental ethics? What are the stakes, prospects and relevance of present debates? This paper is divided into three sections. The first revisits the pre-colonial context African Agrarianism portrayed as a typical example of a harmonious relationship that characterized humans and nature. It examines the views of specific thinkers about the inseparability of human-nature in Africa. This paves the way for section two, which examines the features, mutations and challenges of African Agrarianism, easing a deeper understanding of African Agrarianism. Section three dwells on the values and way forward for African Agrarianism.

Revisiting the Pre-Colonial Context of African Agrarianism

The pre-colonial African Agrarian system of agriculture was strictly limited to the communal system. In other words, the existence of individual land ownership was practiced. During this era, land was owned by groups of people and it was also a property belonging to the entire community (CALLICOTT 1996, 2008; WINCH 2006; NORTON 2008). Similarly, this method of land distribution characterized by group and/or communal ownership was regarded as the most effective and dynamic approach, enhancing flexibility and guaranteeing social mutations since land was adequately available for numerous agricultural activities. The post-colonial era, through the dictates of colonialism from post-colonial governments imposed their particularities and policies in rural African societies. This imposition created individual claims to land rights and ownership as a new colonial system greatly influenced the Agrarian system at various levels (PETERS 2004). From that time, African Agrarianism, with a focus on land ownership included in the colonial policies, constituted one of the main indigenous communal tenure systems as confirmed by historians and anthropologists, such as Whitehead & Tsikata (2003, 70). Added to the above reasons for the adoption of colonial policies linked to land, communal land ownership, validated by the colonialists was termed as an endeavor to impose Western control over African land through the alienation of Africans for the benefit of Western groups. It was also described as a means to supply raw materials to Western industries (BOOKCHIN 2003, 71).

Features, Mutations, and Challenges of African Agrarianism

The post-colonial era of African Agrarianism was noted for an increase in the demand for land ownership with more focus on the desire for individual or private land ownership and land titling acquisition. The post-colonial system of Agrarianism shares features similar to those of the modern system. The insistence and growth of individual land ownership and land titles serve as facilitators, easing the attainment of some advantages like incentives, investments, security, available markets, and drastic increase in productivity (PLATTEAU 1996, 52). However, some schools of thought disagree with the belief that titling does not in any way influence productivity positively in sub-Saharan Africa (HABERMAS 1981; 1984). In addition, efficient production is determined by market systems, even with the absence of incentives from governments and the absence of government intervention to establish private land titles, as Atwood (1990) and Yngstrom (2002) declare. Closely connected to land titling and ownership is the discrimination of women's rights to land and property ownership, considered as reserved for men only, as Yngstrom (2002) emphatically unveils in the following passage:

The decisions driving the evolution of land holding systems are taken by men as heads of idealized 'households'. Women exist only as the wives of household heads; their actions are considered secondary or unimportant to the changes that landholding systems undergo. Gender is central to understanding the organization and transformation of landholding on the continent, shaping women's differential experience of tenure security. Evolutionary models and the policies they generate render women's land claims and the forms of tenure insecurity that they face, invisible. (YNGSTROM 2002, 22)

The various methods introduced for the improvement of African Agrarian systems and in deciding categories of people to be accorded land ownership, complications equally arise from the communal and individual land tenure adoptions. For instance, in most regions of sub-Saharan Africa, men easily gained access to land rights and ownership through inheritance, compared to women who could only acquire land rights through special circumstances; like affiliations with their husbands and other male relatives (BERRY 1997). Following this conception, another perspective advances that communal land ownership in Africa is homogenous, unanimously and unevenly distributed within the continent (BRUCE 1998). Moreover, it is also argued that, initially, land is legally a property of the state, although there is a possibility for people to acquire land titles in a long-run (COUSINS 2000). It is worth underscoring that, in relation to land, "rights" focus on the liberties to effectively control and guarantee accessibility, whereas "access to land" concerns land rights, including other means (informal) of land acquisition such as through land sharing and/or invasion with the assistance of other male relatives. Thus, the emphasis on the role of land, access to land, management, rights and ownership is vitally significant in African Agrarian research and a catalyst of Agrarian productivity.

Availability of enough human labor in sub-Saharan Africa is an effective catalyst for efficiency and productivity, which also characterizes Agrarianism. Following statistics from Inter-Academy Council (IAC 2004), more than eighty-nine per cent of African land is cultivated manually, that is, through the dependence on human labor, thanks to the availability of “man power”. In addition to the above, a majority of the laborers come from various African families. Since the size of African families greatly influences Agrarianism positively, the quantity of labor input, the number of hours put in and the efficiency of labor is consequently dependent on and determined by the various family sizes (UPTON 1987). To buttress the significance of labor in African activities, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2009), from 1992, at least sixty-five per cent of African population was involved in agricultural practices. However, it is incumbent stating that the agrarian input systems fluctuate as they are determined by the peculiar nature of the seasons. Due to the changes in the system of Agrarianism, connected practices like farm and soil preparation, crop selection (crop choices), crop health and management, higher yields, or farming experiences as a whole mostly depend on the appeal to labor and its features.

Again, capital is primordially vital in African Agrarianism, despite the fact that the dependency rate of African Agrarianism on capital for productivity is relatively very low. The focus on mostly labor (non-mechanized labor), as an agent of agrarianism signals the absence of capital in production, as confirmed by Wolman & Fournier (1987). Too, a report from the Inter-Academy Council (IAC 2004) indicates that mechanical power (non-human labor) is used only on one per cent of Agrarian land, while animal labor is applied on ten per cent of farmed land in Africa. From this declaration, it follows that the higher the use of capital, the higher the mechanization level, and the higher the mechanization level, the higher the Agrarian efficiency and productivity. In addition to the above, special requirements to enhance proper soil preparation, sowing, controlling weeds, pests, plant diseases, and realizing a successful harvest are fully certain (RUTTAN 2002). The absence of mechanized labor in the African Agrarian system results from the high costs of machines, the difficulty of importing and using machines like tractors and caterpillars is also considered unfit for agrarianism, which is mainly characterized by mixed cropping. Following a report from the Food and Agriculture Organization, the following are worth pointing out:

At the end of the twentieth century, after another fifty years of agricultural history, the productivity of manual farming, which is the least efficient but most widespread type of farming worldwide, is still about 1000kg of cereal equivalent per worker, while the net productivity of the most motorized and input-intensive farming system exceeds 500000kg. (FAO 2000, 177)

African Agrarianism, which involves both conventional farming and non-conventional farming portrays unique features in particular cases. On the one hand, the conventional system, which concerns traditional industrial practices and mostly dependent on chemicals to improve on soil quality, manage pests, weeds, and growth in the production processes cannot be overemphasized. On the other hand, non-conventional farming practitioners prefer the adoption of alternative

methods centered on more chemical-based approaches through the use of natural biological waste products, such as green manure from rotten plants and animal waste, ground cover methods, barnyard manure, rather than applying chemicals or fertilizers to improve, control, and manage soil quality as well as treat plant diseases (LANGLEY *ET AL.* 1983, 323).

From a general perspective, African Agrarianism usually involves tilling of the soil, soil management related practices, crop choices and activities, and methods of pest control. Good climatic and weather conditions also influence Agrarianism, since plants and animals depend on water, sun, space, among others, to survive and blossom. For example, through precipitation (a process whereby plants absorb water through their roots and disseminate it through small pores in their leaves), temperature (a measure of the intensity of heat energy caused by solar radiation), contributes in easing Agrarian practices and yields. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the philosophy of farming centers more on tillage, the implementation of agro-chemical products in farming activities is a plus in ensuring consistence in farming and boosting productivity (PARR *ET AL.* 1992).

African Agrarianism has been undergoing mutations and progress over the years in almost all parts of the African continent, affecting the *modus operandi* of the different systems of modern agricultural activities. This change and evolution took their rise from the era characterized by the domination of small scale family farming practices to the period involving fewer and larger scale farming fields and activities. According to Acton (1995, 15), in South Africa, the number of farms decreased from 112000 in 1951 to 60000 by mid-1990. This drastic decrease, gave room for “polycultural practices” (the growing of varieties of plants and animals in the same farm) as purported by Thompson (1995, 124).

Added to the changes noticed in African Agrarianism, more recent discoveries indicate a shift to organic farming activities as some farmers concentrate on the consistent use of organic manure and fertilizers on their lands, while other African farmers have adopted the application of agro-chemicals on their farms such as; pesticides and bacteriological pathogens to increase yields (THOMPSON 1995, 123-124; and DAMARR 1995). It is worth pointing out that various interrelated aspects contribute in determining Agrarian mutations, ranging from the field sizes, family sizes, given market conditions, economies of scale, the birth and progress of environmental consciousness, among others. However, it is thanks to the vital role of environmental consciousness that consumers’ choices and demands now focus more on the preference for organically produced food, which was not the case before (THOMPSON 1995, 148). Similarly, Damarr & Acton (1995) hold the views according to which opposing philosophical perspectives about human-nature relations, including all other aspects of the physical environment, are partly accountable for the changes experienced in Agrarian activities. On one hand, there exists the philosophical acceptability of alternative farming, on the other hand, a justification of industrial farming practices.

Nonetheless, numerous challenges exist alongside African Agrarianism practices of various natures. For instance, a major threat presented by chemical fertilizer application in farming activities is that the act of exposing land for a very lengthy period after fertilizer use may no longer permit the land to regain its

natural fertility or replenish easily and faster, especially after the withdrawal of fertilizer. Also, various family farmers do not always take community views into account when choosing from their preferable farming choices, leading to their social stagnant positions in society, thereby negatively impacting societal support which would have promoted sustainable Agrarian practices in Africa. Moreover, the adoption of alternative farming practices establishes a closer connection between humans and nature and also in the reduction of pest, soil degradation and weeds, but excess application of pesticides, herbicides and chemicals, destroys nature and affects human health adversely. Again, different farming activities influence economic effects in plants and weeds, in handling insect-related problems and production cost, which may all eventually rise geometrically.

Another burden is the idea that the practice of mixed cropping in African Agrarianism can cause climate change and reduce the possibility of plants adapting to new climatic conditions (REILLY *ndn* 2000). These changes in weather conditions are usually misconstrued and misinterpreted to mean normal climatic mutations in Africa, thereby slowing Agrarian practices as farmers will require a longer time to change their farming activities by adapting to changes and affording new equipment suitable for meeting up the current systems. To add, climate techniques of adaptability are inadequate and usually uncertain, coupled with the difficulty in managing natural disasters such as droughts, floods, earthquakes, and others (OMOTOSHO and ABIODUN 2007). According to Reilly (1995), the introduction of new crop varieties should take a period ranging between 3 to 14 years, while for irrigation systems, it ought to be between 20 to 25 years. So, the challenges presented by African Agrarianism are multiple, ranging from changes in weather and climate, mixed cropping, lack of mechanization, capital, incentives, etc., summarized by Rosenzweig & Hillel (1995, 1) as they reveal that “the problem of predicting the future course of agriculture in a changing world is compounded by the fundamental complexity of natural agricultural systems, and of the socio-economic systems governing world food supply and demand”.

Re-visioning African Agrarianism

Until recently, the physical environment or nature as a whole, being what humans in particular and the society existing within comprise has been taken for granted in the domain of social theory. This is evident from the separate treatment of the “natural” and the “social” contexts. Numerous threats and damages on the natural environment have been a reality over the last few decades, leading to more awareness about the prevention and/or control of harmful impacts on nature and the rigorous and endless desire for survival and sustainability. However, attempting to seek solutions leads to more questions and doubts provoked by man’s continuous exploitation and interference with nature, not leaving out the extent to which nature will continue to bear such exploitations. Therefore, in the face of this evolving social concern linked to an imminent environmental crisis, the idea of neglecting human-nature relations becomes unavoidable as revealed by Ferre (1996); Serroo *ndn* (1996); and Luke & White (1985). This concern has led to the emergence of new theories, ideas, and orientations geared at understanding

and intensifying the attention on the importance of seeking better and more effective solutions, through an evaluation and thorough investigation of human-nature relations holistically (MAGNAGHTEN and URRY 1995; FOSTER 1995; MORRISON 1986).

Focusing on the social, political, philosophical, and scientific concerns of environmental/natural links between nature and humans/social is still an issue of ongoing interest and debates. For instance, disagreements, misconceptions and misinterpretations still exist among policy-makers, environmental activists and scientists regarding the intensity and pace of environmental hazards. As earlier examined, categories of African Agrarianism could be classified as conventional and non-conventional or organic farming. Conventional Agrarianism relies more on the implementation of chemicals to guarantee pest control strategies and on commercial fertilizers for the improvement of soil quality and soil management. Organic-inclined farmers, on their part, adopt more plant and animal manure to improve soil quality, rather than depending on chemical-based products. In addition to the above, organic farmers introduce a crop rotational system while increasing the number of animals as a better means to enhance pest management. The application of fertilizers is considered more effective by pro-conventional farmers because it is easily obtainable and applicable, producing qualitative and quantitative yields than organic farming involving the use of manure, regarded as time-wasting, requiring too much moisture, which is not always available and in sufficient quantities, especially within sub-Saharan African context.

Conclusion

Modern environmental ethics expected to reflect the characteristics of modernity, such as homo-centrism should be implemented as a spearheading paradigm for the provision of vital information on human-nature links in every aspect of societal life. Also, Utilitarian ethics should focus more on tackling issues prioritizing human-nature, welfare, and critically scrutinising the features of good human actions *vis-à-vis* nature, since nature comprises an enormous landscape embedded with diverse vital credentials for humans. Moreover, the use of non-human creatures such as animals should be conditioned and limited only for the satisfaction of vital desires for man's existence and survival, like for food and shelter. Human-nature conservationism is a salutary initiative that portrays compassion and concern for environmental deterioration. Similarly, the aspects of nature possessing economic values should be encouraged, preserved, protected, and given the widest possible support to hold common grounds with ecological conservationists such as Roussopoulos (1993, 285-286) who stated that "human-nature connection focuses on cost and benefit justifications to unveil modern human-centered rationalism".

Furthermore, the preservation of the natural environment is significant and necessary since nature is viewed as an ecosystem. Here, the extraction from nature for economic gains becomes a problematic issue. In order to ensure and enhance the continuous survival of a variety of non-human species, the maintenance of the beautiful natural environment with all its natural endowments

and particularities, adopting an ethical standpoint for the protection of nature for current glorification and appraisal or for future use is paramount. If preservation is prioritized, then, in future, the importance of having preserved the ecosystem and its natural values will be more appreciated (LOCKE 1954; ROLSTON 1988; LIGHT and KATZ 1996; HOBBS 2010). A typical example is the practice of preserving plants today for future curative or medicinal values. To boost African Agrarianism, lower market barriers on Agrarian products should be adopted. Trade information about prices in the international market is important and more accessible than when barriers exist (Rosenzweig & Parry, 1994). African farmers lose so much, especially when affected by climate changes during Agrarian activities. In fact, the majority of the rural African population should be given incentives and proper training to ease adaptation and reduce youth unemployment (VEDWAN and RHOADES 2001).

Lastly, Policy-makers, stakeholders, Non-Governmental Organizations, Food and Agriculture Organization should intensify reactions in various ways by providing public awareness of the values of the survival of useful organisms and other forms of life. This strategy involving sensitization on the vital role of nature to mankind is gradually yielding fruits, as African countries are being educated to avoid the use of chemicals and actions that are detrimental to their environments. The provision of grants and sponsoring of scientific research related to the sources, nature, gravity, and values of environmental concerns should be facilitated in realizing more reliable and sound decisions. Various countries should intensify a more holistic and interactional means to moderate human-nature relations and spare the destruction of the natural world.

One particular remedy is insufficient to resolve all environmental crises on earth since every situation is weighed based on its own merits and particularity. The environment and nature deserve to be well taken care of, irrespective of the person or organ in charge. Humans are obligated to save nature from extinction. The growth of Agrarianism in sub-Saharan Africa, understood as the tending of plants and animals through their life cycle, has been a catalyst for systematically transforming nature and modifying its course for human interests. African Agrarianism has undergone different mutations and processes, ranging from traditional or pre-modern agricultural activities to the industrialized (mechanized farming) or modern agriculture, as well as from subsistence farming to cash crop production. The evolution also constitutes “environmentalization of agriculture”, although it is still at its very early stage of progress (CLAASSENS 2003).

Declaration

*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

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