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Chapter

African and Lakota Ecological Perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter presents a general background of the traditional and religious cultures of Africans and the Lakota of North America. Relying on pertinent works such as *Black Elk Speaks* and *Things Fall Apart*, the author shows parallels between both religious traditions. The Lakota and the Africans represent people who had learnt to live in harmony with nature before the advent of colonialism. Evident in the two religious traditions are important ecological themes or ideas that need to be revisited. These ideas are conceptualized in terms of the anthropocentric, theocentric and cosmic/environmental. These three ‘realms’, described by the author as Costheanthropic, represent the emphases on community, God, and the physical environment, respectively. All three exist in a unity of relationship. The author laments the hitherto misrepresentation of this type of relationship to the physical and non-human world as animism, nature worship or earth cult. The ecological relevance of the Costheanthropic worldview is rather compared to Pope Francis’ emphasis, in the encyclical *Laudato Si*’, on the theme of human relationship with the rest of creation. Both the African and Lakota traditions, as well as other indigenous traditions, deserve further in-depth study towards a worldview that invites humanity to greater ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Africa, Lakota, religion, ecology, indigenous, Costheanthropic

1. Introduction

It is important today to recall that traditional religions and cultures of the world have over many centuries evolved ways of living in harmony with the physical environment. That is why we are still here, living on this planet. Works of religious traditions ought to now attract significant attention at the highest level of scholarship. Two examples of such traditional religions and cultures are the North American Lakota culture and the African culture. Both traditions are well described independently in the published works *Black Elk Speaks* and, among others, *Things Fall Apart*.

Although am an African, I find *Black Elk Speaks* very appealing. The Lakota culture may appear to be one of the most distant from Africa; yet there appear to be parallels with the African tradition. The religious traditions depicted in *Black Elk Speaks* go beyond mere representations of the Lakota culture of North America. Similarly, the precolonial tradition presented in *Things Fall Apart* is more than the cultural practices of the Ibo tribe of West Africa—specifically south eastern Nigeria. Both represent traditions shared by a people who had learnt to live in harmony with nature before the advent of
colonialism. Are there ecological features in the religious tradition depicted in *Black Elk Speaks* and in the African religious tradition? As a background, it is helpful to point out briefly the socio-political context of *Black Elk Speaks* and that of traditional Africa.

### 1.1 Socio-political and cultural context

Both the Lakota and African societies faced colonialism as well as socio-economic and cultural intrusion. Stoeber ([1], p. 612) notes that the collaborative authorship of *Black Elk Speaks* is “complicated by the issues of colonial repression that Black Elk needed to navigate to make his voice heard…” However, the experience of colonialism depicted in *Black Elk Speaks* goes beyond politics and economics [2]: “… for the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no centre any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.” Rather, colonialism would have had much cultural and religious impact on the Lakota people, as was the case in Africa, beyond the economic and political. African authors in the colonial and post-colonial eras have similarly struggled to express their traditional ways through the lens of the education they received from the colonialists. Similar to *Black Elk Speaks*, colonialism in the African experience went beyond politics and economics: Achebe [3] writes, for example: “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

1. Note the similarity between the above statement and the words of Black Elk quoted earlier.

### 1.2 Aim/purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to first show a similarity, ultimately ecological and religious, between elements of the indigenous spirituality evident in *Black Elk Speaks* and an African traditional view of the world. I hope to first conceptualize some of the major themes that emerge from *Black Elk Speaks*, specifically the anthropocentric, theocentric and cosmic/environmental. Each of those three ‘realms’ represent the emphases on community, God, and the physical environment, respectively, which are similarly present in some African religious worldviews.2

This brief paper will not focus on tangential issues surrounding these two traditions. For example, there is controversy over the authorship of *Black Elk Speaks*. There is also dispute over the validity of speaking about a single African perspective – given the many tribes that make up the continent. Others have adequately discussed such matters [1, 6–8]. The view of this paper is that *Black Elk Speaks* and *Things Fall Apart*, as well as other similar writings about or from the perspectives of indigenous peoples, generally contribute important ecological ideas that need to be revisited and may otherwise be lost forever.

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1 Achebe [3] here voices his view on colonialism in his traditional African society. Also, in his book *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Mazrui [4] argues that although colonialism appeared initially to be only political and economic, it fundamentally had a cultural and spiritual impact on Africans.

2 For want of a better expression I use the word ‘realm’, but more significantly I will use the term “Costheanthropism” to describe the unity of the anthropocentric, theocentric and environmental/cosmic realms mentioned above. The term is a combination of Cosmos, Theos, and Anthropos, to represent the above three aspects of reality in a unity of relationship. Costheanthropic is the adjectival form of that word. I first used the term in a previous research study [5]. (Costheanthropos is in line with Raimon Panikkar’s synthesis of the human, physical and ultimate realities, in terms of a “cosmotheandric” principle).
This paper is divided into five main sections or parts. Section 1 will be followed by a brief review of Black Elk Speaks to tease out the Costheanthropic perspective. The same will be done from an African religious worldview. A statement on the ecological relevance of both traditions forms Section 4 before the conclusion.  

2. A Lakota spirituality

There are specific aspects identifiable in the Lakota spirituality or worldview of Black Elk Speaks (henceforth BES) that form an integrated whole. These include an intimacy with nature; the Spirit World; and the Shaman – a human being with access to the spirit world. These three categories as well as others appear to be compatible with three aspects (Cosmos, Theos and Anthropos) of reality referred to in this paper as the Costheanthropic perspective or worldview.

2.1 An Oglala holy man called Black Elk

Black Elk is one of the most studied Native Americans. He was an Oglala Lakota holy man, who had a vision about his society and people. The author John Neihardt teamed up with Black Elk to publish the story of this Lakota native from his childhood to the 1890s. The result is the excellent work Black Elk Speaks published in 1932. The reader may consider reading this book-length poem for more background about this Holy Man of the Oglala. The focus of this chapter is ecological themes about the Lakota presented by Black Elk.

2.2 Black Elk Speaks Cosmos

There is a human intimacy with the physical world or the cosmos evident in Lakota spirituality. In preparation for the opening meeting at Black Elk’s home, where he would narrate his vision that would form the substance of the book, John Neihardt notes that “Many small pine trees, brought from a considerable distance, were set up around the log cabin” ([2], p. 13). The interdependence and affinity native peoples have with nature includes animals. Anyone who reads BES cannot help but be struck by the tradition of naming people after animals. Examples abound throughout the book. Black Elk was named after his father, grandfather and great-grandfather ([2], p. 20); his mother was called “White Cow Sees”; his maternal grandmother was “Plenty Eagle Feathers”; paternal grandmother was “Red Eagle Woman”; his best friend from childhood was “Standing Bear” ([2], p. 31); his apparently favorite character (and cousin) was “Crazy Horse” ([2], p. 75).

The tradition of giving people the names of things in the physical world also includes elements like water and stars or phenomena that occur naturally in nature. The name of the Oglala Sioux chief and peacemaker is “Red Cloud” ([2], p. 23); the Lakota holy man who dreamed about what was to be is called “Drinks Water” ([2], p. 22). The medicine man paid to cure Black Elk of the illness he suffered during his great vision, and who also recognized that Black Elk had a genuinely mystical experience, is called “Whirlwind.

To avoid excessive repetition, Black Elk Speaks will be abbreviated as BES in the rest of this paper.

According to Edwards [9], shamanism is the oldest spiritual practice on earth and has existed in every part of the world.
Chaser” ([2], p. 62). There are other examples throughout BES that show respect towards and intimate relation with nonhuman creatures and elements within the cosmic realm.

2.3 Black Elk Speaks Theos

There is another realm of activity in BES, which is the Theos or realm of the Divine or the spirits. It also includes the ancestors and all that is sacred. The word sacred appears many times in BES. Since this realm is not visible to the physical eyes, the role of the medicine man is very important, as a channel between the realms of cosmos and theos. The holy man may also play a prophetic role, as illustrated by Black Elk, who says, for example: “A long time ago my father told me what his father told him, that there was once a Lakota holy man, called Drinks Water, who dreamed what was to be; and this was long before the coming of the Wasichus” ([2], 22).5

Thus it becomes possible for this spirit realm to penetrate the cosmic realm through the knowledge received via mystical experiences – including that received by Black Elk himself. In fact, the primary goal of BES seems to be a desire to convey “the things of the Other World” ([2], 12). In a most Platonic language, BES describes this otherworldly realm as follows: “That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world” ([2], 98).

2.4 Black Elk Speaks Anthropos

Black Elk was clearly obsessed with the wellbeing of his people. At the end of the day, the whole purpose of his spiritual vision was to help his people respond to and survive in the socio-economic and political context of colonialism – that involved the degradation of his environment. His mystical gift of healing was essentially to help his people — at no cost. He judged his success and failure in terms of how much he was able to help his people using the power received through a mystical vision. “Hear me in my sorrow, for I may never call again. O make my people live!” ([2], 287). Other writers have confirmed that the Lakota spirituality or their powers received from the spirit world is for the benefit of the community [10].

The understanding of this realm of people in BES is not one of individualism. The strength of the people appears to be in their community spirit and their weakness in their disintegration. Black Elk laments the lack of unity among his people based on what his father told him:

“He said that Red Cloud was a cheap man and wanted to sell the Black Hills to the Wasichus; that Spotted Tail and other chiefs were cheap men too, and that the Hang-Around-the-Fort people were all cheap and would stand up for the Wasichus” ([2], 106).

Hence this narrated spiritual autobiography appears to end as a tragedy. The book laments the erosion of the people’s indigenous spirituality alongside the disrespect and exploitation of their physical environment. Black Elk spoke “of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people’s heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people’s dream that died in bloody snow” ([2], 15). Black Elk lamented that he was unable to use his powers from the realm of Theos for the benefit of the Anthros, qua community. Such is the importance of this realm of Anthropos in BES.

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5 Wasichu refers to the colonialists.
2.5 Black Elk Speaks Costheanthropic

The above three realms, Theos, Anthropos and Cosmos, are not separate in BES. There is interdependence. Nature is not disconnected from the sacred, so the ‘yellow metal’ and other gifts in the Cosmic realm are not merely for economic exploitation. Once when Black Elk was about to shoot a bird, he “remembered that I was to be like a relative with the birds. So I did not shoot” ([2], 64).

The human relationship with the sacred also appears inseparable with the relationship to the entire earth. As a Shaman, Black Elk is a special medium within the realm of the Anthropos connecting the Cosmos with the Theos. The interconnectedness is well captured in a most beautiful prayer, a praying through the earth, that sets the tone for the BES narrative. Brevity must now be sacrificed, for it is difficult to abridge any further this most Costheanthropic of prayers:

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been.

There is no other one to pray to but you… And you, Mother Earth, the only Mother, you who have shown mercy to your children! Hear me, four quarters of the world — a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is...

Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their arms, that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet. This is my prayer; hear me!

The voice I have sent is weak, yet with earnestness I have sent it. Hear me! It is finished.

Hetchetu aloh! Now, my friend, let us smoke together so that there may be only good between us ([2], pp. 18–19).

3. An African spirituality

The above major themes of the religious tradition depicted in BES are not totally unique to the Lakota culture. As will now be shown briefly, the Costheanthropic features evident in Black Elk’s narrative are shared by the African religious tradition. Like the controversy surrounding BES, what is meant by Africa or African is equally contentious. Africa is both geographical and cultural. It is generally conventional to speak of Africa in terms of sub-Saharan Africa [11]. This is because the countries of North Africa are regarded as part of the Arabic culture. This chapter follows that convention by basically drawing from the literature (mostly based on a stockpile of proverbs, tales, legends and cultural practices) of Sub-Saharan or ‘Black Africa.’

Some fellow Sub-Saharan Africans, especially a few who are Egyptologists, would object to the appropriateness of the dichotomy or distinction between the northern and southern parts of the continent. I do not question the validity of their objection. Since I have never done any field research in North Africa, I confine myself here to Sub-Saharan Africa.
Like BES, much of the early writings about Africa are in reaction to the colonial experience. However, what has seemingly endured are, not the politically driven ideas, but the rich insights from the cultural and religious practices of traditional Africans. The worldview that emerged from such practices is the product of various, more or less ethnographic, works in different parts of Africa. These include Jomo Kenyata’s *Facing Mount Kenya* and several others [16–18]. It will now be shown how these have provided a Cosmoeanthropic African worldview similar to that described above in BES.

### 3.1 Black Africa Speaks Cosmos

A general observation of the ritual practices and belief-systems evident in various traditional African societies would reveal a pattern that corresponds to a sense of relationship to the physical and non-human world. That is why land was for a long time in many parts of Africa never owned [19]. “To people of this kind land was something akin to water or air; it had no owner…” Hence the physical and non-human world was not something to be owned and exploited like the yellow metal in BES, but to be regarded as respectable ‘beings’ in relationship with humans. The preponderance of totems and a generally rural lifestyle in traditional African societies also reflect the close connection that Africans had to the natural world. In many parts of Africa today, one still finds totems, either in the form of specific animals, plants, or any other natural being, which people believe to be ancestrally related to their ethnic group, clan, or family. The particular totem is seen as a tutelary spirit, to which the people attach very deep feelings. It is highly forbidden to kill such a totem. Members of the particular ethnic groups would never trap, torture, kill, nor eat, a totemic animal [20].

### 3.2 Black Africa Speaks Theos

Traditional Africans experienced a relationship to a power beyond their control, as experienced in the vision of Black Elk, something beyond what is observable in the rest of the physical and non-human world. This realm of Theos is described variously in terms of gods, spirits and ancestors. Similar to the Platonic world of forms described in BES, Africans [21] “subscribed to the existence of two worlds—the human world in which they lived and the spiritual one in which the ancestors dwelled.” This was before the advent of institutional religion like Christianity and Islam in Africa. “Among such a people you see little external evidence of religion.” [22]. Rather, this awareness of the realm of the Theos [23] “has its roots in African culture before and separate from contact with Christianity or Islam.”

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7 In an early postcolonial context of various attempts to restore the African dignity, a variety of indigenous African philosophies emerged from the pen of the first set of Africans to receive Western education [12]. As Mushi notes, this movement took place at a time when more than 70% of the African population could neither read nor write ([13], p. 4). Hence among the several characterizations of the African worldview then, such as Consciencism, Négritude, Authenticité, only Julius Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* was practicable [14]. Nyerere was a traditional African and a devoted Catholic of supreme integrity, who had a great vision for his people [15]. Yet even *Ujamaa*, like Black Elk’s vision, did not achieve the results desired by the one who had that great socio-political vision.
3.3 Black Africa Speaks Anthropos

As in BES, relationship with people was central in traditional Africa. Hence the realm of the Anthropos or community is very important. People in traditional African societies lived in extended family units “based within large households or compounds” ([23], p. 82). For example, in the ancient Zululand, the Nguni peoples lived completely in extended family houses ([21], pp. 35–36).

The underlying philosophical principle in this realm of the Anthropos has been described in the non-Cartesian terms of “we are, therefore, I am” ([17], p. 109). The original expression is Zulu [24], “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” or “I belong therefore I am.” Therefore, the realm of Anthropos situated Africans in a relationship of mutuality and complementarity. A colleague and professor of African Theology at Hekima College in Kenya sums it up perfectly, stating that life in traditional Africa is a “Relationship Imperative”:

The realization of sociability or relationships in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African Religion. Relationships receive the most attention in the adjudication of what is good and bad, what is desirable and undesirable in life. Not only is the view of the universe at the service, so to speak, of the formation and execution of good relationships, but relationships make possible the continuing existence of the universe [25].

3.4 Black Africa Speaks Costheanthropic

The three realms described above exist interconnectedly, as observed in BES. In the African’s lived experience, there is similarly a unity of relationship and deep interconnectedness in the realms. Through images and ritual practices this worldview permeates all aspects of the individual’s life. Zuesse [26] writes:

“The African who unself-consciously and humbly bends, sweating in the brilliant sunlight, over some ‘medicines’ and dirt mounds at the edge of his field to invoke the ancestors and God, is not just praying for the maintenance of his family and fields. In the deepest level of himself, he is praying for the preservation of the entire astonishing fruit-bearing reality he moves in and knows so well, from the celestial spirits to the textures of the wild grasses in his fingers.”

The above quotation sums up well the Costheanthropic unity, the relationship or interconnectedness with the Divine, with one’s community and with nature. Zuesse shows the traditional African simultaneously relating to the Cosmos, Theos and Anthropos in a unity of relationship – which is also deducible from BES. Like the Lakota holy man (Drinks Water) who dreamed of what was to be, the African Oracle is a medium within the realm of the Anthropos connecting the Cosmos with the Theos: “The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the white man would break their clan...It said that other white men were on their way.” ([3], p. 97).

4. Relevance of both traditions

The traditional African beliefs and ritual practices as well as those of BES should not be dismissed as primitive or fetish. In the current context of a pending
ecological crisis, tensions surrounding globalization and cosmopolitanism, both the African and Lakota traditions offer some alternative ways of relating with the environment and with other human beings. This relevance is best captured by McCluskey ([8], p. 242): “The forces that defeated Black Elk and the Sioux are the same that many Americans revolt against today: technological rape of environment and soul, progress without humanity, values too materialistic, and individualism too sterile.”

4.1 Ecological relevance

In ‘The encyclical Laudato Si’, Francis [27] emphasizes the same theme of relationship with the rest of creation as observable in BES: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”

Unfortunately, this type of relationship to the physical and non-human world in BES and in traditional African societies was often misinterpreted as animism, nature worship or earth cult. Such cults/nature worship are on the contrary not true in the African context. Parrinder [28] observes: “It might be expected that cults of the sun and the moon would play a large part in the life of African peoples, since such cults were of great importance in ancient Egyptian religion. But in fact such worship is rare even in the pantheons of West Africa.”

That Black Elk was a Catholic (even a Catechist) at the time he provided his narrative is evidence that his perspective on holding nature in great esteem is not at the level of worship or religion. Rather, in both BES and the African tradition, it reflects the unity of relationship that the people experienced with both the divine and other non-human realities.

4.2 Relevance for social relationship

In a more recent encyclical Fratelli Tutti, Francis [30] calls humanity to fraternity and the value of social relationship. As evident in the prayer by Black Elk, quoted above, all are created and exist in relationship to the one Creator. By virtue of that relationship to the Creator, all are called to a fraternal relationship with others and the natural world. An acknowledgement of such interrelatedness is important in today’s context of sterile individualism and for the recognition of the inherent worth of everyone.

At the heart of this perspective on social relationship is an understanding of the human person. As mentioned in the traditional African worldview, a person is understood in terms of Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, “I belong therefore I am.” The Holy Father has rightly invited humanity to such a universal fraternity based on a common Creator.

8 The religious hybrid (Christian–Lakota) in BES is beyond the scope of this paper. Others have dealt adequately with that theme [1, 29].

9 This is not to say that modern Africa lives by this perspective. Nor does this presuppose that there was a commonality of perspective among the people of traditional Africa and of Black Elk’s Lakota. The ideal remains a noble one.
5. Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show a similarity in ecological themes discernible in the Lakota (*Black Elk Speaks*) and African religious worldviews. In presenting briefly the two traditions, the chapter conceptualized the themes in terms of the anthropocentric, theocentric and environmental or cosmic. Importantly, it stated that all three aspects are connected or exist in a holistic way (*Costhenthropism*) in both the African and Lakota traditions.

The relevance of both cultural traditions today was stated in terms of ecological and social relationship issues. Therefore the two ancient traditions highlight the importance of a respectful approach towards indigenous spirituality in the ecological project. Both cultures offer us a worldview that is termed *Costhenthropic*. It is a worldview aimed at restoring a unity of relationship among living organisms, particularly humans, and the physical environment. The unity of perspective on the three realms evident in the *Costhenthropism* of these primal traditions thus strongly supports the call for ecological consciousness and responsibility.

A comparative study of the Lakota and African indigenous traditions makes for a vast topic. Within the length and scope of this book chapter, it is impossible to explain all the essential tenets. However, despite such constraint, it hoped that this chapter has managed to point out an important ecological theme deducible from two geographically different religious traditions – in terms of a worldview that invites humanity to greater ecological consciousness.
References


