

Indigenous Spirituality. Blessing or Curse? Teaching Religion and Development at the Radboud University Nijmegen

Frans Wijsen

Abstract

The Institute of Mission Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands, offers a course on Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development annually. After a clarification of the key concepts in the first session, the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development is explored in five case studies of two sessions each (instruction by a lecturer and feed-back by the students). The case studies deal with indigenous spirituality and law, business, medicine, agriculture and governance. During the last session we discuss learning points. Students come to understand that there is not only a resurgence of indigenous spirituality, but to a large extent an 'invention' of it; that indigenous spirituality is an ambiguous reality that has possibilities but also constraints in view of sustainable development; that there must be a dialectical relation between local level and global level strategies to make a difference; and that promoting sustainable development requires a comprehensive approach, co-ordinating initiatives in various life-spheres, including indigenous spirituality. However, indigenous spirituality is not only a solution but also part of the problem.

Introduction

Since spring 2002 the Institute of Mission Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen has been teaching an elective course on Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development annually. From 2004 till a renewal of the curriculum in 2006 the Chair of Mission Studies at the same university offered the same course as a specialization course in the programme master of arts in comparative spirituality. As this course was first offered in the academic year 2001 – 2002, its planning started long before the renewed interest in religion after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, the establishment of a Knowledge Centre for Religion and Development in 2004 and the establishment of a Forum for Religion and Development by the Ministry of Development Cooperation in 2005.

The renewed interest in religion and development started in the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent Global Resurgence of Religion rhetoric, culminating in the confession by advocates of the secularization theory such as Harvey Cox (1996) and Peter Berger (1999) that they made a serious miscalculation concerning the marginalisation of religion due to modernisation. Scholars such as Samuel Huntington (1993) claimed that the world was no longer ruled by economic and political ideologies but by eight 'civiliza-

tions', including their religions. Possibly also the resistance of indigenous people in Mexico and Nigeria against the exploitation of their lands by multinational oil companies in the early 1990s and the subsequent United Nations' Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 need to be mentioned here. Already in November 1996 the then ministers of Development Cooperation and of Education, Culture and Sciences of the Netherlands organised a conference on *The Power of Culture*. One month later another conference titled *The World belongs to God* was organised by the National Committee for International Development and Sustainable Development (NCDO).

In our case the starting point was slightly different. Our interest in Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development started with the publications of the Forum for African and Asia Spirituality. This Forum had been established during the African and Asian Consultation on Spirituality in Colombo, Sri Lanka, June 18 - 25 1992. This was the year in which Latin American countries recalled the fact they were 'discovered' five hundred years earlier by Europeans and colonization began. The participants in the African and Asian Consultation on Spirituality regretted very much that the African and Asian peoples were almost completely forgotten and ignored during this so called Columbus Year. They argued that Columbus was not looking for the Americas but for Asia and that his 'discovery' of the Americas was also the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. Thus the 'discovery' of the Americas was also the beginning of the oppression of Africa and Asia and of five hundred years of European colonization and imperialism for that matter. They analysed the situation in their continents and observed the exploitation of their land, women and cultures.

In its *Statement of the Consultation on African and Asian Spirituality* the Forum for African and Asia Spirituality noted "That the Church has generally blessed and legitimated this exploitation, either by its silence or by its collusion with the imperial powers. This kind of Christianity has been able to overlook the sins of Mammon and the suffering of the people by setting its sights almost exclusively upon our-worldly or meta-cosmic salvation" (Nr. 28). The said statement closes with the observation that in view of change there is a need of a cosmic spirituality. It continues to say that "Many of us who participated in this conference agreed that institutionalised, patriarchal, other worldly religions cannot be the main source of holistic spirituality. We turned to the spirituality of our indigenous people in Africa and Asia" (Nr. 77).

Inspired by the biblical idea of a Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) the African and Asian participants demanded the cancellation of debts and the restitution of land and possessions that were taken from their ancestors. They committed themselves to organize a Vasco da Gama year in 1998 in order to recall the fact that Vasco da Gama found the way to Asia via Cape of Good Hope in 1498. For this purpose the Forum for African and Asian Spirituality was established. Its Steering Committee invited friends and colleagues in the West to conduct research and to organize conferences in order to investigate the above mentioned forms of exploitation and to look for alternatives in the cosmic spiritualities of the

indigenous peoples. The initiative was taken up by three institutes attached to Radboud University Nijmegen (then called Catholic University of Nijmegen), the Third World Center (now called Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen), the Center for Pacific Studies and the Institute for Mission Studies.

These institutes prepared various publications and in 1997 they organized expert meetings with some of the founding members of the Forum such as Mary John Mananzan (Philippines) and Tissa Balasuriya (Sri Lanka). Together with the Nijmegen Institute for Comparative Studies in Development and Cultural Change (NICCOS) they organized an interdisciplinary course on Globalisation, Religion and Indigenous Spirituality in East and West in academic year 1998-1999, covering almost all the themes which with we are concerned now.

In harmony with the above mentioned *Statement of the Consultation on African and Asian Spirituality* our questions were the following:

1. Where does the interest in indigenous spirituality come from? What is the urgency and relevance of the theme?
2. What do we mean by indigenous spiritualities? What are the main characteristics of these spiritualities? Are they holistic indeed?
3. What will be the future of these indigenous spiritualities? Will they disappear through the process of globalisation? Or will they revive?
4. Do these spiritualities lead to sustainable (i.e. human- and environmental-friendly) development, as the members of the Forum claim?
5. If indigenous spiritualities survive and revive and if they lead to sustainable development, how are the world religions to relate to these indigenous spiritualities?

Basically these are still the guiding questions behind our course.

The course on *Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development* that we have been offering since 2002 has been accompanied by a research program with the same title since 2005. Apart from the staff of the Institute for Mission Studies and the Chair of World Christianity and Interreligious Relations, colleagues from Africa, Asia and Latin America participate in the research. They make their findings and papers available for a module for distance education through the university's digital learning environment, Blackboard. An average of five to ten students participate in the course, coming from different educational programs: theology, religious studies, spirituality, anthropology, development studies, history and law.

The contents of the course are as follows. After a clarification of the concepts and procedures in the first session, the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development is explored in five case studies of two sessions each (instruction by a lecturer and feed-back by the students). The case studies are: Indigenous spirituality and *law*, indigenous spirituality and *business*, indigenous spirituality and *medicine*, indigenous spirituality and *agriculture*,

indigenous spirituality and *governance*. In the last session we close with conclusions.

In general we employ the 'circle of practice' as a research design in our course. This procedure is known in liberation theology as the see, judge and act cycle, and in public health sciences as the AAA cycle: analysis, assessment and action, introduced by UNICEF in 1998. In this paper I will follow the same contents and design. Consequently, after clarifying some of the key concepts, this presentation will have three parts: analysis, assessment and action. Thereafter I will formulate some general conclusions. As this volume deals with religion and development in higher education I will focus on the education part of the course. But it has to be noted that in our university, which claims to be a research university, education should be related to research. This is to say: the knowledge that we transmit is the product of our own knowledge generation.

Clarification of key concepts

The term *indigenous* is difficult to define. Probably the term originates from the 1970s struggles of the Indian Movement in America and the Indian Brotherhood in Canada (Moody 1988; Smith 1999: 6-7). Usually 'indigenous' is contrasted with 'foreign' or 'strange'. The equivalents are 'traditional' and 'primal', which have the connotations of 'primary', earliest in time. The UN ILO Convention, n.169, specifies,

"indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those groups who have a continuous history that originates from earlier stages to the presence of the invasion and colonization."

Indigenous spiritualities, then, could be defined as *the spiritualities of the indigenous peoples or the pre-missionary and pre-colonial spiritualities*. As far as the contents are concerned, indigenous is often the equivalent of 'integral', 'cosmic' or 'holistic'. In this book we not only speak about indigenous spiritualities as distinct from the world religions, but also indigenous spiritualities within the world religions.

Also the term *spirituality* is difficult to define because many people claim this term with various interests. Some people see it as an alternative to institutionalised religions, others see it as the core of religion. The book series on 'World Spirituality' has as subtitle 'An Encyclopedia of the Religious Quest'. Spirituality then seems to be the equivalent of the religious quest. The editors of 'world spirituality' say, "The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions 'the spirit'. This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality" (Olupona 2000). For the sake of clarity we define spirituality in a neo-Tylorian way as the belief in and interaction with spiritual beings that inspire people to act or do not act in certain ways. It is to be noted

that this is a rather new way of defining spirituality, as up to the Second World War this term referred to the practice of praying, contemplation and fasting of members of religious institutes that had nothing to do with the daily life of ordinary people.

Development refers to the discourse that started in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of Enlightenment to bring a better quality of life to less advanced territories in the world. And of course, in the 18th and 19th century a 'better quality' was what West Europeans and North Americans considered 'normal': economic growth and modernisation through education and health care, science and technology. At present development scholars prefer definitions 'from within', in people's own terms, endogenous development (Millar, Kenide, Apusigah, Haverkort 2006). Development, then, is the process in which people use their own resources to realise what they consider to be a more satisfactory life (Theuri 2002:193).

According to international standards development has to be *sustainable*. This term stems from German studies on forestry. It was introduced to development discourse by the World Conservation Strategy (Allen 1980) and has come into general usage since the so called Brundtland Commission Report (Brundtland 1988). It is now used in the Earth Charter and Millennium Goals. The qualification of sustainability comprises the notion of intra-generational and inter-generational solidarity. In other words, our development is not to be achieved at the cost of others, either contemporary persons or those yet to be born. This means that the present generation must not satisfy its own needs to the extent that it depletes the natural resources of its descendants. If these principles are accepted, and of course part of the debate is whether or not they are truly universal or typically Western (Tarimo 2004), they give more or less clear criteria for an answer to the question whether or not indigenous spirituality is a blessing or a curse in the light of sustainable development.

African alternatives to neo-liberal globalization

In exploring the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development all lecturers are supposed to relate their classes to their specific fields of study, according to the above mentioned principle of linking education and research, and in my case this is African Studies. Other lecturers deal with Asia (Thailand), Latin America (Mexico), or our own context, Europe (The Netherlands).

I lived and worked in Tanzania between 1984 and 1988. This was the period in which the Tanzania government shifted from a state-controlled type of development, based on the African model of *ujamaa*, to a neo-liberal type of development, based on an open market economy. Undoubtedly the *ujamaa* experiment was a fascinating endeavour which has had a tremendous impact on national unity and social cohesion in Tanzania, up to the present. But in terms of sustainable development it was not a success as it caused desertification and deforesta-

tion due to exploitation of natural resources such as land, water, wood (Wijzen 2008).

My area of life and work was in Northwest Tanzania, in Sukumaland, comprising the regions of Mwanza and Shinyanga, with expansions to neighbouring regions. The vast majority (85%) of the 10 million Sukuma people have been adherents of the indigenous world view up to the present. In the religion or spirituality of these people it is not God or a Supreme Being, not even ancestor spirits or nature spirits, but mysterious powers (*nguvu za ajabu*) that are the centre of their concern, powers that cannot be seen but that are believed to be there and to affect people's lives in beneficial or harmful ways. In the literature these powers are called vital force or spiritual power. They are believed to come from the Supreme Being and to be mediated by the living deaths.

Since 1988 I have been conducting fieldwork in Sukumaland and co-authoring various publications with one of the government anthropologists who worked in Tanzania (then called Tanganyika) during and shortly after the colonial period (Wijzen & Tanner 2000; 2002). At the risk of being biased through my experience in Tanzania, I describe the search for African alternatives to Western-style development (Odozor 1999).

In reaction to environmental destruction as a result of agricultural applications of Western science and technology, many Africans revert to indigenous knowledge in *agriculture* and in *environmental care* (Wangiri 1999: 82). The conviction underlying these attempts is that the soil in which the ancestors are buried is holy and cannot be exploited. In African traditional spirituality the spirit world and the natural world are interconnected. Whoever harms the natural world harms the spiritual world. Thus the African attitude to nature is relational, not instrumental (Daneel 1998).

In reaction to a neo-liberal market economy the use of Africa's community spirit in *business* and *management* is advocated. In reaction to what is perceived as typical Western individualism and materialism, decision-making in organisations is to be collective and people should work not only for material gains. As is the case in most subsistence economies, people work in order to live, and not the other way round (Hyden 1983). In the same vein, advocates of ubuntu management claim that the spirits of the ancestors should be used as social capital in the management of organisations and states (Mbigi 2000).

Many people resort to *traditional healing* (Chepkwony 2006). One of the consequences of globalisation is that the gap between rich and poor widens. Thus many people cannot afford Western medicine and go to indigenous healers instead, which they find more compatible with their worldview and have greater availability anyway. In Uganda, for example, the ratio between (western trained) medical doctors and patients is 1:20.000, whereas the ratio between indigenous healers and patients is 1:100 (Khamalwa 2006: 88).

In many parts of Africa *customary law* and *peace keeping* are being re-instated. In Tanzania the *sungusungu* developed (Masanja 1992; Bukurura 1993; Bukurura 1994). In Rwanda there are *gacaca* people's tribunals and in Ethiopia and Eritrea

the *gada-gada* system. Many Africans hold that Western law failed to bring justice and peace to Africa (Mutua 2003; Eboh 2004; Van Notten 2006). Hence they promote traditional reconciliation rituals and conflict resolution, as happened in South Africa (where traditional rituals were mixed with Christians ideas) and is now being proposed in northern Uganda.

In various parts of Africa traditional ways of *governance* and *decision making* are used as alternatives to Western-type democracy (Assefa 1996; Gounden, Pillary & Mbugua 2007). The multiparty system is not really democratic, it is said, as it is based on compromise rather than consensus. In Uganda, and to some extent in Tanzania, chiefs are being re-instated. Nation building in Ethiopia is based on a federal system run along ethnic lines (Abbink 1997).

This is not the place for a detailed explanation of why the concept of spirituality has become so popular, and whether or not it is an alternative to religion (Abraham, Mbuya-Beya 1994; Olupona 2000; Heelas, Woodhead 2005). The point is that the African alternatives to a Western type of development briefly described above are based on Africa's community spirit, *ujamaa* or *ubuntu*, and from an African perspective the community always includes the spirits of the ancestors. Thus communalism is spiritual (Mbigi 2000).

Assessment in terms of sustainable development

The second stage of the circle of practice is an 'assessment' of the indigenous spirituality. As the title of our course suggests, we assess the non-Western alternatives to a Western type of development in the light of sustainability. In harmony with the definition given above this provides us with two criteria, namely intra-generational and inter-generational solidarity. Of course one may question whether or not these criteria are universally accepted (Tarimo 2004). This is subject to debates between Western and non-Western – and to a certain extent between Christian and non-Christian – scholars of religion and theologians. It is addressed in our fifth sub-question (see Introduction), which is skipped here due to lack of space.¹

As said above, presently scholars of development prefer definitions of development 'from within', in people's own terms, endogenous development (Millar, Kenide, Apusigah, Haverkort 2006). The people in the village where I used to live would say: the aim of development is a good life, manifested in the fertility of the land, cows and wives, health and wealth, well-being and happiness, vitality, life force and spiritual power (Wijsen & Tanner 2000; 2002). In the light of our normative reference – inter- and intra-generational solidarity – what can we say about the African alternatives to a Western type of develop-

¹ We will deal in extension with this question during an expert seminar organised by the Nijmegen Institute of Mission Studies in October 2008 and we hope to publish a joint volume on this and other issues soon afterwards.

ment described in the previous section? Here I will draw on our research in Sukumaland.

Undoubtedly there are many places in Africa that are considered to be sacred, but the Sukuma of northwest Tanzania and various other peoples have not had that tradition. Sukumaland was sparsely populated and farmers moved from one field to another (Wijsen & Tanner 2000:69-70; Brandström 1991). However, with ever growing populations there is a danger of overgrazing and desertification. The ujamaa experiment is a case in point (Stöger-Eising 2000; Schweigman 2001). Tanzania had a population of 16 million in 1975; by 2000 it was 35 million. The population is expected to be 60 million in 2025 and 88 million in 2050. Agriculture based on indigenous knowledge will not be able to feed Africa's escalating populations (Getui 1999), who will moreover increasingly live in towns and not in rural areas where poverty is endemic. Mwanza, the capital city of Sukumaland, had a population of approximately 40 thousand people in the 1950s and whereas it nowadays counts over a million people, notwithstanding the many aids victims. Old attitudes to nature will not solve global environmental problems (Taringa 2003:212; Ndungu 2005).

Africa's community spirit did a lot to maintain solidarity. In Sukumaland and other African territories, though, this solidarity existed mainly within clans with a common ancestor. Thus the Sukuma are only willing to invest in water supplies or other development projects if there is an immediate return for the family (Wijsen & Tanner 2000:68; Drangert 1993:33). It is doubtful whether family solidarity works on a larger scale. This is also a lesson that we can draw from the ujamaa experiment (Stöger-Eising 2000; Schweigman 2001). The communitarian spirit causes lack of creativity and initiative, as well as fear of jealousy and witchcraft. A Sukuma businessman in Dar es Salaam complained, "In Mwanza I cannot do business. My relatives are always there to eat the surplus that I need for further investments." An effect of communalism is not only hostility towards outsiders but also pressure within the group.

It goes without saying that Sukuma traditional healers do a good job. They are bone-setters, herbalists, psychotherapists. But if Sukuma healers claim that all diseases are personal, caused by witches and ancestors, or willed by God, and that their patients therefore do not need to go the hospital because modern medicine based on science and technology cannot cure them, they are not promoting the health of their patients (Wijsen & Tanner 2000:48). It is true that traditional healers have significant results in taking away the symptoms of hiv/aids, and for that reason should be given a place in the health care system, but so far they have not been able to cure the disease, as some of them claim.

Customary law and traditional peace keeping have the advantage that they are small-scale and have immediate effect. The *sungusungu* in Sukumaland were successful in bringing peace but they used means that are unacceptable by Western standards. Few Sukuma would consider it to be wrong to kill a suspected witch or a cattle thief caught in the act, or to steal from a stranger or the government (Wijsen & Tanner 2000:96). The *gacaca* tribunals are not popular

among either the Hutu, who fear unfair trials, or the Tutsi, who fear reprisals. According to traditional leaders Joseph Kony² should be granted amnesty after a traditional reconciliation ritual, but most ordinary people want justice to be done (Allen 2006). Several scholars question whether or not the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa will in the long term be effective (Meiring 2002).

Traditional governance and decision making are a communal affair based on consensus. Yet, the Sukuma chiefs were not popular and youths and women had no say in the decision-making of the elders. Out of 54 member states of the African Union, 18 have civil wars raging in their territories and four of the five largest refugee populations in the world are African. Why is it that the rebels in Darfur distrust their own leaders in the African Union and seek United Nations intervention? The Mungiki movement in Kenya is a protest against the power of the elders (Kagwanja 2003; Frederiksen 2007) and many women-led spirit movements are a protest against male dominance (Wijsen & Tanner 2000:117; Waliggo 2002:1-6). Undoubtedly ethnicity can contribute to national unity (Tanzania's regional museum policy is a case in point). But as the federal system based on ethnicity in Ethiopia, a country that was never colonised, shows, it is difficult to build a nation on ethnicity. It leads to a totalitarian state, based on the old-age principle of divide and rule. Recent post-election upheavals in Ethiopia and Kenya, otherwise considered to be a haven of peace and stability, will definitely throw more light on this controversial issue.

Indigenous spirituality: learning points

My aim of giving these examples is not to make fun of the African alternatives to a Western type of development, and certainly not to generalize my specific experiences in East Africa. My intention is simply to raise critical awareness and to show some of the complexities and ambiguities involved when dealing with indigenous spirituality as a source for sustainable development. There are no ready-made solutions to these complex problems. When we come to the third stage of the circle of practice, the planning of what should and could be done, we therefore draw some conclusions concerning the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development.

Most students start with the presumption that indigenous spiritualities revive in the global world as alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation. They come to understand that there is not only *a resurgence* of indigenous spirituality, but to a large extent *an invention* of it. Here we refer to Roland Robertson's observations on 'ideology of home', based on the Romantic view that the pre-modern local communities are destroyed by modernisation. This overlooks two things.

² Kony is wanted by the International Criminal Court for his 20 years' leading of cruel warfare in Northern Uganda deploying numerous child soldiers in his Lord's Resistance Army

First, the global does not come after the local; world formation has been going on for hundreds and even thousands of years. And secondly, the global is not opposed to the local; to a large extent the local is a product of the global. This is what Robertson calls the 'invention of locality'. The Sukuma copper bracelets are coastal ornaments brought upcountry by porters of goods to the Indian Ocean but they have been indigenized as 'typical' Sukuma. In the same vein, the Bulabo harvest and dance festival has been commercialised as traditional Sukuma culture, as well as Sukuma traditional medicine (Hannerz 1992).

Most students start with the conviction that indigenous spirituality is a source for sustainable development. They take for granted that indigenous spirituality is cosmic, integral, and holistic, that primal religions are man- and nature-friendly. During the module they come to understand that even in one and the same context, indigenous spirituality is an ambiguous reality that has possibilities but also constraints in view of sustainable development. Case studies show that one cannot generalize. Some African groups are more communitarian than others (the Nyakyusa of Tanzania are very communitarian, the Ik of Uganda have almost no community sense). Some African groups are notoriously religious and other groups seem not religious at all (the Nyakyusa of Tanzania have almost no notion of a High God; the Nuer and the Dinka of Sudan have a prominent place for a High God).

Students come to understand that indigenous spiritualities operate at the micro level of society. However, most attacks on sustainability come from worldwide trends as is the case with global warming. Therefore, actions on the micro level of society, e.g. promoting indigenous spiritualities for environmental care, are not enough to make a difference. There must be a dialectical relation between local (or national) level (micro) and the global (international) level (macro) strategies.

Students come to understand that promoting sustainable development requires an integrated approach. In many non-Western cultures religion is not a separate domain but goes through all life-spheres: health care, land rights, social (including gender and age group) relations, management and governance. Strategies to promote sustainable development are most effective when all these spheres of life are taken into account in a coordinated way.

Last but not least, students come to understand that development studies must not neglect religion. Religion matters, as culture does. On the other hand, though, they must not exaggerate the influence of religion, as Samuel Huntington (1993) does in his *The Clash of Civilizations*. Moreover, religion is not only a solution but also a part of the problem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we try to teach our students is that a balanced approach is needed. In view of sustainable development, both Western and non-Western models of development have advantages and disadvantages. They are not to be

opposed as heaven and hell. Thus the first subtitle of this paper is misleading. In the light of sustainable development, indigenous spirituality is both a blessing and a curse, just as the modern scientific rationality is a blessing and a curse. With respect to the *Statement of the Consultation on African and Asian Spirituality* we came to the conclusion that holistic spirituality alone is no guarantee for sustainable development as also examples from Latin America and Asia in our course show. At best we can say that the adjectives 'indigenous' and 'sustainable' refer to different and sometimes contradictory discourses and concerns, local and global, and that they should be coordinated to become a 'global' concern (Robertson 1995). In other words we hope that our students learned to employ a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', that they come to see scientific work as a form of ideology critique which applies also to our own scientific work (Phillips & Jørgensen 2002: 175-122). Definitely the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development is a field of study where various rationalities and corresponding views of good life clash (Du Toit 2007) and where criteria have to be negotiated to attain the status of a new or concrete universality (Tarimo 2004: 28-29; Krieger 2005).

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