

Ritual Practices as an Ontological Foundation of Life Skills in the African Context

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Abstract

African rituals are often criticized and dismissed as either superstitious or irrational. These criticisms, often based on Eurocentric prism, fail to appreciate the African mode of thinking that fuses the epistemological into the metaphysical. One of the consequences of such dismissal has been the unprecedented neglect and isolation of the indigenous life skills that shaped the life and practices of African individuals, families and communities for centuries. This paper examines the African ritual in order to establish its reasonableness by interrogating its ontology and tracing how life skills evolve out it. The paper argues that there is variation in worldviews among cultures. Therefore, the form, content and meaning of social actions and behaviors in the African cultural context cannot be judged on the principles of Western scientific rationality. They should instead be seen in light of Africa's holistic understanding of health, communal lifestyle and the central place of spirituality. The paper further argues that based on African ontology, African rituals with their deep-rooted cultural, spiritual, and communal significance, form a vital foundation for indigenous life skills.

Keywords: Ritual Practices, Ontological Foundation, Life Skills

Introduction

Rituals refer to a system of rites, ceremonial acts and actions or an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner (Lugira, 2009). In the African traditional set-up, a ritual typically entails the observance of actions or procedures in an ordered and ceremonial way done in accordance with social customs (Csordas & Lewton, 1998). Kyalo (2013) states that ritual practices provide a suitable basis upon which a community can teach and preserve their knowledge, practices and skills. Rituals are, therefore, an important resource that can be harnessed to provide a foundational basis for a community's way of life, including life skills. Before appraising ritual practices as an ontological foundation of life skills, it is important to first understand the nature of African rituals.

Nature of Rituals

African cultures have rich and diverse traditions, which often involve various rituals. According to Olupona (1990), there are three types of rituals significant to African traditional ways: rites of passage; calendrical rituals, and crisis rituals. Rites of passage are used when ushering individuals from one stage to another. Calendric rituals ensure the continuity of the life force. Crisis rituals prevent sudden annihilation of human life by supernatural agents. This third category rituals can be observed at an individual level as well as during community celebrations and festivals. At individual level, they may include practices such as prayer, meditation, offerings to ancestors or deities, purification ceremonies, divination, healing rituals, or personal ceremonies to mark important life events. Rituals have deep cultural and spiritual significance and may be performed privately or within a smaller family (Monteiro & Wall, 2011). At community level, people come together to celebrate various occasions, such as harvest festivals, initiation ceremonies, weddings, funerals, or religious holidays. During these events, rituals are performed collectively, often involving a larger group of people. They may feature other performances such as music, dance, storytelling, symbolic gestures, animal sacrifices, drumming, chanting, or elaborate ceremonies led by spiritual leaders or elders (Etim, 2019).

Rituals, whether observed individually or communally, are deeply rooted in the cultural, spiritual, and social fabric of their respective communities. They reflect the community values, beliefs, and history. Ritual acts are made more effective by accompaniments such as prayer, music and dance. Sacrifices and offerings presented to accompany rituals help to confirm the relationship between the Supreme Being and humanity (Lugira, 2009). The Nandi people, for instance, performed many rituals in worship of *Asiis* (Supreme God), to give reverence to divinities, and pay appropriate respects to fellow humans (Magut, 2022).

Different authors (Bojuwoye, 2005; Olupona, 2014; Singh & Bhagwan, 2020; Etim, 2019; Ekeh, 2020; Makhubele & Qalinga, 2008) have documented common themes and principles observable in traditional African ritual practices. First, African rituals emphasize the communal aspect of life and the importance of the community in various rites and ceremonies. These rituals frequently involve the participation of the entire community, emphasizing social cohesion and the interconnectedness of individuals. Ancestors hold a significant place in the African cultures, and rituals often involve communication, reverence, and offerings to ancestors, seeking their guidance and blessings.

Secondly, African cultures cherish a deep connection with the natural world and believe in the presence of spirits or deities that inhabit the environment. Therefore, rituals often involve invocation, appeasement or

communication with these spirits to seek their assistance, protection, or blessings. For this reason, natural elements such as water, fire, earth and plants play important roles in many African rituals.

Thirdly, African rituals employ symbolism and symbolic actions to convey deeper meanings and invoke spiritual forces. Ritual objects, gestures, chants, dances, and specific sequences of actions are laden with symbolism and carry spiritual significance. Symbolic representations of ancestors, animals, or mythological figures may also be incorporated into rituals.

Fourthly, African rituals mark important life transitions such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. These rituals are seen as transformative processes that enable individuals to move from one stage of life to another or to establish new social roles and responsibilities. Consequently, rituals may involve purification, blessings, and the acquisition of knowledge or spiritual power.

Fifthly, many African rituals incorporate elements of healing and promotion of well-being, addressing physical, emotional and spiritual ailments. As such, rituals may involve the use of herbal remedies, prayers, divination, and ceremonies aimed at restoring balance and harmony within individuals and in the community.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that rituals are actually pervasive as far as African existential reality is concerned. They define the existence of the African people. They delineate how the African people build and view their relationships to other people and to things in the world. Through rituals, the African people have a channel that they use to find meaning in their lives.

Ontological Foundation of Life Skills in Africa Context

Ontology is a branch of philosophy that examines fundamental questions about the nature of existence, the types of entities that exist, and the relationships between them. According to Etim (2019), ontology seeks to understand the fundamental categories and concepts that underlie our understanding of the world. It provides a structured and organized way to represent entities, concepts and relationships within a particular knowledge domain, which, in the case of this study, is the foundation of indigenous life skills.

Nelson-Jones (1991) posits that life skills comprise particular attitudes, knowledge and competences that enable a person to live optimally and in a more fulfilling way. Every community has its own unique concepts that form useful building blocks for the overall well-being of their members (Mutie & Ndambuki, 2011). These concepts (which include life skills) illuminate rules, ideas, explanations and principles that guide the behaviour of individuals in a community.

The indigenous African life skills is deeply rooted in the indigenous worldview. Indigenous communities in Africa have developed intricate systems of knowledge and skills that are closely tied to their relationship with the natural environment, community dynamics, spirituality and ancestral wisdom. This relationship is exercised through rituals. According to Etim (2019), a human being is considered a rational being with the innate capacity to create and interpret symbols. With this aptitude, human is capacitated to formulate and to interpret, among other things, his language, rituals and culture in general. Ritual, then, is human's creative action as a symbolic being. Etim further adds that rituals provide basic explanations to beliefs, worldviews and issues that may not be easily understood at face value. Examining the ontology of African ritual goes

beyond the gestures and actions to the basic categories that serve as a basis for providing deeper meaning to the phenomenon of rituals within the African context.

A preliminary search by the author on libraries and even on electronic platforms yielded little on the subject of ontological foundations of indigenous life skills in the Kenyan context. Apparently, there is a shortage of research on this area, yet it is clear from the existing literature that local people have had rituals and taboos that formed the basis for life skills. These life skills ensured the optimization of community members' growth and development. This apparent dearth of information on ontological foundations of indigenous life skills can be attributed to neglect and isolation during the colonial period of the indigenous psychologies that characterized the beliefs and healing practices of African families and communities. Then and even during the post-independence period, traditional African metaphysical convictions about the nature of being that inhabit the African world took a back seat. The next section highlights these assertions with emphasis on indigenous life skills.

Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Cultures

Before the scramble, partition and, thereafter, the imposition of Eurocentric ways of doing things in Africa, there existed vibrant indigenous cultures with their own emic explanations for and solutions to people's psychological and behavioural issues (Igboin, 2011). The period in which Africa was under direct colonial rule witnessed unprecedented neglect and isolation of the indigenous psychologies that characterized the beliefs and healing practices of African families and communities. These psychologies had been passed down through generations. They encompassed a wide range of beliefs, including personal agency, human understanding, capacity for inner healing, self-image, personal security and moral lessons (Waldron, 2010). Instead of shaping the psychology in the colonies to suit circumstances of the culture of the colonized, the colonizers chose to demonize and discourage the African folk psychologies, considering them inferior to the ways of Western civilization.

Colonial domination was an imposition that unleashed a lethal blow on African cultures. The immediate consequence of this domination was the introduction of such values as harsh individualism, dishonesty, capitalism and subjugation of others. Of relevance to this study, colonial domination interfered greatly with the traditional ways of moral homogeneity and practice. The methods of moral inculcation were weakened, which resulted in the neglect of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalisation of the African, and the paganization of erstwhile religious or spiritual values. Instead of the treasured collectivism that defined the way of life of the African people, for example, an alien community construct was introduced that segregated and destroyed the spirit of togetherness (Igboin, 2011; Gishinga, 2007).

During the colonial era and in the post-colony, not only were the majority of scholars, at various levels, afraid to challenge the dominant Eurocentric knowledge system and its values, they were also reluctant to admit, both to themselves and publicly, that their indigenous compatriots, shoved to the lower rungs of society, were indeed repositories of valuable primary knowledge (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). Although they recognized the value of indigenous knowledge, they were forced to privilege only one epistemological and methodological tradition at the expense of all others. The colonizers succeeded in imposing external influences through biased anthropological research and allied services like health, education and evangelism (Nsamenang, 2007).

African rituals continue to be faced with criticisms of being either superstitious, fetish and simply irrational (Etim, 2019). These criticisms, often based on certain logical criteria, have categorized the African mode of thinking as illogical, unreasonable and non-rational. Given the inclination of the African mode of thinking to fuse the epistemological into the metaphysical, such criticism could either be excused or be regarded as a misinterpretation or misrepresentation. There is therefore need to relook at the indigenous life skills as sources of achieving and maintaining healing and wellness. This can be achieved through reconstructing and recapturing indigenous cultural norms (McCabe, 2007) and providing an ontological basis for them (Magut, 2022). This is informed by the realization that indigenous people have a vast store of inherited practical wisdom and skills, which they apply in the ordering of social life, the upkeep of norms and other individual experiences. This so-called store of inherited practical wisdom and skills comprises a vast number of rituals and other healing practices that have rational relation to the ends they are intended to achieve.

In the African context, Eagle (2005) argues that indigenous healing systems, located within the African way of life, can act to complement and enrich conventional Western life skills and psychotherapeutic interventions. According to Eagle, indigenous healing systems promote a holistic approach to dealing with psychosocial challenges among under-resourced communities, apart from creating the needed framework for personal and community integration. Eagle, therefore, proposes that therapeutic processes and life skills embodied in many naturally occurring support systems in African cosmology should be fostered as a means of freeing individuals and communities from the psychological problems.

African Ritual Practices as a Foundation of Life Skills

African ritual practices, with their deep-rooted cultural, spiritual and communal significance, form a vital foundation for indigenous life skills (Shilabukha, 2006). They encompass various aspects of knowledge, including practical skills, social competencies, cultural traditions, and spiritual understanding, all of which contribute to the holistic development and well-being of individuals and their communities.

Some ritual practices are connected to ancestral realm and the wisdom tapped from it (LaGamma & Pemberton, 2000; Shilabukha 2006). African cultures place great importance on ancestral knowledge and wisdom. Ritual practices often involve communication with ancestors and seeking their guidance and blessings. Magut (2022) notes that the Nandi of Kenya performed a child naming ritual where a child's face is washed in the undigested food (*eiaat*) found in the stomach of an animal sacrificed in honour of the occasion. The animal's stomach is thus invoked in a prayer together with Deity (*Asiis*) and the spirits of ancestors: "*Asiis! give us health. Asis! protect us. Spirits of the departed, protect this child. Stomach, protect this child.*" Through this ritual, the Nandi people established a connection with their ancestors and tapped into their wisdom. This connection provided a foundation for acquiring life skills, as ancestral teachings and experiences are passed down and integrated into daily life.

Ritual practices are associated with communal learning and social cohesion (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014). African ritual practices are deeply rooted in communal values and emphasize the collective well-being of the community. Rituals often involve the participation of the entire community, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. Within these communal settings, life skills are taught and learned. At the time of harvesting, the Nandi people had important communal ceremonies that linked the people's agricultural activities with the spirits of the community (Magut, 2022). At such times, they held "first fruits" (*tongoanik*)

ritual. Families and clans took first fruits (*tongoanik*) to the shrine (*Kapkoros*) as offering before harvests are given to anyone else. The Nandi dedicated two months – September (*kipsunde netai*) and October (*kipsunde nebo aeng*) – for harvest rituals. Reverence, thanksgiving and gratitude were at the heart of Nandi cosmology during these functions (Huntingford, 1950). These rituals provided opportunities for socialization, cooperative work, mentorship, and the transmission of practical knowledge, moral values and social norms.

African ritual practices often include healing ceremonies that address physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. According to Bignante (2015), these rituals incorporate various therapeutic elements, such as herbal medicine, dance, music and chanting. Indigenous Africans believe in the interconnectedness of the body, mind and spirit, and rituals are used to restore balance and harmony within individuals and in the community (Mazama, 2001). According to Holly and Kimberly (2019), rituals have been applied extensively in therapeutic practice. This is made possible by rituals having aspects that provide: a confiding and emotionally stimulating relationship with a healing person or person who has similar characteristics, even if largely unacknowledged; a healing venue; a rationale that delivers an explanation for client symptoms and provides a system (ritual) for treating them, and a procedure (ritual) that requires active participation by both therapist and client, which each accept as a method for restoring patient health. African communities used rituals during therapies. Among the Nandi, for instance, priests (*tisiik*), diviners (*chepsokeiyot*), medicine men and women (*chepkeriot*), family elders (*boiyoptum/korkoptum*) and heads of organized groups such as hunters or warriors reached out to the Deity (*Asiis*) for assistance on a variety of human needs like life, health, healing, wealth, and prosperity (Holis, 1909). Moreover, the Nandi elders facilitated cleansing rituals for thieves and murderers who owned up to their crime. Other cleansing rituals included those done to rid one of bad omen arising from killing certain animals like donkeys or cats. In addition, special amulets or talismans were worn to provide protection against evil spirits. For instance, parents procured special charms (*setenik/tamagook*) that were affixed on children's clothing in order to provide protection from the evil eye. Moreover, during raids and wartime, mothers of warriors tied their waist belts into four knots (*keuch*) as a prayer for their success and safety (Magut, 2022). Life skills related to the healing practices, herbalism and traditional medicine were learned through these rituals.

Ritual practices are integral to the preservation and expression of African cultural identity and spirituality (Goduka, 2000). They provide a platform for celebrating traditions, honouring deities or spirits, and expressing gratitude for the natural world (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). African rituals are typically rich in symbolism, incorporating music, dance, storytelling, costumes, masks, and other artistic expressions. They create a holistic experience that engages the senses and fosters a strong sense of community and belonging. Through these rituals, African cultural values, history, and wisdom are transmitted from one generation to another, ensuring the continuity and preservation of cultural identity. Furthermore, rituals often reinforce social structures and hierarchies within African societies. According to Stephenson (2015), rituals bind groups together, ensuring their harmonious functioning by generating and maintaining orders of meaning, purpose and value. They can also delineate roles, responsibilities and statuses within the community, establishing a sense of order and cohesion. Indigenous life skills are deeply intertwined with these rituals, as they reflect the values, knowledge and practices that define African cultural and spiritual heritage (Monteiro & Wall, 2011). Skills such as drumming, dancing, storytelling, mask-making and divination are often cultivated and shared through ritual practices. In summary, rituals in African cultures are deeply

intertwined with cultural identity and spirituality. They provide a means of connecting with the divine, maintaining cultural heritage, fostering social cohesion, and promoting individual and collective well-being. By preserving and engaging in these rituals, African communities continue to express and celebrate their cultural identity and spirituality. Rituals and all that goes with them provide a prism through which values and ethical living can be accessed and adopted.

African ritual practices play a significant role in marking important life transitions, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. These rituals provide guidance, support and a sense of belonging during these significant moments (Creider & Creider, 1997). Rituals among the Nandi people play a significant role during transitions such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death. According to Magut (2022), entry into each of these stages was marked by rituals performed to leave a lasting imprint, either on the body or the mind. These rituals were supplemented with teachings, mentoring, and skill-building specific to the transition at hand. Initiation ceremonies for young adults were not simply lay rituals but spiritual ones where prayer, sacrifices and invocations of the Supreme Being and divinities was done. Through it, a complete severance of ties with earlier life considered as childish and impure (*n'getandit*) was undertaken. Elaborate teachings on community responsibilities, ethical conduct, survival skills and cultural knowledge necessary for adulthood taught during such rites provided a foundation upon which values were built and imparted in individuals.

Place of Indigenous Rituals and Life skills in Contemporary Africa

In a recent study, Magut (2022) sought the opinions of school counsellors on their familiarity with indigenous psychosocial resources (of which indigenous life skills is a component). From the study findings, more than half of the counsellors indicated they had minimal or no knowledge of indigenous psychological resources interventions. This apparent unawareness could be attributed to limited capacity the indigenous teachers and curriculum developers have had during and even after independence. The situation is not helped by the forces of urbanization, globalization, lack of models to teach values and harmful media influence, which have all combined to erode indigenous knowledge. According to Owuor (2007), lack of native experts to adopt the syllabus review after independence saw the prevailing dominance of alien systems in African schools. Moahi (2005) also posits that the importance of indigenous resources is seemingly being overshadowed by Western knowledge, which has the advantage that it is widely published and endorsed as better, and allegedly grounded in science.

Conclusion

In traditional African societies, rituals pervaded all facets of life and they were a means for transmitting important life skills and community values. Rituals by nature are deeply rooted in the cultural, spiritual and social fabric of their respective communities. They reflect the community values, beliefs, and history. African rituals are unique because they communal aspect of life and the importance of the community in the life of the individual. They facilitate a deep connection with the natural and supernatural world, out of which practical wisdom and life skills emanate. The symbolic actions undertaken during ritual practices are a means for codifying moral injunctions and lessons for all participants. Rituals also bind individuals to new responsibilities that come with transitions to higher stages of life. As psychological resources, African rituals can also be used to harness the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of people. Indeed, as shown in this paper, the Nandi people used rituals to mark important moments in the life of individuals and

society as a whole. More importantly, moments in which rituals were celebrated were occasions for deliberate teaching of values and life skills to the young.

Recommendations

A number of measures need to be instituted to make African ontology on rituals and subsequent values emanating from them visible. This must go hand in hand with dissemination of information on its utility in solving the myriad of psychosocial challenges facing the continent. There is urgent need to carry out cultural mapping exercises to identify and document indigenous ritual practices and the values emanating from them. This can involve working closely with community members to record their ritual practices and languages. This documentation serves as a valuable resource for future generations and helps raise awareness about the importance of indigenous rituals.

African ontology on rituals and values that stem from them need to be strongly re-emphasized through seminars, workshops, conferences, and so on, which can be organized by African philosophers and scholars. In addition, school curriculum in Africa need to adapt those rituals that trigger values, enhance unity, peace and mutual understanding and so on. Such rituals include, but are not limited to, those which nurture values like truth, sincerity, love, cooperation, accountability, interest in the common good of all, and sanctity of human life. Finally, it is necessary to re-orient the mindset of the Africans, especially the young ones, on the important role rituals play in character development. This will embed in them the desire to protect the sanctity of human life over and above money, influential positions, power and other material acquisitions.

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