

Environmental Sustainability and Development in Africa: An “Egbe bere ugo bere” Approach.

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Abstract: The negative effect of human’s exploitative activities on the non-human aspects of the environment has become increasingly alarming. There is an ever growing need for the development and subsequent sustenance of the virtues of our environment. Mankind and other elements of the environment need each other in order to attain this all important environmental vision. Hence, this paper uses the Igbo maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere” as a springboard to articulate a philosophy of environmental conservation that is succinct and enduring in its effort to broker equilibrium between humans and other elements of the environment. It emphasizes the point that any of humans or other elements of the environment that refuses to accommodate the other will as a matter of necessity suffer the consequences. Employing the methods of critical analysis, conversational thinking, conceptual analysis and deduction, the paper demonstrates the fact that aspects of the environment beside humans need to be given the opportunity not only to exist, but also to live and fulfill the essence of their being. It is a call for sustainable development of the environment through a symbiotic interaction between humans and other elements of the environment.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainability, Development, Egbe bere ugo bere, Environmental elements and Environmental resources.

INTRODUCTION

What type of relationship should exist between humans and non-human elements of the environment? How should environmental resources be harnessed for sustainable development given the anthropocentric predicament facing the world today? What indigenous thought pattern can be appropriated in articulating a philosophy of environmental conservation in Africa? In response to these and similar questions, scholars of diverse orientations have presented views amounting to the idea of “relationship”. Jonathan Chimakonam buttresses this when in an introduction to the book “African philosophy and environmental conservation”, he observes that, one common theme that runs across the chapters is the idea of “relationship” not just among humans but between humans and non-humans in the ecosystem [1]. In other words, for him, everything in the ecosystem both human and non-human stands equal to others and represents a necessary link in the network of existents.

Chimakonam further develops and deploys the ideas of complementarity and conversational thinking to demonstrate that in the ecosystem, everything, whether human or non-human stands equal to others and represents a necessary link in the network of existents and that the rupture of this link might have unknown consequences [1]. While this present research aligns with Chimakonam’s view as embedded in his notion of “Ohanife” and “Ezin’ulo”, it demonstrates that the complementary relationship between humans and non-humans is better encapsulated in the Igbo maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere”. The reason is that the notions of “Ohanife and Ezin’ulo” as used by Chimakonam to explain the nature of the ecosystem as a community appears complicated and therefore uneasy for one to understand especially the uninitiates [2].

In his theory of African modal relationship Thaddeus Metz develops a philosophy of animal rights in which he presents arguments to defend among other things, the view that a being has a greater moral status the more it is by its nature capable of relating communally with characteristic human beings [3]. The implication of Metz theory is that humans must consider their moral obligation with respect to their treatment of animals. The challenge with this theory is the fact that it limits its application to only animals at the total exclusion of other non-human and non-animal parts of existents in the ecosystem. Hence, the theory of environmental conservation developed from the maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere...” overcomes this limitation as it encompasses the relationship between and among humans, non-humans and non-animal beings in the ecosystem.

Relying on oral tradition from the Yoruba culture, E. O. Oduwole and A. K. Fayemi explores some Yoruba proverbs and cultural practices to show the relationship between human and non-human animals

in the ecosystem [4]. Again, this work goes beyond the examination of the relationship between human and non-human animals to other non-animals existent in the ecosystem.

Thus, this paper begins by clarifying the concepts of environment, sustainability and development in order to show their connection. Next the philosophy inherent in the Igbo maxim. “Egbe bere ugo bere” is exposed by a conceptual analysis of the maxim. The paper then concludes by presenting arguments to demonstrate the possibility of environmental sustainability and development in Africa through the principles of morality and justice inherent in the Igbo maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere...”

ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

The concept of environment has been defined “as the surroundings in which a person lives. It involves the circumstances and influences on them and their effects on man” [5]. This definition suggests that the environment is simply that which surrounds us. In what seems to be a corroboration of the above view of the environment. Oshita refers to the environment as “all conditions surrounding an individual which are extrinsic to that individual, plant or animal [6]. Similarly, Bellany describes environment as “that which surrounds an individual or a community at any point in its life cycle both physical and cultural surroundings” [7]. One obvious implication of these conceptions of environment is the fact that whatever is outside of man or oneself constitutes the environment. This is why the environment is all things external to us. In other words, “man cannot exist or be understood in isolation from other forms of life and from plant life” [8] in which he is submerged.

To sustain the environment and its constituent elements is to ensure improved growth and maintenance of man, plants, animals and other forms of life resident on the earth or natural environment. The word “sustainability” is drawn from the word “sustainable” which in turn is gotten from the word “sustain” and this means “to give help or strength to”. In other words, sustainability or to be sustainable, is the act or process of giving help or strengthening something, in this case the environment, in order for it not to be weakened, destroyed, depleted or degraded. Literally, sustainability refers to that which can be maintained or kept continuously in goal. From an ecological perspective, Singh describes it as the “conservation of ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources [8]. This can be understood as something which has to do with the longevity of resources, commodity, species, ecosystem, man, earth, etc. Sustainability includes among other things, a very significant sense of preservation and conservation of existing natural and earth resources. It is a conscientious effort at protection, restoration and maintenance of the natural environment and wildlife in an effort towards preservation and conservation of the ecosystem. It is in this sense that sustainability is simply described as the “ability to last for a very long time” [9] and in this specific context, environmental sustainability means all efforts to ensure that the environment and its resources, both human and non-human last for a very long time.

“Development” is a very important concept in the study of environment. This is mostly because of its remarkable and enduring effects on the ecosystem. Literally, development represents “the act or instance of growth and advancement” [8]. The growth referred to here can be in the sphere of education, industry, economy, population or the well being of human kind. Whichever aspect of growth is in focus, there is an inextricable link between development and the environment. For instance, the environment is put under unbearable pressure by human’s generation of comfort and luxuries. The nation’s economic activities geared towards growth and development rests wholly on the fragile foundation of earth’s resources. These and many more are issues of great concern for environmental studies. The development of science and technology undoubtedly, has brought some light and happiness to mankind, yet it has had and may continue to have adverse effects on the environment if urgency is not exercised in checkmating its recent trend. The notion of development constitutes “a steady and gradual growth or change from not so good a state, to a relatively stable and better socio-economic, political, religious and mental state. In this sense development encompasses every aspect of a nation’s life both human and non-human” [10]. We had identified two dimensions of development, namely, structural and individual dimension. Accordingly:

When development takes place in an institution or structures in the society or nation, structural or institutional development is said to have taken place. Moreover, when this development or progressive change is found in an individual member of a state, then it is said to be human or individual development. On a large

scale, when there is a development in each of these area at a time in a given society, it is said, that national development has occurred [11].

What is obvious from the above is that genuine national development is a combination of progressive change in the structures or institutions, individuals, machineries and other resources or component parts of a nation. This will include the earth's resources and natural resources available in such an environment. It is in this sense that one can begin to conceive of the notion of sustainable development of the environment within the context or framework of genuine national development.

The notion of sustainable development was popularized by the 1987 report of the world commission on environment and development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. According to this Commission, "sustainable development means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [12]. Thus, sustainable development is possible considering the limitedness of nature's resources and man's consistent dependence on nature for survival. How can we establish a balance or an equitable equilibrium or exchange between man and the earth's resources?.

In responding to these questions, the anonymous Igbo traditional Philosophical thought system encapsulated in the maxim "egbe bere ugo bere..." presents a viable approach to ensuring environmental sustainability and development in Africa. This Igbo maxim exposes the benefits of a mutual-coexistence between humans and the constituent elements of the cosmic environment as well as the consequences of refusing to do so. Thus it prescribes the right line of actions for humans to take that will be of mutual benefit to him and the environment.

CONCEPTUALIZING "EGBE BERE UGO BERE"

"Egbe bere ugo bere" is a maxim or a proverb by the Igbo speaking people of eastern Nigeria. It represents an aspect of their world view especially their communal spirit. This maxim or proverb is a combination of three words, namely, "Egbe" "bere" and "ugo" which means "eagle", "perch" and "kite". Thus, as a maxim or proverbial expression it is literally translated to mean, "Live and let live". For a clearer understanding of the maxim, it is usually better to state it in its complete proverbial rendition - "egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibeya ebela, Nku kwaa ya". This is translated to mean; "let the eagle perch and let the kite perch, any one that begrudges the other from perching, let its wings break". The implication of this proverb for the Igbo traditional thought system, is that, the world is a large place that can accommodate everyone, therefore, no person or group should deny the other the right to existence. It is a principle that propagates harmonious coexistence between and among existent entities, groups, peoples of different tongues, languages, tribes, race, species, etc.

It is this inherent principle in the proverb that inspires hospitality, friendship and good neighborliness in the Igbos and in most African societies. This proverb it must be noted has been differently expressed by different scholars using different but closely related maxim that expresses the same moral principle. For instance, Theophilus Okere [13] states that the proverb "egbe bere ugo bere..." [12] (let the eagle and the kite perch...) can be rendered as "Onye anwuna ma ibe ya efula" (let one not die and let one's neighbour not be missing) or even "ya bara onye, bara onye" (let there be profit for the one and let there be profit for the other). In other words, this expression shows the need for fairness to all, such that whatever that is good or right to be done to one should also be done to the other.

Similarly, Ozumba and Chimakonam [14] translate "egbe bere ugo bere" to mean "give that others may also give in such a way that none would refrain from giving". According to them, this maxim advocates a predisposition to relate to other individuals or variables in a network in a way that sustains and promotes the mutual interdependence of realities. It inspires the character of moral goodness or togetherness in others by the actions and words of every individual [14]. Thus, for them, it is significantly expressible by other moral maxims such as "Biri ka mbiri" (Live and let another live in a way that none would prevent the other from living) and "Onye aghala Nwanne Ya" (march and also help the other to march who could not march on its own).

Okoye Uchem Miriam et al are of the opinion, that the moral maxim. "Ibiri Kam biri" (live and let live) is derived from the significance of the Igbo proverb "Egbe bere ugo bere" (let the eagle perch, and let the kite perch), and both expressions re-enact the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence of reality [15]. It points to the fact that all existing beings need each other in life in order to fulfill its presence or purpose. This is why Asouzu in interpreting further the import of the proverb "Egbe

bere ugo bere nke si ibe ya Ebela nku Kwaa ya” avers that, all beings are in mutual complementary service to each other such that any being that affirms the being or existence of the other through its actions, at the same time affirms his own being and existence. However, when an individual negates the being of the other by depriving this other the right of mutual complimentary service, it indirectly also boomerangs on this individual who remains unserved to his own detriment [16].

It is in this sense of Boomerang effect in the relationship between the eagle and the kite as expressed in the Igbo proverb under consideration, that we conceive a very significant implication for the relationship between humans and non-human elements of the cosmic environment in relation to sustainability and development. Thus, in this context, eagle may represent the humans and the non-humans may represent the kite, and vice versa. If one does not allow the other to serve it in a mutually complimentary manner, it may have to bear the consequences. Mention must be made of other scholars who have also attempted a conceptualization of the nature of “Egbe bere ugo bere”. These include; Ibuout [17], Kanu [18], Opata [19] etcetera. These scholars are of the opinion that this Igbo proverb exhibits the nature of belongingness, interpersonal and harmonious complementary relationship that ought to exist between and among levels of realities.

ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND “EGBE BERE UGO BERE...”

The moral value expressed in the maxim “egbe bere ugo bere...” or “Ibiri kam biri” is very significant for environmental philosophy especially as it concerns human’s relationship with the non-human elements of the environment such as plants, trees, and lower animals. For there to be sustainable development of the environment and its resources, both humans and other non-human occupants of the cosmic environment must heed the moral directives inherent in the maxim. The maxim demands that each being must be considerate of its neighbour as it lives and executes its projects. This is an attitude that runs deep in African and in the Igbo thought pattern. It is argued in this paper that an adoption of this attitude will challenge the numerous environmental problems facing humanity as a result of human’s indiscriminate activities.

The problem of environmental degradation has arisen as a result of lack of discipline in man. It is also the case that Nigerian environment is threatened largely by manmade disasters. Thus, it is believed that in many parts of the world today, environmental problems have reached a crisis level and as such constitute dangerous threat to human survival and sustainable development [5]. The point is that in this present economic growth and development, humans through the instrumentality of the government and its agencies have continued to engage in environmentally degrading activities with no recourse to the flourishing of the non-human elements of the environment. Granted that there are some environmental problems that ensue from natural disasters, more numerous are the environmental hazards that are man made. These include deforestation, desertification, pollution of all types, just to mention a few.

Deforestation leads to the extinction of certain species of trees, plants and animals that habits the forest and its surroundings. Similarly, desertification brings about loss of the mineral resources and the fertility of soil, thereby making it impossible to grow some species of plants and crops. Some animals may also lose their lives as a result of inadequate grazing area that will sustain them. In the same vein, pollutions have proven to be detrimental to the maintenance of the virtues of the environment. All living things – both human and non-human are adversely affected by pollution. Water pollution for instance, breeds diseases to humans and causes death and extinction of some aquatic animals. The same is applicable to air, land and even noise pollution. Thus, both human and non-human elements of the environment suffer the same fate as a result of environmentally harmful activities orchestrated mostly by humans. Therefore, in line with the moral maxim of “egbe bere ugo bere” humans must recognize their need of the environmental resources and the non-human environmental elements must recognize their need of humans. None of them can exist alone and fulfill the essence of their being. Each of them has a right to live, exist or to be. A symbiotic relationship is what is required for a harmonious co-existence as embedded in the principle of “egbe bere ugo bere...”. It is in doing this that, the environmental virtues can be conserved for a sustainable development. Kanu paints this picture succinctly in the following words;

The idea of Egbe (kite) and Ugo (eagle) speaks of a variety of positions, personalities, creeds and cultures. The Egbe has no more right to existence than the Ugo, for both must co-exist.

The Egbe has fundamental contributions it must make to the being of the Ugo and likewise the Ugo to Egbe. Therefore, when one begins to put the other down or to deny the other's existence, it ends up alienating itself. They both need to dialogue and make room for each other for the world is such that difference would always exist and to try to destroy the other is to destroy oneself. To end the variation in reality is to end reality itself, for reality is by nature, variegated [18].

In other words, considering the inevitable natural differences between Egbe and Ugo and the fact that they are condemned to live in the same world of space and time sharing the same resources, it behoves on them to conduct themselves in a manner that will orchestrate symbolic, complementary harmonious and balanced relationship. Such a harmonious coexistence will create room for each of them to interdependently pursue and achieve their goals and projects and as such fulfill the essence of their being. Thus, any action, or activity by any of the two elements that is chaotic, disharmonious and detrimental to the existence and flourishing of the other will not only disrupt the natural order and balance in the ecosystem, but will negatively affect both elements and disintegrate their common existence.

Applying this to environmental conservation, sustainability and development, humans and non-human elements of the ecosystem, like Egbe (kite) and Ugo (eagle) must recognize their interdependence on each other such that any harm to the other is a harm to oneself and any good to the other is a good done to oneself. Thus there's a need for them to tolerate, co-operate and accommodate each other in order for each to flourish and attain their authentic beingness. This is because humans need the non-human aspects of the environment (trees, plants, animals, soil water, etcetera) as much as these non-human elements need humans for them to flourish despite their differences. The moral principle inherent in the maxim "egbe bere ugo bere..." emphasizes the common ground upon which two different elements or entities can interrelate and flourish while it de-emphasizes their differences.

Thus, as Onebunne rightly observes, even though the kite (Egbe) the eagle (Ugo) do not naturally fly nor live together, they are permitted to perch (bere) together and in this act of perching, one sees a kind of relationship of respect, regard, acceptance and accommodation which is possible because they belong to a common world of animals and operate within one human world. This mutual respect, regard, acceptance and accommodation is what is needed for both elements to flourish and attain their full beingness. In the same vein, as much as humans and non-human entities are of different species and nature, they are nonetheless bound to relate with each other in a convivial manner since they occupy the same ecosystem and depend on the same environmental resources for their flourishing, fulfillment of their being and sustainable development of the environmental resources. This is possible when both humans and non-humans recognize the fact that none is meant by nature to live alone, but are meant to live in mutual-complementary relationship that reflects the moral principle of "Egbe bere ugo Bere"

The maxim "Egbe bere ugo Bere, Nke si ibe ya ebela Nku Kwa ya" has two significant dimensions that is relevant for the sustainable development of the environment with respect to human and non-human relationships within the ecosystem. The first is what this paper consider as the positive dimension and it is represented by the first simple statement in the maxim namely, "egbe bere ugo bere" (let the kite perch, as well as the eagle). This denotes the moral principle of the maxim that encourages mutual respect, reciprocity, togetherness and harmonious co-existence and the benefits of adhering to such principles. Following the positive dimension of the maxim, if humans and non-humans should adhere to this moral principle by living in mutual respect and harmony, the benefit among other things will be a sustainably developed environment.

The second dimension of the maxim is what this paper consider as the negative dimension and it is represented by the second statement in the maxim, namely "Nke si ibeya Ebela, Nku Kwaa ya" (whichever begrudges the other from perching, let its wings break). This denotes the principle of justice inherent in the maxim. The principle is such that if any of Egbe (kite) or Ugo (eagle) engages in any unjust act in an attempt to deprive the other of its right to existing and flourishing, it will by that singular act be punished by being deprived of its own right to existing and flourishing. This principle of justice does not require external agent to enforce punishment or render justice to an erring party or group. It represents what Asouzu termed boomerang effect [16]. This negative dimension of the maxim is applicable to the need for environmental sustainability and development as it relates to human and non-human relationship in the ecosystem. It can then be argued that the unjust and unhealthy activities of humans on the ecology do not only affect negatively the non-

human aspects of the environment but also humans suffer diverse hazards as a result of their unjust actions. No wonder Onebunne [20] describes the maxim as primarily a principle of justice.

The moral principle of mutual complementarity and the punitive measure which is expressed by the principle of justice inherent in the maxim “egbe bere ugo bere, Nke si ibeya ebela nku kwa ya” when carefully adhered to, will ensure a balanced relationship between humans and non-human elements of the environment. This will further engender a philosophy of environmental conservation that will in turn orchestrate the sustainable development of the virtues of the environment.

CONCLUSION

Neither humans nor non-humans elements of the ecosystem such as plants, trees, animals, water etcetera, is naturally designed to live alone. Despite the differences in nature and specie existing between and among these elements, they inhabit the earth and depend on the earth’s resources in order to flourish according to their nature. None of these elements (humans or non-humans) has the right to deprive the other the right to exist and flourish by any unjust or unhealthy actions towards the other. On the one hand, the principle of justice inherent in the Igbo maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere...” presents a punitive measure that restricts such negative tendencies. On the other hand, moral principle of togetherness, mutual respect and harmonious complementation inherent in the maxim presents the right course of action that should be taken by each of these elements in order to ensure conservation and sustainable development of the environment. Thus, “Egbe bere ugo bere” is presented here as a requisite philosophy of environmental sustainability and development.

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