

Towards an African Philosophy of Environment

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Abstract: Unlike mainstream Western ethics, African environmental ethics recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings than individuality of being. This implies that Africans have often lived in peace and harmony with nature, realizing that the environment is keyed to life and that everything possesses intrinsic value. It is on the strength of the prevailing observations that this paper is geared toward unraveling African philosophy of environment and in the process argued that Africans indeed do have a philosophy of environment due to their respect and oneness to both the living and nonliving components within the ecosystem. This paper employs the method of exposition, critical analysis as well as argumentation to prove that indeed, Africans have good intentions of taking care of the environment and not abuse it. This is evident in some of their cultural heritage where during some planting seasons, some lands are left fallow for some years to avoid excessive use that leads to erosion, also, many forests and groves are tagged ‘taboo’ to scare away people in order to preserve them as well as the other non-humans beings in the forest.

Keywords: African, Environmental Ethics, African Ontology.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship that exists between man and the environment is based on a philosophy. It is the principle that shapes his universe of being as well as the things around him [1]. The thrust of this work is to unravel the African philosophy of environment. African philosophy of environment or African environmental philosophy concerns itself with the laws that guide and directs man’s actions toward the environment. African environmental philosophy according to Ekwealo, is an applied philosophy dealing with the fundamental principles that govern the relationship between man and the environment based on African worldview [2]. For him, African philosophy has a background belief in the linkage of nature, community, and man, from which an ethical relationship is defined. Thus, ethically, there is a culture of respect, dignity, and accommodation for all beings, such that before you invade another’s space, it must be based on necessity. For instance, among the Umueri people in Anambra State, Nigeria (likewise in every community in Africa), before you cut the bark of the tree for maybe medicinal purposes, you have to first seek permission by incantations to the spirit of the tree.

From the foregoing, it would not be out of place to aver that Africans are environmentally friendly with their egocentric view of the environment which gives recognition to other lives and creatures that exist in the environment. This is in line with the African spirit and method of complementarity where every existing thing serves as a missing link in the web of reality.

However, the negative influence from the west has affected the African to forget his heritage and engage in activities that are un-African to the detriment of the environment and to a large extent it has become the dominant actions of the day. It is germane to note that these anti-environmental actions were not inherent in Africans. The African loves his environment (surroundings). Thus, it would not be out of place to assert that these anomalies are due to western influence in the form of decolonization and globalization [3]. This paper thus focuses on unraveling and showcasing African philosophy of environment and to prove that African do have their surrounding environment and it is the DNA of a typical African to take care of his immediate environment.

THE NATURE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENT

To understand the nature of African environmental philosophy, it is important that we briefly shed some light on African ontology. Africans has a dual ontology which comprises of spiritual (invisible and intangible) and physical (visible and tangible) beings. The spiritual comprises of God, gods, spirits, ancestors, etc. whereas, the physical comprises of man, animals, plants and other objects without

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biological life. Mbiti buttress this view further when he categorically said that; Africans have their own ontology; but it is a religious ontology..... This thesis proposes to divide it up into five categories:

- (1) God
- (2) spirits being made up of super human beings and the spirits of men who died long ago
- (3) man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born
- (4) animals and plants or the remainder of biological life.
- (5) phenomena and objects without biological life...

This anthropocentric ontology for Mbiti, is a complete unity or solidarity which nothing can break up or destroy. One mode of existence presupposes all others [4].

These five categorizes all form part of the same reality. Their interconnectedness manifests in one whole [5]. For the African, material and non-material, plants or animals, biotic or abiotic are accorded recognition and respect as they all serve as a missing link in the web of reality. Little wonder why Ekwealo, posits that in African environmental philosophy..... “there is a culture of respect, dignity, and accommodation for all beings, such that before you invade another’s space, it must be based on necessity [2]. From the foregoing, it is evidence that Africans are environmentally conscious and friendly with their ecocentric view that accord intrinsic worth and value to every living organisms and the natural environment. It is thus in-polemical to asseverate that the interdependence, interconnection, and interaction between all beings in the African metaphysical worldview suggest a virile bond which is depicted by the African shared system. That the African environment is a holistic ecosystem cannot be overemphasized. Nothing exists in isolation, plants, animals, humans and inanimate beings are intricately related to form a whole [3]. African environmental philosophy as we may infer from their ontology is anthropocentric cum ecocentric.

The anthropocentric conception of the universe from the African perspective means that man is at the centre of all created things. A cursory look at the hierarchy of existence carefully reveals this fact [3]. Although it has been argued that anthropocentric or humanistic conceptions of the universe are often criticized as placing intrinsic value on human and sees other creatures as mere means to man’s end. Keith Goree et al, as cited by Asuo and Maduka, buttress this view when they posit that “an anthropocentric or humanistic ethics is concerned about the environment only because a healthy environment will serve human ends [6]. That everything exists for man, in the African sense does not imply aggressive dominance or subjugation over the rest of nature. Laurenti Magesa, as quoted by Osemwegie, succinctly capture this view thus: The centrality of human beings in the order of the universe by no means implies human license. It does not mean that humanity is allowed to treat other creatures in the visible sphere of the universe without reverence and respect. In fact reverence for all creation is an essential part of the moral order of the universe and determines everything that happens to or befalls humanity [3].

Thus, man being the Lord of the universe is saddled with the responsibility of caring for, maintaining and conserving the natural environment; since his well being depends on the wellbeing of the natural environment. The Ubuntu philosophy of “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am”, lends credence to this assertion.

Africans no doubt are also ecocentric in their conception of the environment. The natural environment in the African perspective as noted by Osemwegie is not only material but also spiritual. Malidoma some shed more light on this view when he avers thus: Beneath the material world that we can see and touch and feel is an energetic world the world of spirit whose vitality enlivens not only all living things, but the very geography of the world holds life. In the indigenous view, the world of spirit and the material world coexist; each needs the other because each feeds the other (as cited by Ekwealo) [2].

Africans are ecocentric because they accord recognition and respect to all beings. For instance, before you cut the bark of the tree in Umueri, Anambra State, Nigeria (likewise every community in Africa) for medicinal purposes, you have to first seek permission by incantations to the “spirit of the tree. This according to Ekwealo, is “part of the belief in respect and dignity of nature, of the form of respect and recognition of the ‘rights’ or ‘value’ that all beings possessed [2]. Philosophically, therefore, Africans environmental philosophy is basically ecocentric where recognition is accorded to other lives and creatures that exist, as noted by Ekwealo [2]. In summation, the nature of African philosophy of environment is that of care, respect, and preservation

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENT VIS-À-VIS WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENT

African philosophy of environment has a lot of dissimilarities with western philosophy of the environment. Ekwealo enunciated seven differences that exist between western environmental philosophy and African environmental philosophy. However, we shall here be concerned with the first four.

1. In Western Environmental Philosophy (WEP), the material and physical world are distinct and separate from the spiritual one whereas, in African Environmental Philosophy (AEP), they are fused. The world of the spirit is the same as the world of the material both worlds are one and do exist and dwell in harmony and peace.

2. In WEP, dualism is distinct and exists in competitive nature whereas AEP, dualism is complementary and mutually co-existing. The effect of this is to promote a culture of respect and accommodation for all that exists.

3. In WEP, nature is devoid of sacredness and this accounted for the rape and abuse of nature or the environment. In AEP, the environment is sacred and it accounted for the respect and positive attention by man.

4. In WEP, life is restricted to animate and human beings whereas, in AEP, there is life in nature. Nature is understood as an intelligent being which demands care and maintenance [2].

5. In WEP, the metaphysical dimension of the natural environment is unknowable. This is evidence in Immanuel Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena, whereas, in AEP, the metaphysical dimension of the natural environment is knowable [7].

6. In WEP, theories such as anthropocentrism and biocentrism may adequately fit into their environmental value whereas, in AEP, they may not. This is so because all living things in the African conception possess intrinsic worth. According to Tempel, as cited by Ossemwegie, "Bantu philosophy holds that created beings preserve a bond with one another, an intimate ontological relationship. For him (Ossemwegie), by virtue of this, it presupposes that all living things possess inherent worth. It is on this basis that the Africans treat all things as an end and not means [3].

7. WEP is individualistic. This is evidence in Pythagoras' dictum "man is the measure of all things" and in Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" whereas, AEP is communalistic. This is evidence in the Ubuntu philosophy of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am".

However, despite all the dissimilarities between the western philosophy of environment or environmental philosophy and African environmental philosophy, there are also some similarities that exist between them. The major similarity is that both the western man and the African man's life depends on the resources from the natural environment. Hence, both cannot do without utilizing the environment by utilizing the environment, the African is more passionate about the environment since the African sees the environment as an extension of himself.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

African philosophy of environment as we have seen from the foregoing is basically ecocentric where recognition is accorded other lives and creatures that exist. For the Africans whatever that exists is in relation to the other and this connection account for the defined relationship that is geared toward harmony. Thus, there is interrelatedness, interconnectedness and interaction between man and the natural environment. This is so because everything is embedded in a whole and imbued with forces. Force or spirit inheres in all created things; living and nonliving [3].

According to Mbiti, natural objects in Africa are deemed sacred because 'people hold that the spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains or just around the villages' [5]. Hence, nature is accorded due reverence and not treated anyhow. This view is reflected in the belief and practice of tokenism, where different families, clan or villages respect different animals, plants, or natural objects as totemic or sacred objects in which ancestral spirits reside. People believe that a mystical relationship or spiritual connection exists between them and the totem [8]. According to Burnett and Wa Kang'ethe, as cited by Ikuenobe, an animal totem, for the bantu, "was not killed except in self defence and it is never eaten" [8]. to the Africans, in the words of Ozumba is "how things are holistically related or the interconnections that exist among particular beings" [9]. It is this mutual interconnections that exist among beings (living and nonliving) in Africa that triggered Asouzu to formulate the theory of complementarism as an African philosophical method which he defines as a philosophy that "seeks to

consider things in the significance of their singularity and not in the exclusiveness of their otherness in view of the joy that gives completion to all missing links of reality” [10]. African philosophy of environment to this end is that which cares, respects, protects and preserves or sustains the environment.

It should be noted at this point that, the hitherto environmental problems in Africa are due to western influence through colonialism and globalization, hence Ikuenobe avers that “one may argue that colonial social structures have created for Africa very interesting problem that have a bearing of the current environmental problems in Africa” [8]. Ab-initio, Africans have lived in peace and harmony with nature realizing that environment is key to life and that things possess intrinsic value.

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