

From Traditionalism to Modernism: A Study of the Problem of Environment in Africa

Okoye A. Chuka

Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria
Email: chukeeye@yahoo.com

Received February 16th, 2012; revised March 24th, 2012; accepted April 5th, 2012

The history of the environmental philosophy carries with it the effort to overcome the medieval anthropocentric morality. Here, nature is seen from the instrumental value which they give. The instrumental value here shows the existence of things as important only as they are useful to man. The contemporary environmental ethics bring a novelty showing these environmental bodies as possessing an intrinsic value showing that they have an ethical value. The medieval ethical system which denies intrinsic value to the environment and thus posits man as being at the center of any moral system leads to the over possession of the environment by man. This over possession by man has led to the destruction of environment by man who exploits the environment in his service. This work looks at the African scenario which seems to be facing more environmental degradation in the contemporary times. The reason for this is surmised by this paper as a damaging evolution of the African history from traditionalism which seems to respect the environment to modernism which demystifies the mysteries accorded the environment and hence putting the environment into excessive use through some actions like deforestation, burning of fossil fuels and so on. This paper suggests a crusade against these damaging effects of modernism for a better preservation of the environment.

Keywords: Traditionalism; Modernism; Africa; Environment

Introduction

The grounds of People's existence stem from their culture which evidently shapes their lives and their perception of things. One is whom one is by the grounds of one's culture. It is pertinent here to note that one's actions, attitude towards things and indeed the whole of one's world view is measured by how much the culture of the person is able to influence him. Jurgen Habermas (2008: p. 99) expressly categorized the human culture into two.

- 1) The capitalist/rational structured societies.
- 2) The mythically structured societies.

The African societies by the tenets of their culture belong to the mythically structured societies. As such their belief systems and their world view are based on some mythologically founded theories. It must be important to immediately note here that the mythological undertone of the African belief system neither makes it weird or non factual. Present in these myths are pragmatic issues that operate successfully according to the African system.

Among these is their understanding of their environment. The Africans see a lot tied to their environment. In fact the Africans do not seem to believe that human beings exist alone independent of those elements in their environment. This amounts to the attachment and the respect which the African man has for his environment. This respect for the environmental is innate in the African culture and has helped save the African environment from colossal damage. Nevertheless, the wind of enlightenment and modernism seems to tear Africa apart owing to the loss of identity by the mutilation of culture. Today, it appears that Africa generally suffers many environ-

mental problems due to this loss. People make use of the environmental endowments carelessly which leads to their destruction and abuse. Africa is endangered environmentally by the amount of man-made hazards that has occurred as a result of the carelessness put by the Africans over their environment. This article attempts a study of the indigenous African concept of environment with a view to seeing how far the current environmental problems can be tackled.

Explaining the African Cosmology

The African life is governed by their cosmological grounds of existence. In the first place, the Africans believe that there are two major worlds namely: the physical and the spiritual worlds. These two worlds are further divided into parts by their hierarchy in existence and values attached to them. They are distinct but are always in constant interaction.

The spirit world is a world of a transcendent form. Here in dwells some spiritualized beings including the sovereign God. The abode of the sovereign God is inhabited, as Africans believe, by God Himself and the "angels"/messengers that wait on Him, carrying out His decrees. The second part of this spiritual world is the world of the ancestors. The ancestors are often regarded as the living dead who still play active role in the protection of and the provision for the family. This position is a sublime and exalted one hence not every dead person is acknowledged as an ancestor.

These ancestors are closely united with the physical universe. This physical universe is a universe of men and animals, plants and other inanimate things. This world is very active to the extent that the whole activities of the African cosmological

plane centre round it. This world is active, however, not because of the animals and plants but because of the human existence in it around which the whole world revolve. As such, although things are oriented in some way or other to the world about them, only man cultivates a world view and generates action in the universe (Andah, 1988: p. 73).

This cosmological view of the Africans incorporates the African ontology which centers on forces in existence. Based on the religiosity of the Africans, they have a tendency to place every existential authority of God. They see God as the creator of the universe (both the visible and the invisible). But He entrusted the worldly administration on the lower gods, good spirits and indirectly the ancestors. The Africans, as such, look up to these intermediaries of God for provision and sustenance. They offer prayers through the ancestors to god for fertility, of their lands and their daughters, daily protection from woe, daily bread and so on. This exchange, according to Andah, (1988: p. 81) preserves the balance of the world which is unstable.

By the ontological co-existence of these beings, the African sees a subtle interaction among them. Dogbe (1988: p. 3) lists five (5) categories of the ontologically interacting beings which are ordered but fused together.

- The being above all beings which is the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.
- Spirits made up of super human beings and spirits of men who died long ago.
- Man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
- Animals and plants or the remainder of biological life; and
- Phenomena and objects without biological life.

These must co-operate for harmony through rites, offerings, sacrifices and invocations. This at times demands mystical relationship between man and other lower forces.

The traditional African preservation of her environment consists in the way in which this hierarchical interaction is carried out. Most of the natural things in Africa in the core-traditional society are not carelessly tampered with. They are left following in the belief in their possession of intrinsic value which demonstrates the place of the traditional African environmental ethics. These things that form the natural world are protected from man by surrounding them with mysteries, and major and minor taboos which keep man and his destructive tendencies away from them. Andah (1988: p. 81) argues further:

The African (Igbo) have the frightening possibility of overthrowing their [enviro]ns by violating the manifestation of the sacred, which pervade their whole life, trees, market, rivers, hills, shrines, and so on. Therefore, they are protected by numerous major and minor taboos that can be broken even unintentionally.

One does not dig too deep to discover that the structure of the core-African society by the application of their rules embedded in their tradition, save their world from some environmental damage and ecological destruction. Any violation of the natural order through an occurrence of any form of natural disaster is seen further as a retribution from God either for misuse or re-appraisal for a taboo. One sees among the Africans a collective effort to pressure his environment by avoiding such environmental property that will either destroy one or the entire community.

The African belief system seems to be mythologically bound and conformist in its structure since everyone dread the out-

come of any mishap, from the gods. However, it seems rewarding since in the practice of this there is an environmental preservation and ecological equilibrium.

Environmental Philosophy: The African Indigenous Perspective

Environmental philosophy studies the relationship between human beings and the environment (here comprising of animals, plants and other inanimate things with the world; and indeed whole world). The African indigenous perspective comes to mind in trying to study the various things in the world and how they interact. In the *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1958: p. 105), the author brought out a seeing attitude of the average African man to his environment by the reception given to the “white man” (colonial missionaries) by the natives.

According to Achebe, when the white man came, the indigenes gave the “evil forest” for their settlement. This, the author stressed, is to make it impossible for them to survive since the evil forest is specifically sacred and is believed to be an abode of the wicked spirits. Similar account is rendered of the Turkana people who mounted fierce resistance to the construction of Dade Dam and the subsequent flooding of the valley. The belief of the indigenes of this Turkana is accounted for by Lenana the medicine man. It is so believed by these people that there is a serious problem digging the valley—the graves of the dead. This is because the beliefs and the knowledge of the dead which impacts on the knowledge of the living will be cost since there is a link between the living and the dead, to destroy the remains of the dead amounts to destroying the knowledge and future of the living (Johnson, 1981: pp. 13-14).

The African perspective of environmental philosophy evidently stems from their concept of interaction of forces. This belief in interaction of forces is embellished by their attachment to genealogical bonds and their belongingness. The indigenous responsibilities to and for the natural world are based on an understanding of the relatedness, or affiliation, of the human and non-human worlds (Jamieson, 2001: p. 22). One can conveniently call this a “fundamental genealogical drive to environment”.

The genealogical study of the Africans presents a mythological history of the indwellers of a particular place. This mythological history goes to inform one of one’s primogenital descent and the migration (if any) to the present settlement over time. It is indeed a continuous unfolding of history. According to Jamieson (2001: p. 6):

Genealogical map affiliations spatially as well, placing individuals and families in relation to one another, and locating them in—by connecting them to—the earth.

The above citation suggests that possession of origin is tantamount to the possession of genealogy which gives its current place within time (historically). This genealogy by its historical attribution connects the individual in question with the place and further with the other people who exist and others who existed (but are dead) in that place at one time or another. This genealogy equally accounts for the other aspects of existence (non-living things in the world and their origin in the environment).

Genealogy identifies a people and their relations and thereby set them apart from the others. It explains the mode of the relationship between one person and the order and the extent of this relationship. Thus, to recite a genealogy, to recall the ties of

affiliation, is to affirm a reciprocal bounding (Jamieson, 2001: p. 5). Genealogy defines an individual and opens to the individual the moral responsibilities and obligations which individual owes to the environment. Genealogy is a valid source of the knowledge about the past present and future. It cements the bond between an individual and another and between one group and the other.

This genealogy comes to the fore in explaining the African interaction with the environment. The respect given to certain water bodies, trees and even animals is a testimony to the attachment the African has to his environment. The description of the place given to the "Land" by the Africans is illustrative. The Igbos of Africa, for instance, believe that "ala" (Land) is the mother of all and it the strongest of any god. As such special care is taken not to offend this earth god (ala). The issue here lies in the fact that the African system by their ontology shows the relevance and functionality of every form of being in the African world.

The hierarchical structure of the African ontology as previously demonstrated opens up the interconnectivity between the human entities and non-human entities. The Africans believe that everything reserves within itself a value given to it by nature/God. The grasses are given to a number of functions which when put to use can either restore health or damage. This belief of the Africans in the intrinsic functionality and relevance of everything in the world, whether human or non-human, bring up what we can label as "respect" in the African mode of existence.

The sense of respect as the African existential inquiry shows is such that there is a demonstration, of the full significance of every environmental object in nature and at the same time a capturing of the normative grounds of their existence in the world. Respect, based on the above is further illustrated by Laurie Whitt as a matter of appreciating the inherent value of some entity or activity that has it by virtue of the fact that it inheres in, or belongs to, the natural world (Whitt, 2001: p. 7). What this entails is a conscious realization of the vital role of an object towards the sustenance of the natural universe. This connotes an avoidance of things that can work down on or a direct misuse of the particular thing in question.

This mutual respect by the Africans on these natural beings is as a result of the role which gives them intrinsic value. Among the Igbos of Nigeria, again, some crops and trees are not meddled with. Yam is a crop which is believed to be for men only. The respect given to this crop is such that one is not allowed to match on yams lest the crop will not grow for the person since the individual has devalued it.

This practice also extends to some animals which are believed to be sacred. This sacredness may be historical in its appreciation based on the role such animals played (often mythological) in the establishment of the said society. This tradition is handed down through generations. This historical ground brings an epistemological angle to the African reaction to the environment.

The epistemological angle to conceptualization of the African environment comes through the mythological foundation of the African culture and the traditional method of transmission of knowledge through strong telling and folklores. In listening to stories one learns. The source of the knowledge and respect for the natural world is usually stories which promote indigenous knowledge and environmental value systems. Silko (1996: pp. 94-95) talks about the place of stories generally in the

propagation of indigenous knowledge stating that:

[T]here is a story connected with every place, every object in the landscape [...] we are still in this place and language—the story telling—is our way of passing through our past and future...

Ekwenugo (2003: p. 48) corroborates what Silko tries to put across while explaining the place of story telling in the African culture stating that:

We find ourselves in a place where we do not know and where we are not familiar with the world around US [...] it is a world of space structured by time. The familiarity we get from this world stems from the knowledge we gather through our tradition handed down to us by our ancestors through folktales and cultural traditions.

One, evidently, learns about a place and the practice through the stories surrounding the very place. As such the environmental preservation which the Africans have is sustained by the knowledge of the relationship between man and the natural world handed down through many generations through stories. Tribal understanding is thereby locked together... with the entities themselves so that a place and its knowledge cannot be separated (Whitt, 2001: p. 15). The Africans believe that man by man's place in the universe is a custodian of the environment and this function so given to man by nature is a result of the belief in the intrinsic value possessed by every existent in the environment both human and non human. This is handed down to generations through the African cultural system peddled through their stories.

The above grounds the African environmental ethics where Africans are said to believe in the intrinsic value of every existent in the environment given to Him by their respective roles in the sustenance of the world.

Cultural Crises and Environmental Problem in African

Colonialism rings out to the average African mind as that which has caused an untold menace to the African mind. A lot of scholars who tried to trace the problem of under development in Africa blame it mainly on colonialism, according to S. Amoah (2004: p. 36), the crises of development in Africa is caused by the current mind set of the African who has been brain washed and rendered inferior by the psychological trauma infused on him by the westerner through the slave trade and the dissolution of his culture through colonization. Evidently people generally believe that the impact of colonization on the Africans is so profound that Africans have constantly searched in vain for the real foundation of their culture.

The colonization of the African man, no doubt, leaves him embattled within himself about what the reality of his existence is. This affects the various areas of the life of the African including the human interaction with his environment. The colonization of the African mind which is said to affect equally the human interaction with the environment comes as a form of cultural alienation in which the African seeks to strike a balance between his culture and the culture of his colonized self. The greatest effect here is seen in the religion of the African.

The ethical grounds of the African worldview is generally believed to be from their religion. Idowu (1962: p. 145) accepts this view stating:

[That] morality is basically the fruit of religion and to begin, it was dependent upon it. Man's concept of the Deity as every-

thing to do with what is taken to be the norm of morality. God made man, and it is He who implants in him the sense of right and wrong. This is in fact the validity of which does not depend upon whether man realized and acknowledges it or not.

Idowu's point is also carried on by Ilogu (1997: p. 537) who uses the Igbo culture to re-present the idea of religion the foundation of morals among Africans. For Ilogu:

In Igbo traditional society, religion is the basis for morality both through the beliefs of the people as well as through the sanctions imposed by customs and prohibitions.

The religion of the Africans gives them the ethical disposition towards their environment. As was mentioned above, the African system ensures that the African sees an intrinsic value in every environmental element ranging from land, herbs, water bodies, trees and animals, to human beings. As such in the traditional African society, there is hardly any report of environmental abuse or degradation.

But in the present times, there are cases of environmental hazards being consequences of environmental abuse. This is blamed on the hybrid of culture which comes with crises of religiosity, between the traditional African religion and to foreign religion.

The dominant western culture which reflects in the western religion presents the natural world as a property of man which man is free to handle any how man pleases irrespective of the values attached to it. This is against the African traditional religious tenet where man is seen as a guardian of the natural world. Nzeadigo (2004: p. 44) shows this his analysis of the African anthropology stating that:

The Africans view man as force, which stands at the middle of beingness. By the human position, he takes care of the natural world not as an owner but as a keeper. Man submits to God who is the strongest force and keeps other lower forces as they exist according to the capacity of their life force.

The western Nigerian strongly shows the strength of man over his environment. This idea gives man the authority to manipulate the environment and as such is responsible for everything that takes place in the environment. Among the Christians, for instance, the base of the relationship between man and the natural world stem from the biblical injunction (Genesis 1: 26-28) where man is given to the control over the world. The scriptures say:

And God said; let us create man in our image and likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the earth [...] God created man in his own image and likeness; male and female He created them. And god blessed them, and said to them go into the world and inherit it. Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every other thing that moves upon the earth.

By this Christian account (which represents the western account of human supposed relation with the environment), humans are the only morally necessary members of the world. Nature lacks any form of intrinsic value. Thus no matter what man does with anything in nature, he is not bound morally. Evidently, natural world is supposed to be at the disposal of and in service of man and the needs he has. The western tradition possesses, by this account, a radical anthropocentrism in which nature is viewed as "merely a resource for the satisfaction of human interest wants and needs". A statement attributed to a Jewish Rabbi shows the strength of marginalization of the environment. Ya'akov, the ancient Jewish Rabbi is noted to

have stated that:

One who while walking along the way, reviewing his studies, breaks off from his study and says, "How beautiful is the tree! How beautiful is that ploughed field!" the scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul (Pirkei Avot Ethics of the Fathers 3.7).

Despite the varied interpretation of this statement attributed to Rabbi Ya'akov. The fact remains that nature is regarded as a secondary to human existence. There is a tendency of seeing nature differently from man and the man's development. Taking care of nature radically suggest mundanity and the relegation of the human soul. Man should be paid great attention to not the natural world.

This teaching from the western religion is what has infiltrated the traditional African religion and leaving the African with the tendency of viewing every aspect of the traditional religion as fetish especially as it concerns the human relationship with his environment. The result is simple'. The African is alienated from his culture and the tenets of it but at the same time not fitted into the new culture which we has been put into. This problem abandons the African in a state of not understanding himself and his environment.

The colonized and Christianized African unveils the secrecy of the tradition which keeps him in respect to his environment. He throws away his concept of his environment and tries to embrace the scriptural western teaching where the environment is seen as that through which man's needs, desires and wants are satisfied. The natural world is often abused and handled without any intrinsic value. This accounts for the number of the environmental problems experienced today in Africa ranging from the green house effects, erosion menace, and desert encroachment to flooding.

Africans seem to have lost the wealth of their tradition which gives them the grounds for maintaining their environment. There is more instrumentalism in the relationship with the environment. This instrumentation has two effects on the individuals namely:

- 1) The inauthentic existence effect.
- 2) The environmental instability effect.

The inauthentic existence effect manifests itself on the individuals who are utilitarian in their relationship with their environment. Here the individual claims to create an artificial environment for oneself. This artificial environment replaces he neutral which has been marginalized and destroyed by the use of harsh equipments and chemicals. This inauthentic existence is created by the individual to make one temporarily comfortable and have a feeling that there is the security of the "self".

This first effect is on the immediate individual who suffers directly and unexpectedly when the artificial structure, which has been built to replace the natural environment, collapses. The second one—the environmental instability effect has a mediate effect on the individual but an immediate effect on the environment. In this environmental instability effect, the environment is depleted as a result of the destructive actions carried out by the human elements. Such actions like extreme industrialization, bush burning, deforestation (through chemicalized elements) and wanton ecological reduction, weigh down on the environmental stability especially in Africa where there is great level of ignorance about environmental preservation.

The trend of development seems to contribute seriously also to the environmental degradation in Africa. The philosophy of development in the African dimension focuses on the centrality

of the “self”. This self stands at the middle of the globalizational existence. The idea of personhood as conceived in the African thought system carries with it a rational approach to development. There is a tendency that the African conceives the ‘self’ through the Cartesian mode.¹ In this dimension, the self proceeds primarily through the metaphysical self and afterwards the social and ecological self.

The structure here brings out the “I”-self as the central existential focus in the existential system. To identify the “I-mind” of cognition and existence defines the human structure. The other levels of existential identification both social and ecological are subservient. It is not a surprise seeing the Igbos define the human being as *Mma-ndu/i*—there beauty or beauty there.² By the etymology of the nomenclature, the humans are depicted as the being at the centre of existence that creates the beauty to the world. This centralizes the existential mode of the human being to the metaphysical self—a reality which exists as itself.

This informs the instrumentalism of the human interactive with the environment. While the human being exists first, he understands his society as belonging to him (social mode) and sees the world around him as an aid to develop and satisfy himself (ecological mode). This understanding destroys the environmental system and causes untold havoc to the nature. The main reason for the African current environmental problem is not far fetched. The problem lies in the way the African conceives development. It is also lies in the alienation of the African culture which is a result of the identity crises in Africa handed down by colonialism. There is need for a readjustment of the African value system and cultural grounds for a before environmental development.

This solution is made perfect through de-ideologization and re-orientation of the African mind. The way the ethics of environment is put forward must be such that the people are duly informed of their responsibilities to themselves through their environment.

Taylor (1981: p. 117) emphasized that a life-centered ecosystem is opposed to human-centered ones since the life-centered one has moral obligations that are owed to both wild plants and animal as members of the earths biotic community. One who cares for the environment cares for oneself as these co-existential entities support the human life by ensuring the stability of nature where man equally exists.

The Africans should care for the environment not just as labour but as a beautiful act. This is achievable by a readjustment of the inclination of the Africans not their morals (which is basically anthropocentric). This does not just end in trying to

establish the inherent worth of nature but emphasize the complementarity in the natural world.

Conclusion

The African environmental problem is basically more man-made than natural. Most of the issues that come up in the environmental problems of African come up as a result of ignorance which is rooted in the effort to reconcile the evolved African man from traditionalism to modernism. It is a problem of development. The African combines the anthropocentrism and rationalism embedded in their culture to face their environment. This culminates in low care/abandonment of environment, environmental dilapidation and hazards.

Africans would need to revitalize the traditional system which gives some respect to the environment and merge with it a developmental structure which would help engender ecological preservation to ensure a sustained environmental preservation.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things fall apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Amoah, S. (2004). *Colonialism and the problem of African identity*. Accra: Grill.
- Andah, B. (1988). *African anthropology*. Ibadan: Shaineson
- Diogbe (1971). *The African world and its neighbors*. Ibadan: Croft.
- Ekwenugo, A. (2011). Africa and the sacred environment. *PESNS Lecture on Environmental Preservation* (p. 7). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.
- Frankena, W. K. (1979). *Ethics and the environment*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Habermas, J. (2008). Theory of communicative action. In McCarthy (Trans.), *Reason and rationality of society* (Vol. 1), Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Idowu, B. (1962). *Oludumare God in Yoruba Belief*. Lagos: Longmans
- Egbeke, A. (1997). Changing moral values in African: An essay in ethical relativity. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 31, 531-543.
- Jameison, D. (2001). *A companion to environmental philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9780470751664
- Johnson, L. (1981). Cultural revitalization identity. *Social Science Quarterly*, 4.
- Nzeadigo, M. (2004). *The African and the sacred*. Lagos: Px pub.
- Silko, L. M. (1996). *Yellow woman and the beauty of the spirits*. New York: Simmon Schuster.
- Taylor, P. (1981). *The ethics of respect for nature in environmental ethics* (Vol. 3). London: Fall.
- Whitt, L. (2001). Indigenous perspective. *Companion to philosophy of Environment*.

¹The Cartesian understanding of the self is such that the self is limited to the thinking personality—the *res cogitans*. The *res cogitans* by its explication signifies the human being and naturally shuts off every other entity which may not be said to possess consciousness.

²See Okoye, Chuka On the Critique of John Ekei's etymological Idea of the human person. The *mma-ndu* etymology.