African Perspectives on Environmental Ethics: A Search for a Grand Model for Environmental Care

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Abstract

Dominant literature in the renascent field of environmental ethics has often promoted Eurocentric perspectives with seeming silence from the African part of the globe. This paper seeks to lend the African voice to the ongoing search for a grand model for environmental care. The significance of evolving perspectives for environmental sustainability cannot be overemphasised. This is as a result of the damning consequences that environmental challenges are posing to the environment and its components. The African continent is not spared of the severe consequences that have come with an unhealthy relationship with the environment. This discourse seeks to undertake an exposition of the different African perspectives on the best form of relationship between humans and the environment. Pursuant to the fact that anthropocentric approaches have been held responsible for the many environmental crises evident today, and Africa is often projected as being anthropocentric in its worldview, perspectives from African environmental philosophers challenge this claim by their excogitations that provide non-anthropocentric alternatives. Using the expository approach and method of critical analysis, this work examines these African environmental models, namely, nature-relatedness, eco-bio-communitarianism, ecology through ubuntu and the ukama theory in the light their non-anthropocentric potentials. Findings show thatin spite of the non-anthropocentric claims of these perspectives, they all have in them some misgivings that make them inadequate for environmental care when considered individually. It recommends that there is need for an eclectic model that will build on the strengths of the various perspectives for adequate environmental care since they

all emphasise the communalistic view that perfectly exemplifies traditional African worldview.

Keywords: Environment, Environmental Ethics, African Environmental Ethics, Anthropocentrism, Non-Anthropocentrism, Environmental Care

Introduction

The emergence of environmental ethics has given rise to divergent approaches for human relationship with nature or the environment. Environmental philosophers have sought to drift away from the anthropocentric disposition that had characterised this relationship given that it has led to immense crises. The efforts towards this have gone global and cultures across the globe are suggesting best approaches to chisel this relationship. Africa as a continent is not left out in this important quest that is gaining momentum by the day. Although dominant literature has been Eurocentric with seeming silence on Africa's contribution to promoting a non-anthropocentric ethics, philosophers of the African soil have taken it upon themselves to lend the African voice to this major concern by evolving divergent perspectives towards achieving best environmental practices. There are many reasons why African perspectives on environmental ethics need to be considered. African perspective is important because the world is searching for theories which will help provide better care for the environment and Africa being a part of this whole can contribute her quota towards this project. Moreover, the efforts at caring for the environment must be done in ways that are peculiar to a people's cultural forms rather than importing and imposing foreign ideas. Africans must handle their unique environmental challenges in ways that are suited to their culture. Thus, as a unique civilisation, African culture has something to contribute in the

search for best ethical attitudes of humankind towards the environment.[1] It is on account of this that this discourse seeks to marshal out African environmental perspectives suggested by prominent African philosophers. This exposition of perspectives will show how much efforts Africans have put in place to ensure that the environment is safe for all its components. To achieve the aim of this study, efforts would be made at exploring the environmental challenges in Africa, critically analysing the various perspectives on African environmental ethics and proposing a model that would be most befitting in the face of perspectives that are inadequate when considered individually.

The Reality of Environmental Challenges in Africa

Africa like many other continents across the globe, has her own share of environmental challenges arising from a *complexus* of factors. These challenges which could be rightly described as environmental crises have a lot of impact on sustainable development. The correlation between environmental crises and sustainable development was a critical point at the Earth Summit held at Rio in Brazil in 1992. At this epochal Summit, a clarion call was made on human responsibility to care for the ecosystem not just for the present generation, but also for the future. Perhaps this clarion call must have been made after a consideration of the harm done to the environmental with the consequences on both human and non-human beings. The caveat has become the declaration for a care of the environment that transcends mere anthropocentric disposition that had hitherto been the case. This could possibly be

1. C. S. Ifeakor and A. Otteh. "African Environmental Ethics: A Non-Anthropocentric African Environmentalism. The Journey So Far*"*. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3, No 6, 2017, 71.

the reason behind the blame mounted on anthropogenic factors for environmental degradation. It is pertinent at this point to reflect on the many environmental challenges rocking Africa.

Ogungbemi underscores the reality of environmental crises in Africa when he avers concerning Africa that the way in which natural resources such as land, water and air are being used goes contrary to the traditional practice of environmental conservation.[2] The quest to develop like other continents has led to increased deforestation which has bred incalculable effects on turbidity, erosion, flood and desertification. The exploitation of natural resources in order to catch up with the modern drive for progress has left untold environmental problems in Africa. Human activities have led to the pollution of water which is an essential resource for all life-forms. Toxic wastes dumped in water by industries, both within and outside the continent, through oil exploration and spillage, bacteriological and chemical agents like fertilizers have made our waters unsafe not only for humans but also other species in our waters. Air which supplies oxygen to sustain life has not been spared as chemical emissions from automobiles, industrial machines, artillery air raids and the like have made it unhealthy for living beings. Noise pollution leading to psychological disorder and auditory impediments cannot be left out.

For Given Mutinta, "environmental challenges including deforestation, land degradation, urbanisation, water scarcity, and other factors that pose the biggest threats to Africa's natural

2. S. Ogungbemi. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis." *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Ed. Pojman, Louis J. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997, 205.

systems and human well-being".[3] This is not far from the list provided by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa which identified biodiversity and ecosystem loss, water scarcity, climate change, desertification and urbanisation as part of the new and emerging challenges faced by Africa. There are many other forms of environmental crises rocking Africa which may not be captured within the purview of this work. Indeed, the consequences of these environmental challenges are multifaceted and affect almost all the dimensions of the African life.[4] With the call for environmental protection beyond anthropocentric boundaries, it is only worthwhile to examine African perspectives that provide promising strategies.

African Perspectives on Environmental Ethics

Scholars in African environmental ethics promote the view that the African worldview is not as anthropocentric as it is claimed. Scholars such as Edwin Etieyibo and Thaddeus Metz[5] have tackled other scholars such as Kai Horsthemke for promoting the view that African worldview is anthropocentric. For instance, Etieyibo prefers for consider the African worldview as closer to biocentrism and ecocentrism than anthropocentrism.[6] Chinedu S. Ifeakor argues that even though humans occupy a central place in African

3. Given Mutinta. *An African Perspective on Environmental Communication: Advocating for Sustainable Environmental Communication in Africa.* Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2026, 29.
4. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. *New and Emerging Challenges in Africa: Summary Report.* Ethiopia: Economic Commission for Africa, 2012, 2-13.
5. Thaddeaus Metz. "How to Ground Animal Rights on African Values: Reply to Horsthemke". *Journal of Animal Ethics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, 163-174.
6. Edwin Etieyibo. "Anthropocentrism, African Metaphysical Worldview, and Animal Practices: A Reply to Kai Horsthemke". *Journal of Animal Ethics,* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, 145.

ontology, they are only a part of an interconnected whole of being.[7] These among other scholars have pitched African environmental ethics away from the anthropocentric labels of its critiques. For these scholars, African environmental ethics could be and is non-anthropocentric. It is pertinent to focus on examining these perspectives at this juncture. There many African perspectives on environmental ethics. However, within the purview of this work, the following perspectives shall be considered: ethics of nature relatedness, eco-bio-communitarianism, ecology through Ubuntu and ukama theory of environmental ethics.

Ethics of Nature Relatedness

This perspective of African environmental ethics was developed by Ogungbemi. Ogungbem notes that in understanding the nature of environmental crisis within the context of sub- Saharan Africa, three points are sacrament: ignorance and poverty; science and technology; and political conflict, including international economic pressures.[8] It is tied to his ethics of care for nature. According to him, "ethics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions…. The ethics of nature- relatedness can be succinctly stated as an ethics that leads human beings to seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival and sustainability.[9] Affirming the fact that traditional African culture had an ethics of care for nature, Ogungbemi notes:

> In our traditional relationship with nature, men

7. C. S. Ifeakor. "Is African environmental ethics anthropocentric?". *Preorcjah,* Vol. 2, No.1, 2017, 72.
8. S. Ogungbemi. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis", 330.
9. S. Ogungbemi. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis", 208-209.

> and women recognize the importance of water and air management to our traditional communities. The ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps this explains why earth, forest, rivers wind and other national objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved, the ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation.[10]

This theory is tied to three basic elements, namely, reason, experience and the will.[11] Ogungbemi's model is unique by the fact that it transcends mere ethno-centric trends that have often been criticized in African philosophical thinking and shies away from tying the concept to simply spiritual attributions, a point he has been criticized for. Ojomo advances that Ogungbemi suggests three ways African environmental crises could be curtailed.[12] First, he suggested the generation, transmission and distribution of solar energy at a reasonable cost as a safety value in reducing African over-reliance on firewood, coal, kerosene, gas and petrol as sources of energy. The second suggestion is the prediction that nature will address the African population problem through means that are unique to it. Finally, the need for a turn-around in Africa's political leadership in order to put in place good policies that are environmental friendly.

10. S. Ogungbemi. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis", 206.
11. P.A. Ojomo. "Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding". *African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology*, Vol. 5, No. 8, 2011, 578.
12. P.A. Ojomo. "Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding", 575.

Nature-relatedness perspective has been criticized for lacking African metaphysical basis and being too worldly. For a theory to be fully African, it has to show mastery of African ontology otherwise it lacks the characteristics of being African.[13] The African worldview in its holistic nature considers both the physical and spiritual dimensions of life. This is far away from African conceptual experiences which are rooted in metaphysical beliefs.

Eco-Bio-Communitarianism

This perspective of African environmental ethics is associated with Godfrey Tangwa. The theory is steeped in African metaphysical worldview. This metaphysical worldview involves the "recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans".[14] This metaphysical outlook underpinned the ways, manners and cosmic relations between humans and their fellows and as well responsible for why traditional Africans were more cautious in their attitude to plants, animal and inanimate things and the various invisible forces of the world. Tangwa emphasises further that the traditional African metaphysical dichotomy between "plants animals and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a flexible one[15] since it is in line with this metaphysical framework that one can consistently and coherently situate the people's belief in

13. C. S. Ifeakor and A. Otteh. "African Environmental Ethics: A Non-Anthropocentric African Environmentalism. The Journey So Far", 71.
14. G. Tangwa, G. "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics." *A Companion to African Philosophy.* Ed. Kwasi, W. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004, 389.
15. M. B. Ramose, M. B. "Ecology through Ubuntu". *Journal of African Ethics*. Harare: Mond Press, 2009, 309.

transmigration of the soul into animals, plants or into forces such as the wind.[16]

Indeed, Tangwa's perspective draws a lot from the traditional African communalistic worldview and the correlations among creatures in the hierarchy of beings. It is in line with this metaphysical framework that one can consistently and coherently situate the people's belief in transmigration of the soul into animals, plants or into forces such as the wind. On the basis of this metaphysical understanding of nature and the nature of man, Tangwa says such a mindset has very significant implications for the way nature is approached and treated by traditional Africans.[17] Dealing with what African metaphysical worldview could do with technology, Tangwa was quick at noting that African worldview is not opposed to technology, but calls for its use with caution. The concern as such is a more humble motivation for the pursuit of science and technology based on the eco-bio-communitarian attitude of 'live and let live'.[18] This can be substituted for the aggressive motivation of domination to the immeasurable advantage of the whole of humankind as exemplified in Western scientific and technological pursuits.

Tangwa's model, in spite of escaping Ogungbemi's metaphysical deficiency, has been criticised for being too ethno-philosophic. Ethno-philosophic ideas have been criticized for lacking the critical touch associated with authentic philosophy. It has been criticized for representing an ethno-philosophic defence of

16. C. S. Ifeakor and A. Otteh. "African Environmental Ethics: A Non-Anthropocentric African Environmentalism. The Journey So Far", 77.
17. P.A. Ojomo. "Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding", 576.
18. G. Tangwa, G. "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics", 394.

African environmental management.

Ecology through Ubuntu

Ubuntu/*Botho*is a concept that is derived from proverbial expressions (aphorisms) found in several languages in Africa South of the Sahara. However, it is not only a linguistic concept but a normative connotation embodying how we ought to relate to the other – what our moral obligation is towards the other (both human and non-human).[19] This perspective of African environmental ethics has its roots in the work of Mogobe B. Ramose. Ramose weaves it around his maxim: *Mothokemothoka Batho is a Sotho* meaning "To be human is to affirm one's humanity reorganizing the humanity of others and on that basis establish human relations with them" which is a translation of the proverbial expression. Accordingly, it is *Botho* (Humanness or humanity) and a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards other human beings which constitutes the proverb's core or central meaning. It emphasizes the fact that an individual cannot achieve his/her purpose without recourse to the complementary relationship that bonds him/her with others. This is a pointer to the communalistic nature of African worldview where the individual exists because of the group and the group because of the individual. For Ramose, humanness suggests both a condition of being and the states of becoming, of openness or ceaseless unfolding. It is thus opposed to any ism" including humanism for this tends to suggest a condition of finality, a closeness or a kind of absolute either incapable of or resistant to, any further movement. This is where efforts are made to safe *Ubuntu* from the accusations of being anthropocentric. It is argued that *ubuntu*rather fits the principles of the deep ecology

19. L. Le Grange "Ubuntu/Botho as Ecophilosophy and Ecosophy". *Kamla-Raj: J Hum Ecol*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2015, 304.

movement (DEM) which is reckoned as non-anthropocentric or ecocentric. In the light of this, it is important to distinguish between humanness (*ubuntu*) and humanism (the Enlightenment idea of what it means to be human) and education based on such an understanding.[20] In other words, for Le Grange, *ubuntu*should not be confused with humanism since it is antithetical to it. This position of Le Grange reinforces the position of Ramose already hinted above.

The *ubuntu* ecology has been criticized for being anthroprocentric in its definition. Even though an attempt has been made to counter this criticism by an extension of the concept to cover human care for other components of the ecosystem, Horsthemke observes that "any attempt to expand *ubuntu* to embrace respect for environment would have to ground concern for nature in terms of its usefulness to humans".[21] Again, the claim on the fact that *ubuntu* emphasizes humanness has been challenged by many scholars following the many ills in African society and that there is nothing special about *ubuntu* since it is only a description of how Africans live with the option of living not otherwise than this.

Ukama Theory of Environmental Ethics

Ukama theory of African environmental ethics is the product of Munyaradzi Felix Murove. The term *ukama* comes principally from the Shona people of Zimbabwe and is akin to the African worldview of seeing all of reality as interrelated. The Shona concept *ukama* means "being related or belonging to the same

20. L. Le Grange "Ubuntu/Botho as Ecophilosophy and Ecosophy" 305.
21. Kai Horsthemke.*Animals and African Ethics.* London: Palgrave Macmillan London, 2015, 5-6.

family".[22] According to Ikeke, "the Shona word, *ukama* implies close relationship and interdependence. This interdependence is not only that between one human and another human, it involves the reality that all things, including nature are closely related and depend on one another for existence".[23] He further states that humans exist in a community that embraces not only the physical humans, but also the community of ancestors, and the natural world of plants, animals, and other elements in the universe. In the *ukama* concept, therefore, is found a unity of reality where the identity of one being is necessarily tied to others, living or non-living. Thus, the African concept of *Ukama* is concerned about the earth and human relationship with the earth. The concept affirms human relatedness with the earth and all life. Human relatedness is not simply with humans but is seen as totally interdependent with all of reality.[24] In this way, Ikeke notes that *ukama* implies one is only a person because of the rest of reality. It means one becomes a person only because of nature. *Ukama* implies that human persons were to live in mutual coexistence with the cosmos.

There is a dimension of *ukama* that is related to totemism and ancestorship. Totemismis the practice of indigenous cultures of seeing an intricate relationship between them and some animal species, plants or other natural elements especially as it has to do with the origin of their ethnic group.[25] According to the New

22. M. F. Murove. "An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu". Ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009, 316.
23. M. O. Ikeke. "Ukama as an African Environmental Ethics". *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition,* Vol. 7, 2015, 202.
24. M. F. Murove. "An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu", 316.
25. M. O. Ikeke. "Ukama as an African Environmental Ethics", 208.

Encyclopedia Britannica, "it is a complex of ideas and practices based on the belief in kinship or a mystical relationship between men and natural objects such as animals and plants. Totemism refers to wide variety of relationships including the reverential and genealogical, between social groups or individual persons and animals or other natural objects, the so-called totems".[26] The *ukama* fosters totemic beliefs and emphasizes the reality of interdependence that thrives among beings. By this principle of interdependence humans are able to relate with other components of the ecosystem which are not removed from them but are an essential part of themselves. Murove writes, that "... it is in *ukama* between the living and their ancestors, that immortality of values is found".[27] So, through *Ukama*, the harmony between the past, present and future are actualized.[28] This is the point Le Grange makes when he writes: "*Ukama* is advanced through totemic ancestorhood and is a connecting thread of the present, past and future and that *Ukama* does not only mean relatedness at the level of humans but also to the natural world".[29] In this concept is found the basis for the humans to relate in interdependence with other components of the ecosystem. There are many other perspectives which have not been captured within the purview of this work. This is a clear sign of the enormous work that African environmental ethicists have in evolving a grand model of environmental ethics for environmental care.

26. The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 11. "Totemism". Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1994, 864.
27. M. F. Murove. "An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu", 317.
28. M. Lyakurwa, M. "Towards an Approach to Environmental Ethics Responsive to Environmental Challenges on the Slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro". Dissertation presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Ethics in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University, 2019, 63.
29. L. Le Grange "Ubuntu / Botho as Ecophilosophy and Ecosophy" 333.

Advocating Eclectic Approach as a Model for Environmental Care

Intellectual productions on environmental ethics from the divergent perspectives already noted point to one thing: that Africa can also boast of its unique way of catering for the ecosystem. The different perspectives identified have made claims to anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric dispositions. Interestingly, the quest for an all-embracing model has occasioned those accused of anthropocentricism to reconstruct their positions for a wider picture. However, the problem remains as to which model best suits the African context. One thing is clear and that is the fact that it is not possible to jettison any perspective suggested because it has its own positives. However, all positions cannot be swallowed because it may result in arbitrariness. What then should be the best approach to adopt in the midst of this plenty? This paper suggests an eclectic approach which thrives on a reception methodology. The eclectic approach will sieve out the strengths from all available perspectives and the reception methodology will provide the way of sieving these strengths towards an amalgam.

The anthropocentric schools will emphasise the special role man has to play in ensuring the care of the ecosystem, recognizing his role from the perspective of stewardship. This advantage of man could be derived from the capacity he has to correlate with both the spiritual and physical dimensions of life which are characteristic of the African worldview. At least it is clear that in the oneness of reality, the spiritual and the physical are comfortably collapsed in the human person. The communalistic worldview of Africa will cater for the unity in all the beings that exist and cater for the interrelationship among them. This is where the African ontological ideas will play a significant role in fostering an

encompassing environmental ethics. This ontology is not one of exclusion, but rather of inclusion and thetype that projects the idea of interdependence among beings in the entire ecosystem. In this way, the creator is satisfied with human role of stewardship and this well-executed stewardship of humans is perceived in the exercise of balance in the ecosystem which in turn benefits humans and other beings.

The challenge now will be the befitting name to represent this approach. This paper suggests that the eclectic approach should be maintained because it provides a melting point for all the perspectives suggested. A critical look at the different approaches or perspectives suggested shows that almost all of them project the idea of relatedness, community and interdependence. At the long run, the seemingly differing views are only the product of different nomenclatures. Like the Ockham's razor will have it, there is no point multiplying entities beyond necessities. The peculiar situation involved should be the determinant of the approach employed since beyond the common goal of ensuring environmental sustainability, our cultural diversity, multiplex belief systems and the like influence our actions. In this eclectic approach, whichever model is adopted should take it for granted that in the African reality scheme, the focus is on the community of beings and this aspect of communion should be the motivating factor for caring for all categories of beings.

Conclusion

This study aimed at lending the African voice to the search for a grand model for environmental care. Arising from dominant Eurocentric literature on environmental ethics, this work has underscored the African contribution to environmental care. It is a

welcome development that Africa has taken the discourse on environmental ethics seriously and philosophers of African soil are already evolving models for environmental ethics. Whether these models are anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric, it is pertinent to underscore that Africans must employ approaches that are peculiar to them. This approach must be in tandem with African traditional worldview in order to ensure that it is relevant. As the quest for most feasible models keeps raging, African ethical philosophers must continue to work out models that will guarantee proper environmental care. Although, there are many African perspectives on environmental ethics, each of these perspectives taken individually falls short of the appropriate model for environmental care because of its inherent problems that have already been pointed out in the course of this discourse. This study canvasses for an eclectic appropriate to will guarantee a balance for environmental care.

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