

Chapter One

AFRICAN ECO-PHILOSOPHY: NATURE AND FOUNDATIONS

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Executive Summary

The environment has been degraded in various forms, and each story of degradation is conditioned by the environment and mentalities of the people present to that particular part of the world, and the consequences of this degradation have become more visible in our time with the abundance of acidic rains, carbon dioxide emissions, depletion of national resources, floods, draughts, outbreak of diseases, pollution of seas, death of animals, shrinking of water bodies, etc. Scholars are agreed that the conventional approach which is largely Western has not been able to handle the problems associated with the present ecological crisis. There is, therefore, the need to develop alternative approaches in such a manner that it works for all peoples and in all places. While developing solutions to ecological problems there is the need to put into consideration the categories of particular peoples, and to use languages and cultural symbols that people understand. This is at the base of the emergence of African eco-philosophy. It attends to questions such as: how does the African understand his or her environment? How has he or she been able to manage this environment even before the advent of the West? What are the spiritual dimensions of his or her eco-system that gives meaning to the environment beyond the Western consumerist and

utilitarian concept of the environment? While there are a few papers written on African eco-philosophy, there is hardly literature that discusses its foundations in a profound manner in relation to the African worldview. This paper, therefore, discusses African eco-philosophy within the broader concerns of philosophy with the purpose of bringing out its distinctive characteristics and foundations, taking from the African worldview. The phenomenological and analytical methods of inquiry were employed for the collection and analysis of data.

Keywords: Philosophy, Eco-Philosophy, African, Environment, Nature, Foundation, Sources

Introduction

In this piece, the concept 'African' provides the context for this study, in the sense that it speaks of an African philosophical approach to ecological discussion within the parameters of philosophy, on the one hand. Thus, the concept African speaks of the *locale*, the context which obviously shapes the discussion. The concept 'eco', on the other hand, is derived from 'ecosystem' which refers to the organisms and the physical environment with which they interact and function as a unit linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows (Chapin, 2011; Odum, 1971). Thus, an ecosystem entails an ecological community consisting of different populations of organisms that live together in a particular habitat, with each element constituting the ecosystem playing an important role in the proper functioning of the ecosystem (Schulze, et al., 2005). The relevance of this study springs from the understanding that the ecosystem is under threat at different levels which the Western approach has failed to resolve (Alexander, 1999, p.14). This has led to the need for alternative approaches to the problems bedeviling the ecosystem. It is from this background that African eco-philosophy takes its place.

While focusing on the African context, this work attempts at articulating the nature of African eco-philosophy. That is, an African philosophical perspective regarding the ecosystem. It also involves how the African understands the eco-system at the philosophical level. This cannot be understood outside an understanding of the business of the philosophical enterprise. What then is philosophy? Philosophy is from two Greek words: *φίλο* (*philo*) meaning *love* and *σοφία* (*sophia*) meaning *wisdom*. Brought together, it means the love of wisdom. The concept is a neologism attributed to Pythagoras; it literally means “the love of wisdom”. This presents philosophy as a high and supreme achievement of man, and philosophers as aspirants to or proponents of wisdom. In this relatively strict sense, philosophy implies both the process of questioning and the results of this interrogation as embodied in a personal or public enterprise of value to mankind (Maziarz 1987). Thinkers in the Classical and Scholastic traditions tend to regard philosophy as a habit of the mind or a body of natural knowledge that results from the use of special methods which enables one to explain in a more or less profound way the sum of human experiences. It is acquired systematically and takes as its beginning, ordinary experience (Maziarz 1987).

Modern tradition concurs that philosophy is a reflection on the subject's experience; it is the response of the self to whatever appears to be non-self. During the Classical Era philosophy passed from the physical world to the contemplation of metaphysical realities; the conquests of Alexandra which initiated the Post-Aristotelian period, philosophy took a political dimension, emphasizing the commonwealth of humanity; then the dawn of Medieval philosophy with its spirit of theocentricism. During the Modern age of philosophy, it reflected a scientific character, emphasizing the powerfulness of

the rational faculty of the human person. As regards contemporary philosophy, apart from the concern with science, philosophers in the 21st C have become increasingly aware of the human and his or her problems.

Within the African context, African philosophy becomes the philosophical reflections of Africans or non-Africans with an understanding of the African people and worldview of African conceptual systems and social realities. In relation to the eco-system, an African eco-philosophy will focus on how this philosophical reflection affects or shapes thoughts or reflections on the eco-system. In this case, African eco-philosophy becomes an aspect of a sub-field of African philosophy. That which remains necessary in such a philosophical reflection is the employment of categories common, peculiar and understandable to the African people. Africa, its worldview and its historical experiences of ecological crisis, therefore, becomes the context for such a philosophical discussion. This work has the burden of discussing the nature of African eco-philosophy and the principles that defines, guides and determines its operations and ends.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework to be employed for the understanding of African eco-philosophy in this piece is Tangwa's *eco-bio communitarian* theory which is based on the African worldview that recognizes the inter-dependence of the dimensions of the African world. It is this metaphysical outlook that should underpin the manner of cosmic relations between human beings and nature. This was the spirit behind the traditional African's preservation behavior in relation to nature; they were cautious in their attitude towards plants, animals and inanimate things and the various invisible forces of the world. It was a philosophy of live and let live. This was very important as the separation

between the world of humans and the animal, plant, spiritual worlds were intertwined, such that what happens in any of these worlds will have consequences in the world of human beings (Ogungbemi 2007). This is the lesson that our technological, industrialized, modern, consumerist, capitalist, etc., world must learn from traditional African spirituality of the environment if the environment will be safe and the human life itself protected from further hazards.

The *eco-bio communitarian* theory is not opposed to technological advancement, industrialization, modernity, consumption of goods and services, capitalism, etc.; what it is opposed to is the motivation for their development and the uses to which they are put. The motivation in the relationship between the human person and nature that is guided by the spirit of possessing and dominating the world is at the heart of the present ecological crisis that humanity is facing. There is, therefore, the need for a more humble motivation for the pursuit of science and technology based on the eco-bio-communitarian attitude of respecting the other as a very important dimension of universal beingness. This understanding of the interrelatedness of reality and the metaphysical dimension of nature are at the base of African eco-philosophy. It is also on the basis of this understanding that African eco-philosophy makes its contribution to the pool of philosophies of ecology.

African Eco-Philosophy

African eco-philosophy signifies the African worldview that critically invokes ecology in promoting environmental protection. It is taken to refer to conceptual frameworks in African ecological and environmental science and as such combines theorizing in ecology with some contributions from the African worldview that relates to ecology. This theorizing within ecology is in relation to the recent ecological challenges.

These are the African ecological concerns that shape Africa eco-philosophical reflections.

What makes it an African eco-philosophy is the contribution that the African experience of ecological crisis and worldview make to the discussion on ecology. Every culture makes a contribution from its house of experience to the universal themes of thought, and this makes ecological discussions relevant to the reality of life. Each culture traces the unity of the themes in ecological studies, synthesizes and organizes them into a totality, based on each culture's concept of life, namely, the relationships between objects and persons and between persons and persons. However, much this may sound repulsive, this cultural contribution, which in the African context has strong religious undertone, is what particularizes ecology as African or otherwise. The 'africanness' of African eco-philosophy speaks of the *sitz en leben* or the *Locale* within which ecological issues are discussed philosophically. This provides the ingredients that defines it as African eco-philosophy.

Principles of African Eco-Philosophy

The principles that define, direct and determine African eco-philosophy include: symbolism, cause and effect, relationship, belongingness, harmony and cosmological balance and solidarity and respect for nature.

a. Symbolism

Symbols within the African context are religious and cultural realities that are imbued with deeper meanings than can be seen by any direct act of perception or apprehension, in the sense that they represent the abstract in a concrete form. In this case, they symbolize, express, represent, reveal and indicate (Ilogu 1974; Ukaegbu 1991). According to Dukor (2006):

Symbolic relationships are essentially tied to culture, as they show an essential function of the human consciousness which is basic to our understanding the language of a people through which the world and reality are penetrated. For our consciousness to really produce ideas of realities, logic needs to establish a relation and necessary connection between this consciousness and reality (p. xvi).

Within the African world, symbols are an attempt by the human person to present the invisible in a visible manner, the incorporeal in a corporal manner, the intangible in a tangible manner. In this case, it involves the human spirit's effort to represent the realities of the world of the spirits in a manner of mediation between two worlds; the realities of the world of the spirits are spirit forces that underlie every African reality. In this process of mediation, that which is not related in terms of meaning is employed from the human world to express that which is in the spiritual world. Echekwube (2005), therefore, avers that "Symbolism is an interpretation of an object in order to make it signify that which ordinarily it is not" (p. 6).

The African world is one in which trees, forests, animals, mountains, rivers, canals, etc., represent or symbolize one spirit force or the other. It is on the basis of this symbolizing, representation, expression, revelation and indication that symbolism plays a fundamental role in Africa eco-philosophy. These symbols give rise to thought; thought about the truth of the nature of the African world (Rubio 1985).

b. Cause and effect

Aristotle had holds that there are two ways of coming to know reality. First, reality could be known through knowing individual things or events as individual things and events, and as they appear to us; this form of knowing excludes the

underlying principle or ultimate causes of the reality that is known. This kind of knowledge is acquired through sense perception and is common to all kinds of people. Second, we can also know reality through going beyond the perception of the senses, beyond the perception of things and events as individual and isolated, to the perception of the ultimate causes or underlying principle of reality. A cause here, speaks of that which brings about a certain effect, and the effect is that which the cause brings about. In some cases, while the cause is invisible, the effect is visible.

The Ionians were concerned with this level of knowing when its representatives like Thales spoke of water as the underlying principle of being; Anaximenes spoke of a neutral element as the ultimate cause of reality and Anaximenes spoke of air as the basic unity in the midst of the plurality of things. Aristotle categorized this kind of knowledge as philosophical knowledge born out of intellectual reflection. He classified the causes of things into four: material cause, which is the material with which a thing is made of; the formal cause, which is the form or essence which makes a thing that particular thing; the efficient cause, which is the source or agent responsible for bringing a thing into being; the final cause, which is the purpose or end for which a thing is made (Kanu (2012a&b)).

For the African, according to Aja (2001), the world is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. Thus, Gyekye (1987) maintains the doctrine of universal causation in the Akan-African world. The African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions like his Western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature. Reacting to the Western beliefs that things could happen by chance, Ozumba (2004) argues that what they call

chance is only the ignorance of the series of actions and reactions that have given rise to a given event.

Although Gyekye (1987) maintains a universal doctrine of causality in African ontology, he emphasizes that greater attention is paid to extraordinary events and not natural events or regular occurrences when issues of causality is discussed. Regular or natural events will include, rain during rainy season, drought during dry season, a pregnancy that lasts nine months, the growth of plants, catching of few fish at some particular times of the year etc. Such events do not constitute a problem for the mind of the African, because, as Gyekye (1987) argues “such events are held by them to be part of the order established by the omnipotent creator” (p. 77). They are empirical, scientific and non-supernaturalistic. They have been observed by people who now know that there is a necessary connection between such events, for instance, they know that during dry season, the river dries up, or that a child stays in the mother’s womb for nine months before delivery.

Extraordinary or contingent events are those that engage the minds of Africans, and such events would include, a woman being pregnant for more than nine months, drought during rainy season, a tree falling and killing a man. These events according to Gyekye (1987) have particular traits that make them mind disturbing, “They are infrequent and hence are considered abnormal; they are discrete and isolated; they appear to be puzzling, bizarre, and incomprehensible; they are not considered subsumable under any immediate known law of nature” (p. 78). The events are deemed insufficient to explain their causes, thus, the ultimate cause of the event is sought. The interest is not on what has happened but why it happened. Not that the tree has fallen, but why it fell on a particular man and not on the ground or on another man.

The African principle of causality is expressed in the following Igbo and Akan sayings: *ife na-akpata ife* (something is caused by something); *odighi ihe gbaraka mee* (nothing happens without a reason); *nwata no nuzo na-agba egwu, odi nwa nnunu na aguru ya egwu no'hia* (a child who is dancing on the road, there is a bird singing for it in the bush), *You cannot see the rabbit in the afternoon in vain*. The Akan will say; “whenever the palm tree tilts, it is because of what the earth has told it”. Within the context of the present ecological crisis, it understands the changes in nature as a consequence of a cause, that is, as effects of a cause. And to address the issues associated with the present crisis, there is need to trace the causes as a first step (Kanu 2014a&b).

c. Relationship

The African world is a world of relationships: relationships between the living and the dead, the spiritual and non-spiritual, the divine and human, the animate and the inanimate. These relationships are shaped by the category of forces that are involved. In these relationships, forces in nature or realities in nature influence one another in a positive or negative way. Tempels (1959) avers that: “The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (p. 60). Expanding our understanding on relationships in nature, Maurier (1985) writes that:

Relationship as the fundamental category of African philosophy, is the vital and active link between persons. The term ‘vital’ wishes to underline that outside ‘relationship’, the person tends toward inexistence. The term ‘active’ recalls relationship is not simply thought, an object of abstraction; but is one that acts without stop in very tangible concrete acts (p. 60).

Iroegbu (1995) adds that:

Not only is relationship vital... It is also active. Active relationship is one that involves concrete actions, facts and events in its network of expression... Passive relationship belongs to the inactive, the moribund, the death. To be alive at all entails having active relationships that link one with others, below and above, and that integrates one in the community. Activity is vital. (p. 370).

The idea of relationship captures the nature of the African universe. It is a relationship not only between human beings, or between human beings and spiritual beings, but also between human beings and nature. It is this relationship with nature and spirit forces that forms the philosophical basis for African eco-philosophy.

d. Belongingness

Within the African world, Iroegbu (1995) argues that it is not enough to be in a relationship, every reality must belong or not be at all. To be and not belong is to suffer self-alienation. He describes belongingness as the synthesis of the reality and experience of belonging. This belongingness is based on the recognition of our finitude as creatures; this recognition manifests our limitedness and self-insufficiency, and, therefore, the need to belong to the life of other creatures in the ecosystem for survival. This finitude borne out of our being created applies to other beings; it means that creation is in a constant interaction with humanity and humanity in constant interreaction with creation; there is a general interconnectedness and interdependence. Consequently, the ecosystem forms an organic unit that creates a web of relationships which interconnects all creation. This connectedness and interdependence introduces the concept of kinship in creation and between creatures. In this story of interconnectedness, it is the world, the Earth that constitutes the common home of all creatures. The crae for this common home thus becomes a common responsibility for all,

especially human beings, given the very nature of their being as rational beings. The idea of a common home introduces the idea of a common responsibility towards the earth and towards one another.

The way to belong is to participate, that is, engaging the active side of relationship. This is the level of relationship with the whole that gives meaning to human existence or existence in general. It is also within this level of relationship that the human person gives himself or herself an identity within his or her community of being. This idea of belongingness and participation in the world, both the animal and the in-animate worlds, is the basis for an African Eco-philosophy. This is a world where the animate and inanimate, spiritual and physical not only relate but participate in the lives of each other for their mutual survival and realization of the purposes of their being or existence. This is a manner of being that speaks of solidarity among the forces of nature that tends to maintain the integral wholeness of the African universe (Kanu 2017a-e).

e. Harmony and Cosmological Balance

The purpose of a healthy relationship between the forces in nature is to maintain a balance and thus preserve the health of the universe. Once this balance is lost, usually born out the failure of particular beings to negotiate their existence on the highway of being in relation to the being of the other, the result is crisis, which can take the form of ecological crisis. Even though the African world is sometimes understood as dual, consisting the physical and spiritual worlds, the African universe is one. This oneness is possible if one realizes that in the African world that the spiritual resides in the physical, and that the physical is a manifestation of the spiritual. It is within this context that we can speak of trees, forests, mountains, rivers, etc., as the manifestations of spiritual forces in African eco-spirituality.

f. Solidarity and Respect for Nature

Solidarity and respect for nature is based on the African understanding of nature as a part of the network to which the human person belongs. Thus, when the human person expresses solidarity with nature, it is a way of preserving his or her own being by preserving the dimension of nature in question. When the human person respects nature, he or she actually respects himself or herself and not just nature. If on the other hand, the human person disrespects nature, the human person actually has disrespected himself or herself because of the connection between nature and the human person. The consequences of the human action on nature will have a resounding consequence on the health of the human person.

Conclusion

This piece studied the nature of African Eco-philosophy and attempted at defining its nature and foundations. Just as African philosophy is determined and shaped by principles based on the African worldview, African eco-philosophy is also shaped and determined by the African worldview. Very fundamental is the African philosophical elements that distinguishes African eco-philosophy from other eco-philosophies or spiritualities; these include the basic realities of symbolism, cause and effect, relationship, belongingness, solidarity and respect for nature and harmony and balance. These are the basic dimensions of the African universe that defines and directs the purpose of African eco-spirituality.

In African eco-philosophy, the element of symbolism is indispensable as the African world is a world of symbols, and these symbols convey meanings and presences about the African universe which is unique to the African people. The principle of cause and effect helps the understanding of the consequences of human actions in relation to the environment. Every action has a

corresponding effect, and the wrong action in relation to the environment will obviously have disastrous consequences. The concepts of relationship and belongingness speak of the relationality of reality, the complementarity of the different dimensions of being, since realities relate with each other and complement each other. The manner of the relationship will determine the harmony and cosmological balance that is possible. An understanding of this relationality of reality calls for solidarity for the preservation of being and also respect for otherness. The understanding of these principles shapes and defines African eco-philosophy as a discipline within African philosophy.

The beauty of this study is that it responds to the question of the possibility of an alternative perspective to environmental issues. It does not only provide an African perspective but defines it in such a manner that responds to the worldview of the African people. It is also a study in contextual philosophy, in the sense that it studies eco-philosophy or philosophically addresses ecological issues from African perspective, therefore, taking into cognizance the categories peculiar to the African people. It is within this context that discussion on ecological issues will not only be understandable to the African people but helpful to the solving of their environmental issues.

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