

## EVER-EXPANDING POPULATION IN AFRICA AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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### Abstract

*This chapter argues that the living standard in most underdeveloped regions is exceedingly declining in recent times owing to human activities as a result of ever-growing human population. The unprecedented population growth, particularly in the sub-Saharan African region, is as a result of the importance they attached culturally to human population within the family systems or the society. Perhaps, issues that underlie the environmental and ecological problems are connected to human activities and decline in the value systems because of the increase in population size. Africans believe in the creation of the universe, which man became the dominant being within it, but it does not mean he can misuse the earth where he dwells. Hence, there is a cultural belief in Africa that humans are to act as friends and stewards of nature, respect the natural order in the universe, and prevent any form of ecological destruction. In order to step up the ecological sustainability culture to confront the current challenges of environmental depletion, the chapter calls for the reinvigoration of the existing indigenous knowledge and value systems on how Africans navigate their environment and the entire ecosystem in a sustainable manner through the years.*

**Keywords:** Africa, population growth, indigenous value system, environmental activities, ecological crisis, conservational sustainability.

## **1. Introduction**

The demographic index of Africa is extremely rapid, and has shown signs of increasing even more in the next decades or so. Hence, the quality of demographics in the continent, particularly the sub-Saharan Africa, is problematic. Despite the high mortality rate in the continent there is a rapid population growth due to the fact that most of African cultures desire increase in their family size without considering the consequences of high density in a region that is considered backward in terms of means of livelihood.

There are a number of factors that are responsible for the ever-increasing population in Africa; average family sizes are between 4 to 8 children per woman, and quite a number of homes are polygamous in nature; a woman often marries young, stay in it till the end of her productive years; the use of contraceptives is strange to most African cultures; sexual abstinence that might serve as fertility brake appears to be against their cultural values; widows and divorcees who are within their reproductive years often desire to remarry to have families of their own as a sign of responsibility. Spinsterhood and bachelorhood are often discouraged in virtually all the cultures in Africa. These and many more are the reasons for population explosion in the African sub-region.

The rapid increase in number of individuals and lack of indigenous knowledge in the region are the proximate causes of decline in living standards, which indeed has exercised enormous pressure on available resources. Perhaps, the population growth in Africa poses immense depletion challenges on the environment through various detrimental activities they accept to be mainly family survival strategies. It is in view of this that the chapter seeks to expose the various ecological threats caused by apparent lethargy in indigenous value systems and several other pressures or challenges that the increase in population size in Africa has brought to the environment with the aim of suggesting various ways for improvement on ecological sustainability.

## **2. African Indigenous Knowledge System**

Knowledge in the African context assumes a complex composition beyond mere general awareness, or possession of information, facts, ideas, truths or principles that are learned over time. Conversely, the African knowledge system says something more beyond this; it divulges some kind of ideas of the corporeal, as a manifestation and somewhat related to the intangibility or incorporeity. Of course, there is unity between the knower and the knowledge possessed. This suggests in some sense the fact that knowledge acquired unifies the subject with the essence of the object known – which is consistent with the Aristotelian view.

The concept of knowledge in the African context, as earlier observed, avails in a seemingly bewildering manner; in fact, it presents itself in a more difficult and confusing mode beyond the general notion offered, which describes it as mere understanding, awareness, acquaintance, etc. It is indeed a sort of integrated knowledge whose perplexity lies mainly in its synthesis. The vision of knowledge in the African context has not shifted ground overtime from its traditional mode; this defies Francis Bacon's assumption that the 'ideal of wisdom is slowly replaced by the ideal of expertise,' which analyzes, manipulates and dominates the world (Tanzella-Nitti, 2002). Conversely, the African way of contemplation on nature consists in a unified system of expertise and wisdom within a single conceptual framework, rather than thinking about one replacing the other (i.e. the former replacing the latter). This is how Africans come to contemplate reality, and perhaps develop the will to analyze, manipulate, and dominate their world. Giuseppe (2002) alludes to this fact when he argued generally that:

History shows us that the most important cultural expressions of all peoples and nations, from art to literature, from their vision of nature to their conception of humankind, have often embodied a good amount of “unified and coherent knowledge,” often induced by the impetus of philosophical and religious thought.

Giuseppe's idea clearly explains the unity of knowledge within the historical religious context of cultural expressions of all peoples. This idea suggests roughly a sort of metaphysical convergence between 'being' and 'truth', to which extent it is the aggregate of knowledge about reality that paves way for a common openness to the search for the ultimate and grounding causes. Perhaps, “this also implied the convergence towards a unique deeper truth having universal characteristics.” Giuseppe (2002)

The indigenous African culture demonstrates a sort of anthroposophy, to which the human intellect is thought to have the ability to contact spiritual worlds, as they relate to all social engagements. Such unity of knowledge has a semblance of philosophical system whose purpose is meant to interpret and unify, in a coherent picture, the internal workings of (and between) realities. Perhaps, there is no other way that Africans, from the context of their traditions, could acquire knowledge that leads to a unified vision of reality better than this. Indeed, Africans like other races have their peculiar 'cosmovision' – a particular way of viewing the world or understanding the universe. One would then wonder on the mode which Africans acquire their knowledge. Conversely, their conception of indigenous knowledge implies consciousness of the physical and spiritual worlds, and the environment in which they conduct their lives.

This makes obvious the sort of interpenetration between the biodiversity within the physical environment and the spiritual world. Perhaps, this is how Africans educe their ethnocentric anthroposophy that reveals a sort of consciousness about the relationships linking all beings in the ontological order; which forms the basis for the African indigenous ecospirituality (Kabuk, 2021;357) – a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment.

### **3. Ever-Rising Population & African Values**

Human population simply refers to the number of people occupying a particular area, country, region or the entire globe in a given time, and continually being modified by other factors such as births, deaths, immigrations and emigrations, or other environmental factors, social customs governing reproduction, and technological developments. Demography on the other hand is the study of the characteristics of human populations, which involves their size, growth, density, distribution, and statistical data concerning birth, marriage, disease, and death.

Most of the issues that underlie the environmental and ecological problems in modern times are connected to human activities due to an ever-increasing population. The case is not different in the sub-Saharan African region. The indigenous African society attaches great importance to human population within the family systems or the society. This has brought an unprecedented rapid population growth. Various data on population index are provided by scholars with scary forecasts which the growing population boom is threatening.

The population of Africa as adumbrated by the United Nations Population Division (Worldometer: 2019 Revision) sketched its index from 1955 to 2020; and also provided the forecast from 2020 to 2050. The African share of world's population in 2020 is 18.2% as against 1955 which 16.4% and 2000 which is 14.1%. The forecast has given scary rise from 18.2% in 2020 to 20.6% in 2030 and 26.3% in 2050 respectively. Jason Mitchell (2021) gave a comparative trajectory of human population growth which he argued that: “Sub-Saharan Africa's population is growing at 2.7% per annum – more than twice as fast as South Asia (1.2%) and Latin America (0.9%). By 2050, Africa's population is expected to double to 2.6 billion people, accounting for one-quarter of the world's total inhabitants (up from over 17% today).” His prediction continued that, “Nigeria is forecasted to become the world's third-biggest country – after India and China – with 406 million people.”

As already stated, Africa's population is increasingly the fastest growing in the world. The index shows that in a couple of decades Africa will count for nearly half of global population growth (Bello-Schünemann, 2017), unless something is

done because the ever-increasing population is real and challenging. Perhaps, the increasing population size and density, the impact of high birth rates, rapid population growth and increasing dependency burden “all translate into greater demands on the African governments in productive activities which in turn accentuate the problems of unemployment, persistent poverty, urban slums, crime and political unrest” (OAU & ECA, 1994). The population variables also bring to bear glaring negative effects on development if not checked.

The critical growth components of the Africa's population has shown a retrogressing developmental index in all ramifications, due to the fact that demographic catalogue of Africa has consistently shown that its population size is squarely a burden. The problem is not simply the number of persons, it is the problem of “human welfare and of development rapid population growth can have serious consequences for the wellbeing of humanity worldwide” (OAU & ECA). Perhaps, the document has explicitly explained the contemporary situation in many African countries. Most African nations (particular the sub-Saharan) are seen to be deliberately refusing to harness the so-called demographic dividend that is known to have the potentials to unlock economic growth.

The African heritage consists of various traditional value systems which are passed from one generation to the next, and a plethora of this is what gives the identity that deeply characterized them as Africans. There is of course, a number of factors that are demonstratively a typical African traditional value system which their cultural sustainability solely depends on. Some of these factors responsible for the rapid population growth include the following: 1. The desire for male children in the African societies, particularly among peasants, to increase labour force for the family; 2. There are more polygamous homes in the sub-Saharan African societies as part of their cultural heritage, and there is no limit to the number of children a woman should bear. The size of an average family is between 4 to 8 or more children per woman; 3. Statistically, women in African societies often marry young and remain in the union throughout their productive years; 4. The use of modern contraception is believed to be against the African value system; 5. Sexual abstinence is characterized as a taboo in most African cultures as the woman is seen to be at the mercy of the man's insatiable quest; 6. Widows, widowers and divorcees who are within their reproductive years often desire to remarry to have families of their own as a sign of responsibility. 7. In virtually all African cultures, spinsterhood and bachelorhood is often discouraged as a sign to dignify the individual in the community. Of course, there are more reasons for population explosion in the African sub-region.

The unprecedented population explosion currently witnessed within the sub-Saharan region is not without adverse consequences, it brings about problems of food supplies, high dependency ratio; problems of shelter, health systems, education

and other social welfare like productive employments. There is no equilibrium between population increase and economic productivity, which affects the quality of lives in the African sub-region. Since there is lack of economic expansion driven by technological advances, which commensurate the large population and the increase in the fertility index of Africa, people often employ other detrimental means for them to survive. Some of their activities for survival exert direct pressure on the environment, and hence, lead to its degradation.

#### **4. Environmental Activities and Ecological Crisis in Africa**

Ecological degradation has routinely been one of the resultant effects of large populations with marginal economic viability and insignificant technological progress like most of the African communities. According to Bello-Schünemann (2017), “in many cases, extremely rapid populations growth is set to compound poverty and lack of economic opportunities. Many African governments do not currently invest adequately in human capital (education and training)...” Unless they do in future African's demographic change story will be a tale of missed opportunities. The average African society is indelibly that of consumption for survival, with an over blowing human population without improvising any meaningful remedy. In other words, sustainable measures are yet to be considered in order to reduce the pangs of poverty that are apparent attendant effects of overgrowing population.

A plethora of anthropological findings consistently assert the claim that a rapid population growth has the potency of urbanizing the third-world's minutest human settlements over a period of time. Hence, it is a truism that every society that is overpopulated and consumes more than it produces has thrown itself in what is referred to as an 'ecological deficit'. It is a situation where a population exceeds the biocapacity (or productivity) of the area available to that population. By so doing, the municipal must account for the deficit somehow (Bish, 2020). Nonetheless, there seems not to be signs or significant achievement recorded in terms of technological innovations among countries in the south of the Sahara, even as the world has unprecedentedly advanced technologically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Societies within the region prioritized ever-increasing procreation among their top cultural values without taking into cognizance certain detrimental concomitances.

The rapid population growth in Africa exerts much pressure on the continent's ecosystem. The brisk increase in the number of people causes widespread environmental depletion. According to leading researchers in the Global Ecology Laboratory at Flinders University, Professor Corey J.A. Bradshaw and Enrico D. Minin (2019) “our finding that the strongest predictor of environmental performance among nations in Africa is population density means that countries with most people

suffered relatively more environmental degradation on average.” The rapid population growth in the sub-Sahara Africa threatens the existing biodiversity in the region. And the trajectory of the biodynamics is such that within a short span the region may lose many of its already threatened species and ecosystems. There are indications that overseas demand for timber, minerals, fuels, agricultural products, seafood, and wildlife; and these demands are on the increase to cater for overgrowing global population.

The report of Flinders University exonerates some African countries like Central African Republic, Botswana, Namibia, and Congo to be doing much better than their neighbours in the environment stake. The report however added that, “...some of the worst environmental performers are densely populated countries like South Africa, Algeria, and Nigeria.” The indexes of these countries have shown a retrogressing stake; and despite the signals of threatening situation of overcrowded population, nothing much is done by the authorities of these countries to take in for questioning or abate the impending doom.

The societies within the sub-Saharan region are largely agrarian, who are mostly subsistent peasants. Cutting down of trees in form of land clearing for farming, as source of energy or charcoal, or wood and timber for shelter, burning of bushes for hunting, the use of toxicants to catch fishes, all these cause overwhelming ecological issues. Most of the causes of rapid occurrence of resource depletion and environmental impacts are connected with human activities associated with the problems of population explosion.

The recent industrialization in the region and elsewhere unprecedentedly brought about CO<sub>2</sub> emissions which threaten the quality of lives as a result of the exponential growth of human population. These emissions increase with the population growth, the climatic pattern changes as well. This simply means that as greenhouse gases increase, the society experiences climate change. In plain terms, the warming of the earth's surface is as a result of atmospheric pollution by gases. It is however feared now that the warming effects are being undesirably increased due to human activities, this manifest in climate changes as it is noticeably melting polar icecaps. This means that, as the population increases the earth's resources deplete, which results in deforestation, and loss of biodiversity 'as humans strip the earth resources to accommodate rising population numbers'. Hence, lots of resentments are evident in various reports on the developmental stakes of the sub-Sahara African societies, where a plethora of them revealed the sad tale of the situation in the region. Conversely, Mayer (2018) wondered that, “populations in developed countries trend toward using substantially more resources, while populations in developing countries feel the impacts of environmental problems more quickly”. Bradshaw and Minin (2019) reports however warned that:

As pressures on the environment grow, most African nations will have to focus on mitigating the negative interactions of high population growth and sustainable development if they want to have any chance of maintaining the beautiful, rich and unique animals and plants for which Africa is famed.

Perhaps, this appears to be a wakeup call to people in developing countries who are experiencing impacts of environmental problems acutely. This also includes the most vulnerable populations without access to clean water, increase in water pollution and diseases, decrease in biodiversity, and also those facing other immediate challenges of depletion of local resources such as plants and animals.

## **5. Promoting African Environmental Values**

The idea of 'values system' consists of various connotations; however, its ethical nuance signifies a form of practice based on people's cultural and moral belief system. It is often construed to be essential societal principles that provide a framework within which people act in ways that are consistent with the sets of values they uphold as their cultural beliefs or value systems. Most scholars are agreed with the general assumption that the value system of a culture implies the set values according to which people, societies or organizations regulate their behaviour or worldview. Such sets of values are what characterized most African societies as 'uniquely African'. Most value systems within the African sub-region are often communal or societal, rather than personal, which are mainly idealized systems – ideal representations of individuals' or group's value prioritizations. This set of principles often manifests, in reality, in the societal or group's actions and decisions, which over a period of time become absolute consistent cultural views or rules that guide the general conducts of each person in the society.

It cannot be disputed that people in recent times are increasingly becoming obsessed with the current state of the environment. There are indications that a large portion of what constitutes the environment is severely damaged to the extent that the entire ecosphere is threatened. The various indications of ecocatastrophes are as a result of human activities. It is due to this a group of extreme supporters of the environmental cause – who are designated as *ecofreak* – picked it upon themselves to protect the natural environment and its inhabitants. This is not completely new to the African culture. There has been a form of indigenous ecological awareness posited overtime, which constitutes part of the cultural values that are consistent with the modern ecological consciousness. As the society expands due to population growth, there is need for awareness to unearth the various cultural ecological values that have semblance of ecospirituality to remedy the environment from catastrophe.

There is no gain saying that traditional African society raised questions through the centuries on how humans ought to live in the society to foster a

sustainable ecological community. Africans believe that there is a rapport between beings beyond mere existence. Indeed, this is a comic knowledge that emanates from the African indigenous experience of the universe through which they navigate the environment in a sustainable manner beyond mythical imagination (Kabuk, 2021; 371). There is no doubt that the African indigenous thinking is somewhat ethnocentric anthroposophy, eliciting a consciousness about the relationship linking all beings in an ontological order. The traditional society around the sub-Sahara, although as simple it seemed, indulged in deep thoughts that were exceedingly ecosophic, which were attempts to answer questions that were meant to avert some perceived ecocatastrophe in the community to keep harmony between the individual entities and the cosmic totality.

It may be utterly superfluous to think that, as unsophisticated as the indigenous African society seemed, their thoughts were incapable of rising above trifling. Their thought incorporated and embodied awareness about the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. This is demonstrated in various belief systems that came through the years to be their traditional value systems that aid in the preservation of the environment. Ikeke (2018) advances an argument that the African traditional society developed taboos to protect medicinal plants and animals, religious myths to protect some environment.

Most of these spiritual tales that aim at preserving trees and forests are visible among the Bajju culture and the communities around the Nok area in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Kanu (2021) discusses the place of sacred animals in Igbo-African religious context in the entire project of preserving the environment. He emphasises a dual character that exceedingly makes the preservation of sacred animals central among Igbo people. According to him, “if they are not considered the symbol of the ancestors and deities, they are considered more suitable for the offering of sacrifice.” Kanu argued further that, the preservation of the sacred animals through taboos was to “avoid the stress, in form of ecological crisis that would come as a result of loss of these species.” This is consistent with the belief system among the Bajju people of Kaduna State in Nigeria. The Jju culture through the years held that certain domestic and wild animals are believed to possess great powers, and they are often seen to exhibit such character due to the spirit that is related to them. Since the spirits dwell in them, they are often considered sacred. Such an understanding must have made Metuh (1981;72) to believe that the 'sacredness' in these animals makes them to be “ferocious and ruthless and inspire great fear and extreme caution.” Most of African cultures believe in totemism; the Bajju culture posits some cultural knowledge that humans have some kinship or a mystical relationship with the spirit-being, such as an animal or plant.

The essence of these taboos, sanctions, beliefs system or indigenous knowledge is to check the abuse of the environment. Indeed, the preservation of sacred animals in African traditional is part of the global scheme to conserve the resources and the environment. In the view of Kanu I. Anthony (2021):

In relation to sacred animals among the African people, the creation of taboos for the preservation of sacred animals and the effort towards ensuring that these taboos are kept is based on the African belief that the loss of natural resources (animal species) must be avoided as the loss of it is more stressful than the gain of it. The traditional African society knew the importance of these animals in the balancing of the eco-system and they also knew the consequences of losing these animals on the lives of individuals in the society. The preservation of these animals through taboos was to avoid the stress, in the form of ecological crisis, that would come as a result of the loss of these species.

As observed earlier, recent ecological studies reveal that there are huge physical manifestations of environmental problems and ecotoxicity across Africa and beyond; this owes to the dual factors of ever-growing human population and the decline in value system that makes up the ethical standard of the society. Even though, there is synergy in the fight against ecological crisis which is demonstrated by the global community and various regions that consists of entirely environmental sustainability project, a reawakening of indigenous knowledge system that is purely culture-bound is required to give a complete knowledge to the adherents, which makes them become conscious of what their individual society or culture hold sway concerning the importance of environment and the lives within it. The culture however, is a repository of information in every traditional setting.

The cultural repositories on the relevance or the sacredness of the environment which the individual becomes conscious of, leads to the realisation that there is a common thread that unites both humans and nonhuman biological entities. This compels every individual to develop ethical concerns toward conserving the ecosystem. When consciousness of certain cultural values are rekindled and people become aware of the reality of nature, which humans are believed to be inseparable from nature itself, then, the entire ecosystem would be wholeheartedly preserved.

## **Conclusion**

The human population index shows ever-increasing population density within the sub-Sahara African region, which places the region on high risk pedestal in the global community. The research however tacitly established that the

exponential population growth in Africa south of the Sahara in itself is not a grave problem if managed properly, and the various municipalities design good policies and the right programmes that will guarantee equilibrium between the large population and the economic indices that lead to optimal condition of living for the people. Although, it is said that a healthy environment and ecosystem is believed to be in equilibrium when it is in a relatively stable state that keeps population sizes within a stable range; however, the situation with most African cultures is drastically different. Unless that is properly checked, the rapid increase in the number of humans often leads to a decline in the standards of living; and when the livelihood chain, which may include food and shelter, become insufficient, people tend to deploy other survival strategies that exert damaging pressure on available resources, and by extension, to the environment.

Countries in the African sub-region are predominantly agrarians at the level of subsistence; hence, theirs is an agricultural economy mostly in the rural areas. The immense vicious activities done by individuals due to enormous number of persons in the society lead to the depletion of the environment and other lives within it. Hence, there is dire need to disinter some of the rich indigenous African value system that seemed to have dulled over a long period of time. Nonetheless, the ethnographical ecological concerns of Africans exceedingly exhibit anthroposophy. Such moral concerns consider the place of realities and their meanings in human cultures. Exhuming the indigenous value system will in no small way refreshing the individuals, despite the range of the population size challenges in the continent. Indeed, there is need to understand the significance of the interconnectedness of all beings and the environment; a consciousness that leads to the realisation that there is a common thread that unites both human and nonhuman biological entities within the environment.

Conversely, the African indigenous ecospirituality is a sort of ethnocentric anthroposophy that elicits a consciousness about the relationship linking all beings in the ontological order. It is through this means that the traditional African society raises ecological related probing questions on how Africans ought to live in the environment to foster a sustainable ecofriendly society.

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