

African Environmental Ethics and the Challenge of 'Dehomogenization' of the Epistemological Framework

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Abstract

The paper examines extant models of environmentalism, environmental philosophy and environmental ethics. This paper observes that the models one way or the other fails to adequately account for the myriads of problem of the environment neither have they been able to identify a moral or ethical rules to solve the identified problems. This paper argues that the inherent weakness arises from the dichotomy created in the attempt to solve the problems. This paper also argues that the existing model of environmental philosophy does not appear to be feasible in adequately resolving all the environmental predicaments of our world, as it has been basically influenced by Western dualistic epistemological orientation on the one hand, and its homogenization ethical base on the other hand and focusing more on human being less than its focus on human concern. This paper concludes that there is a need for a new outlook or approach in environmentalism and environmental philosophy by introducing African perception of nature and knowledge system.

Keywords: Environment, Ethics, Dehomogenisation, Epistemology, Africa.

Introduction

Primarily, Environmental philosophy is the endeavor to delineate and set the scope for the fundamental and deep-seated dualistic hypotheses of man-nature relations and the essential principles

that exemplify the conception of humans in relation to other lives and the natural life-supporting environment.¹ This attempt includes the clarification and evaluation of our relationships as humans with the nonhuman aspects of nature thereby setting the scope for the kind of moral concerns human can have with the nonhuman aspects of nature. This is necessary because of the pathogenic concerns that take place as a result of the anthropocentric conjectures and ideals which inadvertently provoke life-destructive consequences on the environment.² Ever since the environmental and non-human concern became a major moral debate, anthropocentric views have been held responsible for all that is ethically wrong about our interactions and engagements with nature. Those who consider themselves as non-anthropocentrists, usually presuppose that the West's anthropocentric axiology and ontology trigger all of the environmental predicaments connected with our specie.

Thus, the existing model of environmental philosophy does not appear to be feasible in adequately resolving all the environmental predicaments of our world, as it has been basically influenced by Western dualistic epistemological orientation on the one hand, and its homogenization ethical base on the other hand, and as such focuses more on human concerns and less on human beings' relationship with Nature. As such, there is need for a new outlook that is holistic and dehomogenized. As such, any attempts to venture into an African viewpoint in environmental philosophy, will be bedridden basically as a result of its over-reliance on homogenization ethics and a dualistic epistemological hypothesis—a heritage bequeathed to it by western philosophy. A cursory look will make us understand that relying mainly on this

1.. Fasiku, G. C. “Kant on the Question of Rights and Moral Duties and the Challenge of Biocentrism” in *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. Vol.5 (1), 2022a, Pg. 94

2. Fasiku, G. C. “Kant on the Question of Rights and Moral Duties and the Challenge of Biocentrism” Pg. 95.

homogenization ethical framework and the dualistic epistemological approach as the philosophical framework for tackling environmental problems will discount the ontological and the epistemological magnitude of the African veritable traditions.

It is therefore important to note that, contrary to the two-world hypothesis inherited from the Platonic tradition, Africans have a one-world understanding of human-nature relation which derives its validity from their ontological interpretation of the relationship within which seeming opposites are reconciled.³ This is why, Obi posits that, for the Africans, the visible and the invisible worlds; the physical and the metaphysical worlds; the terrestrial world which comprises the human and the nonhuman world interact and influence one another⁴ and provide the foundation for African philosophy and religions on the basis of which a holistic approach to environmental problems can be achieved.

Thus, this paper seeks to further advance the improvement of an African oriented Environmental Philosophy which is holistic in nature by exploring African epistemic and ontological viewpoints for environmentalism beyond its western dualistic and anthropocentric perspectives. The study further argues for a shift in the theoretical framework, and advocates for an environmental philosophy that is African and must have a conceptual consideration for the ontological and relational holism that are the hallmarks of the African epistemic scheme.

³. Booth, N. S. *African Religion: A Symposium*. (New York: Nok Publishers, 1977), Pg. 5-6; Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*. (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 2017), Pg. 24-25.

⁴. See Mbiti, J. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1969), Pg. 4; Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*, Pg. 25.

Epistemological Challenges with its Process of Interpreting Nature

Western epistemology especially as stipulated in the epistemic project of Descartes, as well as successive intellectual discourse of the Enlightenment period is anchored on dualism and this traditional Western epistemology lacks sufficient theoretical framework suitable for the development of the right attitudes that could engender reverence or care for nature and the nonhuman environment. Perhaps the oldest and most essential classification of Cartesian epistemology is that it is anthropocentric in nature. Anthropocentrism is a worldview that presupposes the pre-eminence of man over nature and separation of humans from nature.⁵ From this perspective, a world with no humans would invariably cease to have a reason to exist. Hence, humans live with the state of mind that rationalizes exploitation of nature to an obnoxious degree. This view is impressively articulated by Robert Sheldrake in *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God*. He maintains that the effect of the human alteration of the environment was significant even in the Paleolithic era⁶ Though Paleolithic societies “seem to have lived in greater harmony with nature than agricultural societies or urban civilizations, they still appear to have wrought major changes in their environments”.⁷ Among the changes were species extinctions through overhunting and habitat alteration by intentional burning.⁸ Most surprisingly,

^{5.} Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy” Unpublished Doctoral Thesis.2021, The University of South Africa, Pg. 112

^{6.} As quoted by Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy”,Pg. 112.

^{7.} Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy”, Pg. 116.

^{8.} Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy”, Pg. 117.

“much of the world's desertification may have been aggravated by the activities of prehistoric man”.⁹ The difference between then and now, however, is the vast increase in human power, fuelled by the development of technology.

Another error in this tradition of dualistic interpretation of the man-nature relationship is also evidently reflected in the work of Martin Buber, who in his *Philosophy of Dialogue* gives an analysis of the relationship between the self and the other. “By other I refer to any being the self identifies as not-self, in which the self is seen as that which can relate with the other in either the I-It or I-Thou relationship”.¹⁰ Buber noted that if the self interprets the other as an It, the relationship between the self and the other will be an I-It relationship; and if the self interprets the other as a Thou, the relationship between the self and the other will be an I-Thou relationship.¹¹ With respect to attitude, the self is in the I-It attitude when it interprets the other as an It, and the self is in the I-Thou attitude when it interprets the other as a Thou. The I-It and the I-Thou relationships hence correspond to the I-It and the I-Thou attitudes: when the self is in the I-It attitude, it is in the I-It relationship with the other; when the self is in the I-Thou attitude, it is in the I-Thou relationship with the other.¹²

What should be noted here is that whether the self and the other are in the I-It or the I-Thou relationship depends on the self and not

⁹. Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy”, Pg. 118.

¹⁰. Buber, M. *I and Thou: A New Translation, with a Prologue and Notes*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Touchstone/Buber 1996), Pg. 52.

¹¹. Buber, M. *I and Thou: A New Translation, with a Prologue and Notes*, Pg. 53; Alvin, L. C. “Buberian Environmentalism” an unpublished Master's Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2001, Pg. 14.

¹². Buber, M. *I and Thou: A New Translation, with a Prologue and Notes*, Pg. 53-54).

on the other and this forms the basis of the relationship that the I has with the It. Such interpretation is erroneous because in Buber's analysis the self is a hermeneutic or interpretive agent, for the kind of relationship that occurs between the self and the other depends on how the self construes the other.¹³ This interpretive act is seen from two perspectives: "the primal setting at a distance" and "entering into a relation".¹⁴ The self recognizes the other as the other; recognizing the other as the other allows the self to enter into a relationship with it on the basis of the other's distinct identity. Thus, the value the self objectifies in the other depends on the perceived distinct identity which the self identifies in the other. This notion, rules out any form of intrinsic value in the other except that which the self identifies. The self merely has to recognize that the other has possibilities and intrinsic values of its own outside those imposed by the objectification of the self. Even though Buber eventually saw that the self's objectification of the other cannot entirely capture the other, hence, such objectification fails; he nevertheless believes that continuing to relate to the other in the I-Thou/ I-It mode, the self has to acknowledge any such failure in its objectification.

Another error committed by the western tradition is the homogenization assumption which gave birth to the human-centered or anthropocentric attitude towards nature. How could value exist without a valuer? Since, the art of valuing involves some form of mind's perception or consciousness, non-conscious beings may possibly not have the faculty to confer value on themselves except that which the conscious being (the valuer) imposes.¹⁵ It was in response to this assumption that Richard

^{13.} Buber, M "Elements of the Interhuman" in *The Knowledge of Man*, translated by Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), Pg. 60.

^{14.} Buber, M "Elements of the Interhuman" in *The Knowledge of Man*, Pg. 60.

^{15.} Fasiku, G. C. *A Holistic Interpretation of the Concept of Duties in Kant's Ethics*. An Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Kogi State University, Anyigba 2022, Pg. 109.

Routley made a clarion call in the question: "Is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethics? Is there a need, in other words, for an ethic of nature in its own right, an ethics that values the forest, the natural world at large, for its own sake independently of its utility or its instrumental value, for us?"¹⁶ Despite this clarion call, they were not ready to extend moral consideration and consciousness to some extent, to all natural entities, since it would result to mysticism or pantheism. So how was the supposed intrinsic worth of non-conscious natural entities be accounted for? Disturbingly though, they plumped for a view of value as tied only to possible rather than actual human valuers: if actual human beings did in fact value natural entities for their own sake, as the last man argument purportedly demonstrated, then even if human beings ceased to exist, it would still be true to say that, were they to exist, they would value those entities, and this was sufficient, according to Richard Routley, to confer intrinsic value and hence moral consider ability on nature.

African Environmental Ethics and the Challenge of Dehomogenization

One of the fundamental objectives for any viable discourse on African environmental philosophy would be to present a rational perspective that would accentuate the intellectual input of African epistemological framework to environmental philosophy. However, for a proper articulation of this environmental epistemic discourse, it is crucial for us to scrutinize the African epistemology and ontology, upon which the environmental discussion is anticipated to rest just like its western counterpart. For two reasons, this evaluation of African epistemological and ontological

¹⁶ See Routley, V. and Richard R. "Social Theories, Self-Management, and Environmental Problems" in *Environmental Philosophy*. Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie, and Richard Routley (eds.) Canberra: ANU, 1980; Richard, R and Routley, V. *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry*. Canberra: ANU, 1973.

foundation is germane. One is the observation that there is an unjust and unmerited superimposition of the Western epistemological scheme over the African Indigenous Knowledge, through interference and the rupturing of the Indigenous Knowledge base. Secondly, is the “methodic errors”,¹⁷ which portray the various endeavors by intellectuals to contest the denigration and deprecation of African knowledge base. Examining the African epistemological heritage that is devoid of these “methodic errors” becomes critical because such an examination will bring to bear the flaws in the universalization of western epistemic category on the basis of which African epistemic process is undermined or seen as inferior or lacking in rational substance.

It is important to note that; fundamental to African ontology is the interpretation of reality as wholeness which is contrary to the dominant dualistic interpretation of the west. As Obi succinctly puts it; “the African achieves fullness of being not as a separate individual but as a participant whose activities impact every aspect of the whole”.¹⁸ This position is informed by the African holistic explanation of everything that exists in nature; with the earth as the whole, things are not strictly divided into classes and subclasses,¹⁹ because life is interpreted as an uninterrupted and unbroken continuous whole, which does not admit any specific differences or distinctions as the case with the dualistic conception of the west. This wholeness informs man's relationship with nature because, the African sees himself as part of the whole and

¹⁷. Akinpelu, A. O. “An Exploration of an Indigenous African Epistemic Order: In Search Of A Contemporary African Environmental Philosophy”, Pg. 158.

¹⁸. Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*, Pg. 21; Opata, D. *Essays in Igbo Worldview*.(Nsukka: AP Express, 1998), Pg. 195.

¹⁹. Parrinder, R *West African Religions*.(London: Sheldon Press, 1962), Pg. 66; Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*, Pg. 21.

not separate from it and thus relates with nature not on the basis of I-it attitude but as members of the community called nature on par with other beings and in that regard, are not special or higher than others in any way. The difference between humans and nonhuman beings in African ontology stems from the fact that the former are less determined by their circumstances and are capable of moral responsibility than the latter.

This relational worldview includes also the harmonized wholeness of the community– comprised of both humans and nonhumans. The communalist nature of African societies shows a sense of interrelatedness and interdependency of all beings in the domain of existence. Although the theory and practice of communalism refer to relationships between and among human beings and has nothing to do with nonhuman beings, however, scholars like Kevin Behrens (2010), (2014); and Chemhuru (2017)²⁰ construe this term to include relations with nonhuman beings also. This highlights the epistemic basis for understanding reality in African ontology, as it includes all aspects of life both the human and the nonhuman aspects.

Additionally also, this relational attitude presents nature as a language being though its language is foreign to people, and its “statements” have to be translated. Even though, Erazim Kohák dared to reflect on the possibility of speaking to nature (trees for

²⁰. See Behrens, K. G. (2010) “Exploring African Holism with Respect to the Environment.” *Environmental Values* 19(4):465-484, Behrens, K. G. (2014a) “An African Relational Environmentalism”. *Environmental Ethics* 36(1), pp 63-82; Behrens, K. G. (2014b).“Towards an African Relational Environmentalism.” In Imafidon E. &Bewaji J.A.I. (ed.) *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 55-72. Chemhuru, M. (2017).*The Import of African Ontology for Environmental Ethics* Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. The University of Johannesburg. Accessed July 20, 2022. <https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/manager/Repository/uj:20840>

instance) in contemporary world²¹ because according to him, the idea of conversing with nature is often viewed as illogical and ridiculous due to the fact that conversation is commonly conceived of as “linguistic communication between people”,²² which may not necessarily entail mutuality– we occasionally speak to those who cannot answer us and we do not find our action out of place. If so, it is probable to think of speaking to natural beings in ways in which they understand. Speaking to them, Kohák states, means addressing them as persons, which is accompanied by a proclivity to talk about them as persons, relate with them as person and have an attitude towards them as person²³ This dialogue-attitude informs why Africans understand the language of nature and sometimes use such language to interact with nature and to influence it, which provides the foundation for African religion. This interpretation affirms the position that spirits and humans inhabit the same world²⁴ and if the world is interpreted as a field of operation with regards to all the cosmic forces, then, everything abides in the world and there is no-thing outside of the world. This standpoint validates Obi's interpretation of being as “being-within-the-same world”.²⁵ This implies a dynamic relation between Africans and the world of forces which requires dialogue and attention on the part of the individual to the messages nature communicates. On this basis, the individual has no existence²⁶ but merely reflects and “inessential appearance”²⁷ because “to be”

21. Kohák, E. *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Pg. 35.

22. Mateusz, S. “Dialogue with Nature and the Ecological Imperative” in *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*. (Vol. 4 (4), 2020), Pg. 132.

23. Kohák, E. *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, Pg. 36.

24. Mbiti, J. *African Religions and Philosophy*, Pg. 80.

25. Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*, Pg. 25.

26. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), Pg. 81.

27. Thomas, E. M. *The Harmless People*. (New York: Knopf Press, 1961), Pg. 116; Obi, A. C. *Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation*, Pg. 26

implies for the African, a dialectical relation with the other.

Conclusion

It has been established in this paper that the epistemological tradition of the west appears not to give satisfactory concern for the environment and nature in general because of its dualist conceptual framework. This dualist theory is also responsible for feminist theory and colonialism and many other areas of philosophical debates and finding a solution to the ecological crisis necessitates a change in people's attitude and peoples' epistemological basis towards the natural environments. This Western-centric epistemic position is suicidal to African indigenous knowledge. The superimposition and suppression of African epistemology is a "long-term consequence of modernity, enslavement and colonialism, in the process, African people have been reproduced as in a Eurocentric history".²⁸ This is largely in the bid to fit African conceptual schemes and intellectual engagements into the hegemonic and supposedly unitary epistemic category of the Western thought system. Such biased epistemic reasoning was further described by Anselm Jimoh as a "situation of distortion, which has broken and dismembered African Indigenous knowledge system through systematic degradation and epistemological silencing".²⁹

The position also taken in this paper is that, while many take the view that there can be no value in the absence of actual valuing, others have argued that what is valuable is what there is reason to value, whether it is actually valued or not. The different kinds of value thus turn out to concern the reasons for which the bearer of value should be valued, whether instrumental, aesthetic,

^{28.} De Sousa Santos *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, (2018), Pg. 1

^{29.} Jimoh, A "Reconstructing a Fractured Indigenous Knowledge System." *Synthesis Philosophica*, 65(1): 2018, Pg. 10.

symbolic, historical or intrinsic.

It has also been established that African epistemological and ontological foundations are flexible as they provide explanation for ecological personalism. This is not so much about accepting nature as if it were a human community but the basis of such relational worldview projects the nature as a harmonized corpus comprising both humans and nonhumans.

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