

# **An African Understanding of Environmental Ethics**

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## **Abstract**

Global concerns about the current environmental crisis have culminated in some controversial environmental ethical theories, among which are normative environmental ethics, sentientist ethics, biocentric ethics, ecocentric ethics and eco-feminist ethics. One of the underlying features connecting these environmental ethical theories is their grounding in Western perspectives and cultural experiences. Given that environmental concerns are global, and that the goal of environmental ethics is to address those concerns, critical explorations of environmental ethics need to go beyond the Western horizon. Nevertheless, very few African scholars have investigated the African people's understanding of the current environmental crisis, and the African perspective on environmental ethics. However, Segun Ogungbemi and Godfrey Tangwa have pioneered philosophical discussions on environmental ethics from an African point of view. Ogungbemi defends what he calls "ethics of nature-relatedness", while Tangwa proposes "eco-

bio-communitarianism”. This paper is a contribution to the consolidation of an African orientation in environmental ethics through a critique and reconstruction of the African perspective on the environment as presented, separately, by Ogungbemi and Tangwa.

## **Key Words**

Environmental ethics; ethics of nature-relatedness; eco-bio-communitarianism

## **Introduction**

Africa has a rich heritage as well as multifaceted challenges in her cultural-political experience. Since primordial times, Africans have had a humane and peaceful society and environment informed by a sound ethics. However, due to some internal dynamics in various African cultures coupled with some external forces, African states are now experiencing acute developmental challenges which have impacted negatively on their environment. Besides political issues arising from leadership ineptitude and capitalist aggrandizement, which have brought about corruption, injustice, poverty and underdevelopment of the continent, there is now a new dimension to the African crisis - the environmental imbroglio.

It is indisputable that the environmental crisis is now one of the most pressing concerns of our planet. As a global phenomenon, no society is totally immune from the threats which the environmental crisis poses to humanity and the rest of the ecosystem. Nevertheless, with respect to the African experience, a vast area of land rich in natural resources of all kinds, the dimension of the global environmental crisis in the continent takes on a peculiar character. The causes of environmental pollution and degradation, environmental injustice, ineffective responses to the environmental crisis, and the lack of a viable environmental ethics which takes cognizance of the peculiar dynamics of the environmental crisis in Africa are issues worthy of philosophical scrutiny.

Environmental ethics questions humanity's relationship to the ecosystem, its understanding of and responsibility to nature, and its obligations to leave some of nature's resources to posterity. It is an aspect of applied ethics which examines the moral basis of environmental responsibility (Pojman 1997, 1-2). By environment, we mean human beings and their surroundings, including the life support provided by the air, water, land, animals and the entire ecosystem of which human beings are but a part (Osuntokun 2001, 293).

In this paper, we seek to explore the role of African philosophical thinking in the efforts to conserve the African environment in particular, and the global ecosystem in general. The aim is not to merely ethno-philosophically describe how traditional Africans have managed their environment; nor is our focus to establish the primacy or superiority of the African option over and above the theoretical perspectives of environmental ethics in Western discourse. Rather, the primary objective of this paper is to contribute to the consolidation of an emerging orientation in African environmental ethics as a contribution to effective environmental management.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first outlines the dominant trends in Western environmental ethics. The second and third sections survey the views of two African philosophers, Segun Ogungbemi and Godfrey Tangwa respectively, on an African understanding of environmental ethics. In the fourth section, we posit a critique of the arguments of the two philosophers.

### **Western Environmental Ethical Theories**

Western discourse on environmental ethics is usually categorized into five schools of thought: enlightened (weak) anthropocentrism, animal liberation/rights theory, biocentrism, ecocentrism (which includes the land ethic, deep ecology and the theory of nature's value) (Yang 2006, 28) and eco-feminism. Traditional Western normative ethical theories (teleologism and deontologism), which form the first category, are very anthropocentric and short-sighted in

matters concerning future generations, as their understanding of rights and duties is limited to the present. From their anthropocentric viewpoint, humans have a moral duty only towards one another: any duty they seem to have towards other species or entities is really only indirect.

Animal liberation/rights theory, notably championed by Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1986), expands the object of duty to include all species in the universe. It contends that the pleasure and pain that animals experience are morally relevant, and that sentience is the necessary and sufficient condition for a creature to receive moral consideration. According to this theory, the only right way to treat animals is as ends in themselves, never as mere means, because animals, like us, have rights that precede other interests, and therefore deserve our respect.

However, animal liberation/rights theory has been accused of being individualistic, and of not promoting the interest of communities through common good and equilibrium of the entire ecosystem (Fadahunsi 2007, 6). In other words, according to critics, this theory does not consider the interest of the bio-community as a whole. It does not take the good of the entire ecosystem into consideration, and as such it is guilty of speciesism which anthropocentric environmental ethical theories have been accused of.

Furthermore, the proponents of animal liberation theory need to address the problem of predation. The point here is that some animals suffer tremendously when other animals prey on them. To be consistent therefore, the proponents of animal rights must oppose this pain and suffering. It is not enough to concentrate on the pains inflicted on animals by humans. So, one of the major challenges for the proponents of animal rights is how to address the problem of respect for life among animals: this is a difficult task.

Biocentric and ecocentric approaches, both non-anthropomorphic environmental ethical theories, represent a radical break with anthropocentric ethics. Biocentrism maintains that all life forms are “moral patients” - entities to which we should accord moral consideration. We therefore have a duty towards all forms of life. It is its *telos* (*purpose*) that gives each individual organism inherent worth, and all living organisms possess this worth equally because all individual living beings have their *telos*. The equal inherent worth of all living beings warrants according them equal moral status (Fadahunsi 2007, 6).

Contending that biocentrism was not radical enough, ecocentrism emerged, expanding the definition of a “moral patient” to include nature as a whole. Ecocentrism focuses on the integrity of the ecosystem and the value of species. Under ecocentrism, we have the land ethic, deep ecology and the theory of nature's value. Aldo Leopold (1966) summarizes the land ethic in the maxim: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

There are two notable basic ethical principles in deep ecology. The ecosphere egalitarianism principle says that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic value (Callicott 1992). Furthermore, all things in the ecosphere have equal rights to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization. To harm nature is to harm ourselves, and to defend earth is self-defense. Rolston's (1989) theory of nature's value derives our *duties* to nature from the *value in nature*. According to this theory, nature is a kind of subject with teleology, creativity, intelligence and a capacity to value. Instrumental value, intrinsic value and systematic value exist objectively in nature. These values in nature impose on us the imperative to care for the earth. Humans, therefore, ought to be Earth's moral overseers. However, ecocentrism has been accused of leading to unacceptable

treatment of individuals, and of requiring excessive sacrifice from humans (Fadahunsi 2007, 7).

Ecofeminism, as a school of thought in environmental ethics, seeks to end all forms of oppression, including the oppression of the environment. It does so by highlighting the interconnections between the domination of humans by fellow humans on the basis of race, gender and class on the one hand, and human domination of the earth on the other. It uses the lens of gender to reveal the logic of the interrelated dominations. For example, Karen Warren (1994) contends that there are important connections among systems of domination (e.g. historical, literary, political, empirical and ethical), and that any adequate feminism or environmentalism must recognize these connections. However, for Susan Feldman (2007, par.1), the claim that the domination of nature is wrong in the same way that the domination of women is wrong makes no sense, since domination can only be considered to be unjust when the object being dominated has a will.

Each of the theories outlined above has its own internal problems, and is also, to a great extent, a creation of the Western mind. Furthermore, the shortcomings of those theories suggest the possibility of alternative theories which may not necessarily come from the West. Besides, given that environmental concerns are global, and in view of the crucial role of environmental ethics in addressing these concerns, critical explorations of environmental ethics need to go beyond the Western horizon. A number of African scholars have recognized this, and made some proposals in this respect. The two scholars who shall engage our attention in this regard are Segun Ogungbemi and Godfrey Tangwa.

### **Segun Ogungbemi's African Environmental Ethics**

In his paper, "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis", Ogungbemi (1997) proposes some ethical considerations and practical measures to mitigate the challenges posed by the

environmental crisis. Ogungbemi construes the environmental crisis as one of the greatest global challenges of our time. In his thinking, the crisis is a conjunction of natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and storms, together with human exploration and utilization of natural resources through the ingenuity of science and technology. He argues that in order to properly appreciate the nature of the environmental crisis in Africa, we need to understand the ways in which both traditional and modern social structures have led to environmental degradation. While recognizing the universality of the environmental crisis, Ogungbemi notes that in understanding the nature of the crisis within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, three factors are salient:

- (1) ignorance and poverty.
- (2) science and technology.
- (3) political conflicts coupled with international economic pressures.

Concerning the factor of ignorance and poverty, Ogungbemi observes that the majority of Africans live in rural areas where they wallow in poverty, lacking basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation and efficient sources of energy. This factor of poverty cum ignorance, Ogungbemi argues, does not necessarily exonerate our people from their contribution to environmental degradation (Ogungbemi 1997, 204). Furthermore, he is of the opinion that the drive of African states to catch up with the developmental pace of the Western world is responsible for the mass destruction of their ecosystems through the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources.

For Ogungbemi (1997, 205), the way in which natural resources such as land, water and air are currently being used is contrary to the traditional African practice of environmental conservation. With respect to land for instance, the drive to “develop” has led to increased deforestation, with its incalculable effects such as turbidity, erosion, flooding and desertification. What is more, in its bid to catch up with “developed” countries, contemporary Africa has exploited some of its

essential minerals such as gold, copper, oil, diamonds, coal and uranium, thereby creating ecological imbalances. This often results in the degradation of agricultural land which the poor depend on, as well as significant pollution of waterways. Many African countries are rich in resources, but because their economies are not structured to take full advantage of them, they are exported with little or no value added to them. The net result is relatively few jobs and other economic advantages; and the few economic advantages that accrue are often siphoned by the corrupt elite.

In addition, Ogungbemi identifies the unprecedented population growth in contemporary Africa as a factor which has continued to aggravate the destruction of the environment. The logic here is that the more the population, the more the stress on the natural resources. However, Ogungbemi says that it is not clear whether population growth, by itself, is the problem: the inequitable distribution of global wealth may be more to blame.

Although many African traditional folk and their contemporary counterparts have in some ways contributed to the general environmental problems of the world today, Ogungbemi also underscores how traditional Africans have regarded nature with awe:

In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water, land 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, forests, rivers and wind and other natural 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 (Ogungbemi 1997, 204).

By the ethics of care, Ogungbemi (1997, 208) means an orientation in which one does not take from nature more than one needs. However, Ogungbemi is quick to note that this moral code is not unique to African societies, but rather has a universal appeal and application, and that there



are some interlocking questions that may obliterate its justification and applicability in contemporary Africa. Pertinent among these questions are:

- How do we know how much we need, given the nature of human greed and insatiability?
- Who judges whether we are taking more or less of the natural resources than we need?
- If we have been taking more than we need, what are the penalties and how fair are they? (Ogungbemi 1997, 208).

Ogungbemi goes on to attempt a reformulation of the traditional African environmental practice of the ethics of care in order to make it applicable to contemporary African circumstances. This conceptual reformulation is what Ogungbemi (1997, 208) refers to as “ethics of nature-relatedness”. 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” (Ogungbemi 1997, 208-209). In his view, the ethics of nature-relatedness has three basic elements: reason, experience and the will. It does not view natural resources as having a spiritual character. With this new ethical thinking, Ogungbemi’s expectation is that our present reckless use of nature can be curtailed.

Furthermore, Ogungbemi offers some practical suggestions on how to mitigate the current environmental crisis in Africa. *First*, he proposes the generation, transmission and distribution of solar energy at a reasonable cost as a means of reducing African over-reliance on firewood, coal, kerosene, gas and petrol as sources of energy. *Second*, on the issue of population explosion, he predicts that “when our population has reached an alarming situation, nature will invariably apply its break (through volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc.) and have a drastic reduction in our population growth rate” (Ogungbemi 1997, 208). *Third*, he recommends a turn-around in

Africa's political leadership in order to put in place policies that are environmentally friendly. He urges the leadership to demonstrate the political will to reduce the amount of industrial and agricultural wastes and to properly dispose of them so that both our industrial and commercial centers, as well as our rural areas, are safe from air and water pollution (Ogungbemi 1997, 209).

### **Godfrey Tangwa's African Environmental Ethics**

Although his work makes no reference to Ogungbemi's, Tangwa's focus is similar, directed towards developing an African environmental ethics that can confront the current environmental crisis. In his paper, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics", Tangwa (2004) bases his conception of an African orientation in environmental ethics on the metaphysical outlook of pre-colonial African societies, which he called "eco-bio-communitarianism". This metaphysical worldview involves the "recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans" (Tangwa 2004, 389). This metaphysical outlook underpinned the relations among human beings. It was also responsible for why traditional Africans were more cautious in their attitude to plants, animals and inanimate things and the various invisible forces in the world (Tangwa 2004, 389). He notes that traditional Africans were more disposed towards the attitude of "live and let live" (Tangwa 2004, 389).

Furthermore, Tangwa is emphatic that within the traditional African metaphysical worldview, the dichotomy between "plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a slim and flexible one" (Tangwa 2004, 389). It is in the context of this metaphysical framework that one can coherently situate the people's belief in the transmigration of the soul into animals, plants or into forces such as the wind. For Tangwa, such a mindset has very significant implications for the way traditional Africans approached and treated nature. Illustrating his position on the conciliating relation between humans and the environment in traditional African culture, Tangwa cites the instance of his own ethnic group, the Nso of Cameroon. According to him, the Nso attitude toward nature is that of respectful co-existence, conciliation and containment: there are frequent sacrifices to

God, to the divine spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, to the departed ancestors, and to the sundry invisible and inscrutable forces of nature (Tangwa 2004, 390). His point is that African culture is not against technology, but rather cautions the piecemeal use of technology. Moreover, given the respect for the values that adorn traditional African culture, there are some lessons to be learnt by western culture, which has subjected such values to the caprice of the god of technology, industrialization and capitalism.

In contradistinction to the western worldview, which Tangwa sees as predominantly anthropocentric and individualistic, the African worldview, Tangwa maintains, is eco-bio-communitarian (Tangwa 2004, 392). This distinction notwithstanding, Tangwa is aware that it does not necessarily have an automatic consequence on the environment:

An anthropocentric ethic, even an individualistic one, if it were sufficiently rational, need not necessarily endanger the environment, just as an eco-bio-communal one may not necessarily forestall all dangers to the environment (Tangwa 2004, 392-393).

Tangwa's point is that there is nothing wrong with modern technology in and of itself, but only with the motivation for its development. He condemns the use of Western technology to satisfy the will to possess and dominate the world. For Him, in order to promote the immeasurable advantage of the whole of mankind, a more modest motivation for the pursuit of science and technology based on the eco-bio-communitarian attitude of "live and let live" ought to be substituted for the aggressive motivation of domination (Tangwa 2004, 394).

### **On an African Orientation in Environmental Ethics: Some Critical Comments**

Ogunbemi's proposal of a reconstructed return to the traditional African attitude to the environment reflected in the "ethics of care" leads him to what he refers to as "the ethics of nature-relatedness". It is an orientation that recognizes that we humans necessarily rely on the natural world for our existence. As such, we ought to treat the environment with due respect. As Ogunbemi (1997, 206) correctly observes, the environmental crisis in Africa, as anywhere else,

is primarily a consequence of human actions. Since value systems inform our actions, we need to search for a viable environmental ethics that is in agreement with African ontology. This is essential in order to pave the way for environmental policies compliant with the cultural experiences of the people.

However, although Ogungbemi shows an adequate understanding of the African perspective of the environmental crisis, especially with his comparative analysis of the traditional and modern African societies' contributions to the complexity of the environmental crisis, his prescription for environmental ethics is the alienation of the African spirit and peculiar experiences. In fact, Ogungbemi's alarming recommendation that nature should invariably apply its brakes through, among other things, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in order to have a drastic reduction in Africa's population growth rate, is an indication of the disconnectedness of his ethics of nature-relatedness from the African ontology.

On the other hand, the merit of Tangwa's position is that it recognises the indispensability of African metaphysics in the construction of a meaningful African environmental ethics. He recognises that the absence of the dichotomy between plants, animals and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual in the African worldview, informed the traditional African attitude of "*live and let live*". Such a metaphysic is not one of domination instigated by greed. Instead, it is founded on the belief that there is a reason for whatever exists, although human beings may not immediately know it. Latent in that metaphysics are folkloric assertions and certain taboos that are conservational of ecological balance.

Nevertheless, the shortcoming of Tangwa's perspective is that it is an idealised ethno-philosophical defense of the indigenous African management of the environment. As such, it does not recognise the ways in which traditional Africans contributed to the degradation of the

environment, albeit due to ignorance and poverty. In this regard, Ogungbemi's position is more commendable.

In the accounts of both Ogungbemi and Tangwa, some questions whose answers are essential for a plausible African orientation in environmental ethics are not raised:

- \* What is the obligation of people in Africa (Africans and non-Africans alike) towards future generations of human beings, sentient beings, the African ecosystem in particular, and nature in general?
- \* What is the justification for an environmental ethics that is African in orientation, and must such an orientation exclude environmental theories from the West?
- \* What are the political, cultural, economic, educational, legal and moral considerations in the construction of an African environmental ethics?

The solution to environmental destabilization is not purely technological or exclusively attitudinal. What is more, environmental ethics, no matter how grounded in African experience or how intellectually sophisticated, cannot alone solve the environmental crisis in Africa. Despite the fact that technology, which is at the root of the environmental crisis, is craved for in Africa and indispensable today, it is our recommendation that only technologies that are significantly benign to the environment be allowed in the continent. In instances in which the effects of a technology are yet indeterminable, the technology ought to be deemed guilty unless or until proved innocent. This reasoning is premised on the view that it is better to err on the side of caution than to discover hazards when great damage has already been done. Governments and non-governmental bodies ought to contribute to environmental protection in Africa (Nneji 2010, 37).

## Conclusion

This paper has not advocated for an entirely new environmental ethics for Africa. Rather, its point of emphasis has been that due to certain peculiarities of environmental degradation in Africa today, not all kinds of environmental ethics are adequate for the continent. Africans can learn from various Western ethical approaches to environmental conservation, but they must not lose sight of the African environmental experience. As such, the task of constructing an adequate African environmental ethics is one of the most fundamental challenges of contemporary African philosophy. Yet as long as powerful predatory countries continue to exploit the fledgling African states, the environmental crisis cannot be adequately addressed.

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