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**PROVERBS AS SOURCES OF AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS:  
ARTICULATING INDIGENOUS ECO-SPIRITUAL WISDOMS**

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**Abstract**

African environmental ethics as an area within the parameters of applied African philosophy focuses on the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as more concrete issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. In relation to Africa, environmental ethics is complementary. It, therefore, responds to questions from a balanced perspective that understands the human person and the environment as complementary realities. Questions such as: what is our understanding of nature or the environment around us? What responsibilities does the human person have towards wild species and ecosystems? How does the recognition of rapid, global environmental change challenge our understandings of these obligations? These notwithstanding, this paper focuses on African proverbs as a source of African environmental ethics. This is important given the place that African proverbs occupy in African life and spirituality- it is the wisdom of the African people articulated in words using categories that are common to the African people. This piece will, therefore, study proverbs in general as they relate to nature, and the particular proverbs that relate to environmental preservation. The hermeneutic method of inquiry will be patronized for the purpose of this study, and the *Igwebuike* conservation theory employed as an interpretative theory. This work discovers that African proverbs are a major source of African environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, African, Environment, Ethics, Nature, Anthropocentric, Philosophy

## Introduction

A cursory glance at developments in the field of ethics reveals that many ethical perspectives that are traditional in character are *anthropocentric* or human-centered given that they assign intrinsic value to human beings than to non-human thing, therefore, suggesting that the value of non-human realities are merely instrumental. This is expressed in the perspective of Aristotle who wrote that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man”<sup>1</sup>. At other times when value is given to animals and other non-human realities within the African cosmos, it is done in relation to the good of the human person<sup>2</sup>.

In the 1970s environmental ethics emerged as a discipline within ethics and as a challenge to traditional ethics. At this time and beyond, it developed rational arguments for assigning intrinsic value to the natural environment. This was based on the understanding that moral duties towards the environment are derived from our direct duties to its human inhabitants. Thus, as much as the valuing of the human person was necessary, the protection of the environment was a necessary accompaniment of the latter<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle (*Politics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 80)

<sup>2</sup> Passmore, J., 1974. *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, London: Duckworth, 2nd edition, 1980; Pew 2018. *Majorities See Government Efforts to Protect the Environment as Insufficient*, Pew Research Center May 14, 2018; Bookchin, M., 1980. *Toward an Ecological Society*, Montreal: Black Rose Books; Bookchin, M., 1987. “Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology”, *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, numbers 4, 5; reprinted in Witoszek and Brennan 1999, pp. 281–301.

<sup>3</sup> Light, A., 1996. “Callicott and Næss on Pluralism”, *Inquiry*, 39: 273–294; Light, A., 2001. “The Urban Blindspot in Environmental Ethics”, *Environmental Politics*, 10: 7–35; Light, A. and Katz, E., 1996. *Environmental Pragmatism*, London: Routledge; Light, Andrew and Rolston, Holmes (eds.), 2003. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell; Norton, B.G., Hutchins, M., Stevens, E. and Maple, T.L. (eds.), 1995. *Ethics on the Ark*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Within the African perspective, environmental ethics deals with the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as more concrete issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems in such a manner that its basic principles spring from African categories. In this way, the African worldview become the basis for African environmental ethics, and responds to the question of the relationship between the human person and the environment. In this piece, African proverb is employed as a basic source of African environmental ethics given the fundamental place that proverbs occupy in African daily life and philosophy.

### **Understanding African Proverbs**

Kanu holds that “African proverbs are the wisdom and experience of the African people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. They spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their belief, principles of life and conduct. It expresses the moral attitudes of a given culture, and reflects the hopes, achievements and failings of a people”<sup>4</sup>. He adds that “The centrality of proverbs in African oral tradition is manifested in the frequency of its use by Africans in conversations, speeches, instructions, judgment, drama, arguments, storytelling, in fun making, etc”<sup>5</sup>.

The Igbo refer to proverbs as “vegetables for eating speech, and as the palm oil with which words are eaten”<sup>6</sup>. They also hold that “a child who knows how to use proverbs have justified the dowry paid on his mother’s head”<sup>7</sup>. Among the Zulu,

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<sup>4</sup> Kanu, I. A. (2015). *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications; Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

<sup>7</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

it is said that “without proverbs, language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul”<sup>8</sup>. The Yoruba refer to them as “as horses for chasing missing words”<sup>9</sup>.

### **African proverbs and the environment**

Owing to the holistic nature of African traditional societies, and in fact the African worldview, everything is considered to be part of nature<sup>10</sup>. It is, therefore, not surprising that African proverbs are about, not just human beings, but God, deities, animals, plants, hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, objects, etc. The following proverbs speak of the fundamental place that African worldview gives to the environment or to the natural world.

**Table 1: African Proverbs on nature**

<b>NO.</b>	<b>African Proverb</b>	<b>Aspect of Nature</b>
<b>1</b>	It is better to fall from a tree and break your back than to fall in love and break your heart.	<b>Tree</b>
<b>2</b>	During a storm you seek shelter under a tree and not the clouds	<b>Tree/Storm</b>
<b>3</b>	If you don't eat mangoes that fall on the ground, be sure to be strong enough to pick the ones on the tree	<b>Tree</b>
<b>4</b>	He is a fool who praises the fruit of a tree and	<b>Tree</b>

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<sup>8</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

<sup>9</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.

<sup>10</sup> Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, *Igbo-African ecological spirituality: An Indigenous response to modern ecological crisis*. A paper presented at the Inaugural Conference organized by Harvard University (Divinity School) on Ecological Spiritualities, from April 27<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, p. 2

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	forgets its roots	
5	If you want to lean on a tree, first make sure it can hold you	<b>Tree</b>
6	He who is not around is never beaten by the falling tree	<b>Tree</b>
7	If you want to sit under a shade in your old age plant a tree now	<b>Tree</b>
8	If your vision is for a year plant wheat, if your vision is for a decade plant trees, and if your vision is for a lifetime plant people	<b>Tree</b>
9	Monkeys don't advise their young ones to be careful on trees they just remind them of the distance to the ground	<b>Tree/Animal</b>
10	It is not the monkey on top that make a tree fall but it is the work and effort of numerous small insects and ants	<b>Animal/Tree</b>
11	A family tie is like a tree, it can bend but it cannot break	<b>Tree</b>
12	A strong tree shall always grow from the roots and not the seeds	<b>Tree</b>
13	A palm wine taper does not stop tapping palm wine because he once fell from the top of a palm wine tree	<b>Tree</b>
14	A wind can move the branches of trees but it will never move the head of a man	<b>Tree</b>
15	If money were to be found up in the trees, most people would be married to monkeys	<b>Tree/Animal</b>
16	Being in the forest and failing to see trees is a curse	<b>Tree</b>

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17	If you debark a tree do not expect it to live again; you can only plant another of its kind	<b>Tree</b>
18	When you see a palm tree, the palm tree has seen you	<b>Tree</b>
19	If a tree is cursed even its shade is unclean	<b>Tree</b>
20	If a bird does not recognise a tree, it will not rest on it	<b>Tree</b>
21	A small shrub may grow into a tree	<b>Tree</b>
22	He who tries to shake a tree stump shakes only himself	<b>Tree</b>
23	Only when a tree has grown can you tie your cow to it	<b>Tree</b>
24	The day the monkey is destined to die, all the trees get slippery	<b>Tree/Animal</b>
25	The axe forgets; the tree remembers	<b>Tree</b>
26	A river does not flow through the forest without felling the trees	<b>Tree</b>
27	A small axe is not sufficient to cut down a large tree	<b>Tree</b>
28	On the day a monkey dies, all the trees are slippery	<b>Animal/Tree</b>
29	A lizard without one leg cannot move up a tree	<b>Animal/Tree</b>
30	No matter how tall a tree might grow it will always shed its leaves on the ground	<b>Tree</b>
31	The fruits of a tree on the roadside are never eaten ripe	<b>Tree</b>
32	The mouse says: I dig a hole without a hoe;	<b>Animal/Tree</b>

	the snake says: climb a tree without arms	
33	The one who went to the in-laws got trapped in a thorn tree	Tree
34	The predator lands on an unknown tree	Tree
35	The roughness of a cotton tree is not known until you get close to it	Plant
36	There are no short cuts to the top of a palm tree	Tree
37	When one tries to shake a big tree, he ends up shaking himself	Tree
38	When the shadow of a tree is bent, straighten the tree, not the shadow	Tree
39	When there is a big tree, small ones climb on its back to reach the sun	Tree

### **African Proverbs and Environmental Preservation**

African proverbs<sup>11</sup> are not only oriented towards nature, given the structure of the African universe- but also these proverbs were used in the past by African ancestors to show the important place nature occupies and the need for the human effort towards its preservation. It is, therefore, not surprising that there are particular proverbs used by the African people as daily reminder to the human family that the environment must be protected. Some of these proverbs include:

**Table 2: African Proverbs on preserving the environment**

No.	Proverbs	Ecological Implications
1	A tree on a hill is a meeting place	Every aspect of nature connects to

<sup>11</sup> Kanu, I. A. Igbo proverbs as embodiments of Igbo-African philosophy. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 4. 1. 2014, pp. 164-168

	for birds	other parts of nature. To destroy a part, therefore, is to destroy something of the life of the other aspects of nature.
2	Trees pull the rain	To cut down trees has many implication for rains in the community. If you want rains, you will need to plant trees. The destruction of an aspect of the ecosystem can lead to one form of ecological crisis or the other.
3	Hills with trees are footprints of God	God is present in nature. The footprints point to the signs of His presence. The cutting down of trees and destruction of hills is to temper with His presences with us.
4	The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the second-best time is now	There is an urgent need for the planting of trees. This is not only for food but for the protection of our common home.
5	When there is something wrong in the forest, there is something wrong in the society	The point is that the life of the forest has implications or connection with the life of the human society. The forest is a part of the society, and just as we protect the society, we must protect the forest.
6	No one throws a stone where he or she has placed a container of milk	No one destroys the place where he lives. To destroy the environment is to destroy the home of the human person.
7	A tree blossoms with rain	Just as trees bring the rain, trees also blossom with the rain. Different dimensions of nature depend on each



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		other for survival.
8	A dried-up tree do not bear a green one	The quality of the life of the environment will determine the quality of the life of the creatures that inhabit it.
9	Treat the earth well; it was not given to you by your parents	The human person has a responsibility towards nature; it is a responsibility to be understood within the context of stewardship.
10	Do not finish the arrowroot; think of the future	Do not take from nature more than you need or to a point where the life of the future is threatened.
11	Eat, but leave some in the forest for others	Do not take from nature more than you need or to a point where the life of the future is threatened.
12	To plant a tree is to relate with God	Nature is the abode of the divine or great spirits.
13	A person who has planted a tree before he dies did not live in vain	The human person has a responsibility to contribute to nature. At birth, one is received by nature into nature; one needs to make nature a better place before leaving nature. This is not only in appreciation but for the good of others who will come after you.
14	Earth is our mother's womb	The human person comes from nature and is cared for by nature. This calls for respect for the earth knowing fully well that it depends on such a care.
15	Do not drain the river till it dries	Nature must not be overused. There is need for moderation in the use of

		nature.
<b>16</b>	One will take a reserve if only one put it in the reserve	The manner in which a person uses nature will determine the survival of nature.
<b>17</b>	When there is a big tree, small ones climb on its back to reach the sun	The relationality and complementarity in nature
<b>18</b>	When the shadow of a tree is bent, straighten the tree, not the shadow	The responsibility towards the protection of trees
<b>19</b>	When one tries to shake a big tree, he ends up shaking himself.	The destruction of the environment is the destruction of oneself
<b>20</b>	If you want to sit under a shade in your old age plant a tree now.	The preservation of nature is the preservation of the future of one's life

### **Ecological Values in African Proverbs**

A cursory glance at the twenty African proverbs that speak of the environment, one notices that they express several ecological values that are necessary for the preservation of the environment. These values include:

1. African proverbs promote the ecological culture of eco-diversity, as they present the environment as a home for diverse realities that need to be given their due spaces for their existence.
2. African proverbs promote the African understanding of nature or the environment as a reality that is composed of several dimensions that are, however, interrelated and inter-connected.

3. African proverbs promote the concept of nature or the environment as places and realities that have spiritual affiliations. Thus, nature is not only perceived in physical terms but in meta-empirical terms.

4. African proverbs promote the urgency of preserving the environment as a backlog in this respect would obviously lead to environmental crisis in the future when neglected.

5. African proverbs present nature as a part of the life of the human person, in the sense that neglecting the environment will have consequences on the life of the human person.

6. African proverbs present nature or the environment as a heritage handed over from the ancestors to the present generation. As in the case of other heritages, it must be handled with care for the good of the next generation. This idea introduces the idea of responsibility and stewardship.

7. African proverbs promote the human responsibility of not taking from nature or the environment more than a person needs from it. This is based on the understanding that the environment is still with us.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has employed the *Igwebuiké*<sup>12</sup> conservation theory which is an indigenous approach that is holistic in character for the study of the environment.

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<sup>12</sup> Kanu, I. A., *Igwebuiké: An operative condition of African philosophy, religion and culture- Towards a thermodynamic transformation ontology*. Maiden Inaugural Lecture held at Tansian University, Umunya. Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021, pp. 22-23; Kanu, I. A., *Igwebuiké as the consummate foundation of African Bioethical principles*. *An African journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol.2 No1 June, 2016, pp.23-40; Kanu, I. A., *Igwebuiké as an expressive modality of being in African ontology*. *Journal of Environmental and Construction Management*. 6. 3. 2016, pp.12-21; Kanu, I. A., *African traditional folktales as an integrated classroom*. *Sub-Saharan African Journal of Contemporary*

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A study of African proverbs in relation to the environment is considered holistic because of the nature of the African worldview that is complementary and relational in character. It is this worldview that shapes African proverbs. These indigenous knowledge systems as related to the environment are designed in such a manner that: feedback comes from the environment and not just from the human society; it creates a moral economy that places a moral obligation on those who are members of the local community; it focuses on the development of the behavioral patterns of the indigenous people with the view of altering the way they relate with biodiversity; it regards the environment with awe and respect, given that the environment is understood as the abode of the divine<sup>13</sup>.

A good number of African proverbs as they relate to the environment have been presented in such a manner that the ecological value of each is expressed alongside. The purpose has been to express how African traditional societies preserved the environment through these sayings that occupy fundamental place in the daily life of the African people- not only in her daily communications, important speeches, but also an important tool used for the daily education of both the young and old. As several efforts and approaches are being employed so as to deal with the present ecological crisis, this piece is a contribution that captures the African perspective and remains a fundamental indigenous contribution to the present ongoing global and local discourses on environmental preservation and sustainability.

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Ebeku Essel, The role of taboos in solving contemporary environmental degradation in Ghana: The case of Cape Coast Metro. *Social Sciences*. 9. 4. 2020, p. 90.

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