

**TOWARDS AN AFRICAN ECO-PHILOSOPHY**

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**Abstract**

*African eco-philosophy is yet to receive due attention from philosophers. As the ecological crisis that presently ravages the world assume an alarming level that threatens the very existence of life on the planet, the dire need of an African eco-philosophy that can serve to create a theoretical platform for addressing the pressing ecological issues from African perspective becomes all the more glaring. The present work, therefore, attempts to articulate in brief, what can be considered as core issues that engage the discourse on African eco-philosophy. The approach is predominantly analytical. It is the thesis of the paper that authentic African philosophy should not only have an African cultural bent which serves as the substrate but also involves critical intellectual gurgitations on the reality, truth and values about the environment. These pertain to the core ontological, epistemological and ethical issues in any philosophical discourse that worth its name. It is in this manner that authentic African eco-philosophy can be built, the paper submits.*

**Keywords:** African, eco-philosophy, culture, ontological, epistemology and ethics.

**Introduction**

Eco-philosophy (ecological philosophy) remains an important aspect of philosophy yet to be given due attention by African philosophers. That the African continent is generously endowed with mega flora and fauna is undeniable. This, however, does not translate to mega or avalanche of eco-literature in the continent. It may rather sound somehow disappointing to say that there is dearth of works

on eco-discourse both within and outside philosophic circles. William Slaymaker affirms that “the African echo of global green approaches to literature and literally criticism has been faint” (683). It is clear that Slaymaker here employs a mild euphemism to describe the glaring dearth of African eco-literature. The mildness of Slaymaker juxtaposes with the harshness of Hochman Jhan who disparagingly remarks that, “whites have more time for nature than blacks” (190). This is another extreme that not only reminiscences David Hume (236) and G.W. F. Hegel’s (91) infamous outburst about Africans but also epitomizes the misconception about the black and their relationship with the natural environment. In a way, the articulation of African eco-philosophy serves as self-affirmation and self-realization.

Non-philosophical African eco-literatures seem to outweigh eco-philosophical and eco-theological literatures. For instance, eco-philosophy is conspicuously absent in the list of burgeoning branches and subsidiaries of African philosophy enumerated in the well-researched book *Themes, Issues, and Problems in African Philosophy*, edited by Isaac Ukpokolo (2). This lacuna was, however, compensated by one of the contributors Kevin Behrens who made a clarion call on the need for developing African eco-philosophy. Jonathan Chimakonam’s book *African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation*, written or rather edited in the most eco-friendly Nigerian city of Calabar is yet another laudable effort. There are other works relating to African philosophy and ecology; some focusing primarily on environmental or eco-ethics. There is, therefore, need for a more systematic articulation of African eco-philosophy. The approach is analytical. Analysis here entails not only breaking through the concepts and language but also the socio-cultural praxis in order to x-ray the philosophical underpinnings that undergird them. In the first section, therefore, the researchers highlight the urgent need for African eco-philosophy that will go beyond ethical considerations to other core philosophical engagement about the African ecology. The second section takes up the ontological issues which we consider to be the most fundamental in the discourse on African eco-philosophy. The third section focuses on the African epistemology and its ecological implication. The values that undergird human-nature relationship in the Igbo world are highlighted under the African eco-ethics in the fourth section. Then comes the conclusion.

### **The Need for African Eco-Philosophy**

Firstly, the peculiarity of African denigration is such that African is premised on what has been described as African close affinity with nature. African philosophy

*per se* began as a reaction to the denigration of the African. An aspect of the polygenetic reason for dehumanizing the African is the misconception that the African is incapable not only of discursive thinking but also of appreciating nature; that the black perceives himself as one with nature, etc. This is to say that, the long term exploitation of the black was most times premised on the close affinity which the African or black is said to share with nature. Authentic African eco-philosophy seamlessly dissipates such misgiving and positively reconstructs such misconceptions. In this way, African eco-philosophy becomes a quest for self-assertion and self-realization.

As a developing continent, Africa faces a barrage of ecological crisis some internally generated, others externally induced. Livelihood here is mostly eco-based so exploitation of the environment through lumbering, fishing, bush-burning and other means become inevitable. Similarly, as a developing continent, though industrialization and technological development have positive sides which include economic growth, there are negative repercussions on the environment such as depletion of natural resources and degradation of the environment. To enjoy the omelet, eggs have to be broken.

It is well known that Africa is affected by environmental degradation caused by foreign countries. "The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming" (Pope Francis no 51). This is simply to say that Africa, in a way, bears the brunt of ecological degradation caused by more economically and technologically advanced countries.

On general note, ecological issues fundamentally concern human relationship with non-human entities and on the concrete existential conditions of man on the planet earth. The threatening level which anthropogenic environmental devastation has assumed calls for redefinition of man's relationship with the natural world. As a response to this clarion call, the glaring need for African eco-philosophy becomes urgent environmental concern which cannot be ignored without regrettable and terrible consequences. Chiras (5) sums it in these terms: "Together, the problems of overpopulation, depletion, and pollution have created an ecological crisis – a threat to the integrity of natural systems of which humans are part, and therefore a threat to the survival of human life.' The present research is part of the African response to the environmental challenges.

The response becomes more *ad rem* given that modern science and technology may not solve all. Therefore, there is a need for behavioral change (belief and principles). If an authentic ecological approach must necessarily incorporate both social and philosophical approaches. Indeed, if questions of justice to the environment cannot be properly addressed without reference to the human person; if the cry of the earth is to be heard simultaneously with the cry of the poor, the wretched of the earth, then Africa must speak up. The ultimate question now is *Africa, quid teipsam dicis?* (meaning, Africa what do you say about yourself?).

### **The Ontological Basis of African Ecology**

The discourse on African eco-philosophy necessarily begins with consideration of the status of the natural environment in African ontology and worldview. This is the metaphysics that shapes and undergirds all forms of relationship in the African lifeworld; human and non-human entities alike. The relevance of ontological inquiries to ecological discourse can never be over-emphasized. It is the bedrock upon which other philosophical discourses on human relationship with the biotic and abiotic environment are built. Similarly, the African cosmology serves as a prism for understanding and interpretation of reality in the African world. According to Kanu, African cosmology is broadly divided into two domains- spiritual and physical; visible and invisible. The invisible sphere is realm of spiritual entities: the Supreme Being, gods, ancestors, and the unborn. The visible realm is the abode of humans and other biotic and abiotic entities. These two worlds impinge upon each other. In fact the division is merely metaphorical. The African world has tripartite memberships of the dead (the living dead), the living and the unborn (15). Life is a continuum. This has ecological implications as it addresses the questions about inter-generational justice and obligations.

African worldview is hierarchically structured. This is a gradient of forces: first on the list is God/Creator, *Chukwu*. After God come the arch-patriarchs, founders of different clans. Next are the dead of the tribe or the ancestors existing according to their order of primogeniture. After the ancestors (the living dead), we have the living human beings. Then come the animals, vegetables and minerals. The above hierarchy may give a false impression of a radically atomized universe of existence. The beings are however inextricably united as we shall see. Man for instance is in constant interaction with even nonhuman.

The ontological status of the natural or non-human entities in African worldview inheres from the pervading conception of being or reality in general in African ontology. Placid Tempels the father of African philosophy submits that for the African, "being is force and force is being" (35). In other words, reality is dynamic, volatile, permeating and interpenetrating. This is quite unlike western conception of being. Parmenides, the father of western metaphysics defines "being" as "that which is." This static conception of being greatly differs from African understanding of being as "force." Furthermore, the African perceives reality as interconnected. Innocent Asouzu affirms that anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality (277). This is the basis of complementary ontology in African philosophy.

Indeed, an outstanding feature in African lifeworld is the fact of ontological relatedness or concatenation. Tempels emphasizes this cosmic unity or harmony by asserting, that "the world of forces (beings) is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the world network" (41). In other words, the hallmark of African worldview is the cosmic harmony that exists amidst all the beings or realities within the African world human, non-human alike. This has special implication for eco-philosophy as both human and non-humans are well accommodated and secured within this cosmic and ecological arrangement. Harmony and balance are core issues in the discourse on ecology. This opinion finds an echo in Lewis Herber who opines that, it is impossible to achieve a harmonization of man and nature without creating a human community that lives in a lasting balance with its natural environment" (Ecology and Revolutionary Thought). Ecological balance is a *conditio sine qua non* in the African universe.

Finally, the exploration of the animistic tendency in African culture might be of great interest to African echo-philosophers and eco-theologians alike. The interest in nature and supernatural is quite pronounced in the African world such that almost every natural occurrence has some bearing with the supernatural. Some authors tend to describe The African has Pansychic such that could be described as animism.

### **Epistemology: African Mode of Perception vis-a-vis Human-Nature Relationship**

The understanding or perception we have about nature or non-human entities shapes our relationship with them (Ahmed Hussien 52). How does the African

perceived herself in relation to non-human entities? Does she see herself as part of nature or apart from nature? A predatory epistemology that perceives the human as apart of nature will potentially lead to domination and discriminatory ecology whereas an epistemology that perceives the human as part and parcel of nature will ultimately lead to inclusive ecology nay eco-friendliness.

African epistemology, which according to Jimoh, “is essentially rooted in African ontology”(125), perceives reality as unitary, concatenated and dynamic. It is through this epistemic prism that realities in African worldview are interpreted and knowledge claims authenticated. The African mode of cognition and its ecological implications is yet another vital aspect of African epistemology that needs to be explored. Leopold Senghor (24) had hinted on this mode of perception that is shaped by the unity of the knower and object of knowledge which compelled Senghor to aver that “*l’émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène*” (emotion is African while reason is Hellenic).” Masolo (489-490) echoes further in these emphatic terms:

Leopold Senghor had hinted on the traces the African’s tendency toward communitarianism to a way of life rooted in his experience of the world. It is the way he feels and thinks, in union not only with all other people around him but “indeed with all other beings in the universe: God, animal, tree, or pebble.” Senghor’s earlier work, including his definition of Negritude, had addressed the naturalness with which Africans embrace and participate in nature rather than relating to it cognitively from a distance.

Senghor’s epistemology presents an eye opener to the nature of African epistemology and its ecological implications. An exploration of the ecological implications of such epistemology will serve to enrich our understanding and relationship with other entities around us.

### **African Eco-Ethics**

African eco-ethics is onto-ethical norms that guide human relationship with environment – biotic and abiotic. Anchoring on African communal ontology, the African ecological ethics has both communal and religious colouration. Communal because, just like traditional African ethics which has ripple effects on the communal living, so also evil done to the non-human environment affects the community. The transcendent serves as the custodian. This gives the religious colouration. It can also be described as eco-based ethics as some hierophanic

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natural entities such as land, trees, rivers and so on, play vital role. Land for instance is held sacred for being the abode of the earth goddess who is predominantly the chief custodian of morality. It is often said of an offender that he or she has committed a crime against “the land.” Barnabas Okolo (21) affirms the communal dimension in these captivating terms: “being-with as a characteristic of the African mode-of-being-in-world means also openness to nature in positive and sacred relationship.” African ecological ethics remains an indispensable aspect of African eco-philosophy. Exploration of the African eco-ethics constitutes part of the core engagement of African eco-philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

The present paper has not only harped on the need for African eco-philosophy but also articulated in brief, core issues that could engage the discipline. Africa is a continent with rich flora and fauna but bedeviled with series of ecological problem. The denigration of the African sequel to the phenomena of slavery and colonization is also reflected on the slur cast on the ability of the African to appreciate nature. African eco-philosophy thus becomes in a way, a quest for self-affirmation.

Toeing the line of the traditional quadrivium in philosophy, the paper nibbled on the *trium* of ontological, epistemological and ethical concerns that constitute the primary engagement of African eco-philosophy. The African ontology and epistemology underscore the relatedness of beings thus predisposing for eco-friendliness. This is guided by the African eco-ethics. The need for balance in the eco-community is also highlighted. In as much as these are not exhaustive of the preoccupation of, it is believed that these would serve to foster further or more reflections on African eco-philosophy.

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