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ECOPHILOSOPHY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Abstract

Ecophilosophy is concerned with the critical study of ecological issues. It critiques the human-earth relationship advocating for friendly treatment of the environment. Philosophy's interests in the environmental crisis dates back to the late 1960s. Among those who were at the forefront are Holmes Rolston III, Thomas Berry, and Richard Routley. The philosophical movement towards the environment was also inspired by Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, Garrett Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Lynn White's 1967 article, *The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis*, Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, and so forth. It is not that before the 1960s philosophers have not spoken about the environment. The unfortunate thing was that most of the philosophers that had spoken about the environment merely saw the environment or nature from a utilitarian perspective and nature was perceived as an object to be studied, evaluated and conquered without concern for environmental wellbeing. Yet, when the philosophic turn towards the environment began even till today, most of the voices are those of western and Euro-centric philosophers. Indigenous voices and wisdoms from non-western cultures are often ignored. The purpose of this paper is to argue for the place of African traditional ecological knowledge in ecophilosophy and environmental ethics. Through the method of critical analysis, what constitutes African traditional ecological knowledge and its place in global environmental ethics is examined. The paper finds and concludes that global environmental ethics will be incomplete and weakened without the inclusion of African traditional ecological knowledge.

Key words: African tradition, ecology, ecophilosophy, ethics

Introduction

The statement of Curtin presented below encapsulates the thesis of this paper. Curtin (2005) opines thus: "Today, more than ever before in history, we need to think about the ways social and environmental justice intersect, and we need to think about these issues in a truly integrated, global fashion" (p. ix). He argues further that the gravest danger is that in the formation of global environmental ethics, the environmental wisdom from non-western regions of the world may be excluded as there is non-recognition of pragmatism and pluralism in deciding global issues. The need for global environmental ethics or ecophilosophy to be inclusive of eco-wisdom from non-Eurocentric and non-western regions of the world is well acknowledged in the works of Grim (2001), Kearns & Keller (2007), Gottlieb (2004), Gottlieb (2006), Maffi & Woodley (2010), Selin (2003), and Ehlers & Gethmann (2010).

The task before this paper is to present African traditional ecological knowledge (ATEK) as offering environmental wisdom that should be taken into discussion in the global environmental ethics. Carrying out this task requires clarification of the basic concepts, examination of the domain of global environmental ethics, indicating the reality of environmental problems in Africa and making clear some essential dimensions of ATEK. The place and imperative of ATEK in ecophilosophy/ environmental ethics will also be evaluated.

Conceptual Analysis

Ecophilosophy, a short term for ecological or environmental philosophy is used interchangeably with the term environmental ethics in this work. Some viewpoints on ecophilosophy and environmental ethics are offered below and synthesized. Ecological ethics according to Curry (2006) which is a relatively new discourse is asking ethical questions on the natural world and the issues of how humans relate to animals, plants, mountains, rocks, oceans and the entire non-human world. In DesJardins (2006), environmental problems raise ethical questions on how humans ought to live on earth and both science and technology cannot answer ethical questions, it is to philosophy and ethics that answers should be sought. Holmes (1989) affirms that the philosophical turn to nature raises questions such as:

Have we any duties to natural things at all, or merely duties to persons concerning natural things? What sort of human dominion over nature is proper? In what senses can or should humans follow nature? Have we duties to animals, perhaps at least to sentient animals? Have we duties to endangered species, or, again, only duties to persons concerning rare species? (p. 9).

From all these definitions or descriptions of ecophilosophy or environmental ethics, the point is that the discipline of ecophilosophy asks critical questions on human – earth relationships from the perspective of ethics. The point of this philosophical questioning is to reflect on how humans ought to live on earth to foster a sustainable ecological community. Environmental problems such as pollution, depletion of natural resources, climate change, species endangerment, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, violence, terrorism, and migration all raise questions for the discipline of environmental ethics.

It is now appropriate here to define traditional ecological knowledge. It is important to relate that there is not one traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) but rather you have a varieties of TEK based on cultural and environmental situations of peoples (Cleveland 2009). It could be opined from Cleveland (2009) that TEK involves an indigenous people's values, descriptive data, and theory inclusive of their interactions with/towards their environment. ATEK will involve African people's cultural values, reflections, and interactions with nature encoded in their proverbs, wise sayings, taboos, rituals, and institutions. Society for Ecological Restoration (2016) opines that:

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) ~ or sometimes referred to as traditional environmental knowledge ~ is often described as local and holistic, integrating the physical and spiritual into a worldview or "cosmivision" that has evolved over time and emphasizes the practical application of skills and knowledge. TEK is the product of careful observations and responses to ever changing environmental and socio-economic conditions: as we now know, adaptation is the key to survival." (par 3).

The same Society for Ecological Restoration (2016) cites The Convention on Biological Diversity defining traditional ecological knowledge thus:

Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained

over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, and forestry.

African people have always related with nature and have cultural practices and beliefs about the environment that have enabled them to live in a sustainable manner from ancient times. While it is true that African peoples can learn from environmental values of non-African cultures they don't have to abandon authentic aspects of their ecological wisdom.

Another term worth understanding is environmental problems. This term is used to describe the various environmental challenges. It is a reality that Africa is facing mounting environmental problems. In the midst of these environmental problems it would not be enough to simply adopt the solution of western environmental ethics as the solution to African environmental problems. There are viable and positive aspects of African environmental ethics that can be helpful in combating environmental problems in Africa when critically analyzed and synthesized with insights from other environmental ethics. The task before this paper is to present aspects of African traditional ecological knowledge and assert that it has a place in ecophilosophy.

The environmental problems that the African continent faces include: desertification, deforestation, drought, famine, poverty, soil erosion, atmospheric pollution, land and ocean pollution, gas flaring, climate change, overpopulation, unplanned urbanization and so forth. You think of a place like Nigeria's Niger Delta it is one of the most environmentally polluted deltas in the world. The United Nations has reported for instance that it will take more than 25 years to remediate the environment of Ogoniland. The issue of terrorism is also a problem and has environmental dimension. Terrorism through the violence that it uses destroys human lives and properties, destroys land, water, and other natural resources. Places in Africa that have experienced terrorism include Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Somali, Kenya, Egypt and Tunisia. The problem of drought and famine is common in places like Chad, Ethiopia, and many countries in the Horn of Africa.

The Domain of Ecophilosophy

It was in the late 1960s that environmental philosophy of ecological philosophy became prominent. It was inspired by the works of Holmes Rolston III, Thomas Berry, and Richard Routley and others. It was also inspired by the book, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962, Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Lynn White's 1967, *The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis*, Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, and so forth

Ecophilosophy has been defined above. But it is still important to explore some other issues relating to this discipline. When it comes to the realm of philosophical ideas there is no dogmatism, rather there is diversity. There are many ecophilosophies such as deep ecology, liberation eco-theology, animal rights theories, land ethics, ecofeminism, and various indigenous ecophilosophies among others. It will suffice to explain briefly only a few to show that there is pluralism in ecophilosophy. Deep ecology and ecofeminism are from the West, while Hindu environmental ethics is from the East. Hindu environmental ethics is added here to show that there is an environmental ethics from the East and so that of Africa when argued for clearly should not be denied.

The term deep ecology was the term used by Arne Naess to describe his ecophilosophy. At the heart of the philosophy of deep ecology, Smith (1997) notes are the following values: biocentric egalitarianism and intrinsic value in biodiversity, humans are one with other beings and should not act as separate from other beings in the universe. Smith (1997) further says that: "The first perception of deep ecology is that humans can no longer be thought of as belonging to a species which makes them exclusively end-in-themselves. Instead all living beings must be regarded as end-in-themselves, possessed of unique drives and purposefulness" (p. 6).

Another form of ecophilosophy is ecofeminism. Ecofeminism affirms that it is the same way that humans have oppressed women and children that they have oppressed the earth and its ecosystems. Women and children have often been oppressed by societal and cultural structures. They are disadvantaged and displaced by social norms. They are denied more often than not of equal rights to resources in society. Patriarchal societies have often seen them as inferior and to be subjugated. The way that patriarchal societies have seen women is the way they have often seen the earth as inferior, of low value, and separate from males.

Hindu environmental ethics is also a form of ecophilosophy. Ecophilosophies are not limited to the views of individual philosophers. Groups of religious-philosophic systems such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are also ecophilosophies. Hinduism sees all of nature as manifestation of Brahman. There is no reality other than Brahman. The implication of this is that this philosophic system teaches respect for all life including that of animals, plants, mountains and rocks. It teaches non-violence to other lives especially that of animals. While vegetarianism is allowed no harm should be done to animals and other humans. This reveals an ethics of nature protection.

It could be seen that there are varieties of environmental ethics. There is no one monolithic ethic over there that is acceptable and applicable to all places. Environment and places differ. Though there could be basic principles in environmental ethics. There is no worldview of a people that is not connected to the environment. It is in this vein that it could be argued that African traditional vision of the world is connected to the environment.

Some Dimensions of African Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ATEK)

ATEK is found in African beliefs and cosmic worldviews. It is important to state the African views about the cosmos here and how this reveals ecological knowledge. African cosmic experience is deeply ecological. As Agbakwuo (2013) states: "ecology and natural settings influenced how the world was seen and interested" (p. 20).

It is generally believed that the African view of the cosmos is anthropocentric. All things in the universe are created for the use and wellbeing of humans. This does not mean that humans can abuse or misuse the things in the universe. No environmental ethics or philosophy is complete without speaking of the place of the human persons. It is human persons who speak of environmental ethics and it is human perceptions and theories about the environment that form a basis for environmental ethics. African traditional anthropology viewed the human person as created by the almighty God. Humans have bodies and spirits. The universe is created for humans but this does not mean that humans can misuse the earth. Mbiti (1991) says of African people that they believe humans are at the centre of the universe, the materials in nature are to be used for

human wellbeing, but humans are not the owners or master of the universe. Mbiti (1991) notes further that humans are to act as friends and stewards of nature, respect the moral order in the universe, and protect nature from pollution or whatever harms nature.

Abuse and misuse of the things in the universe can at times be sacrilegious and break the harmony in the ordered universe. The fact of cosmic order in the universe is a key issue in African cosmology. The universe is not disordered. It is theistic universe created by the creator God. The universe is not a blind universe or simply left to evolutionary forces. One of the serious reasons for today's environmental crisis is lack of respect for the order in the universe. Without belief in an ordered universe life is left to blind chance. This is one area in which African thought differs from atheistic, secular humanistic, scientific Marxism. The refusal to believe that there is an order in the essence of things leaves humans with misguided powers that want to modify the nature of things. While for instance there can be some benefits from biotechnology it has also extended beyond reasonable limits that the products of cloning animals, modifying the nature of seeds, and trans-human modification can have negative medical implications for humans. That debate will not be entered into. Agbakwuo (2013) rightly notes that:

In African category or hierarchy of beings – Supreme Being, spirits, human beings, animals, objects – one mode of existence presupposes all the others, and a balance has to be maintained to avoid a drift from one mode to another. There is peace and harmony in the community when the balance is maintained. This ontological harmony is very decisive for a peaceful co-existence and consistence of the society. An imbalance is very catastrophic to the living and the eco-system. A spill of the blood of an innocent person or a relative, for instance, could disrupt the harmony. Even violating the laws of the land or a taboo could cause a drift in the eco-system. At the centre of this system and order to being is the human person who tries to maintain a harmonious balance. Mbiti argues that in addition to the five categories there seems to be a power, energy or force that permeates the whole universe. (p. 21)

African cosmic knowledge is not based on guesswork or mythic imagination. It comes from African experience of the universe. And it has enabled African people to navigate through their environment in a sustainable manner. Speaking of sustainability, all human enterprises take place on the earth or land or the earth's atmosphere. What people believe about the land then are key issues in environmental thought. All through Africa, in traditional times and in

many places today the land is seen as a trust from the creator and the ancestors. Land is held to be sacred and belongs to the community. Land is not simply a commodity but serves a means of communication with the deities. Because of this the land is to be tilled and cultivated with care. It is to be left fallow after some years of cultivation to allow it renew its nutrients. And in many communities the land is honored as goddess.

Another way that Africans look at the universe is seeing some things in the universe as totemic. Both animals and plants are held as totems in various communities. Totemic animals and plants are not to be destroyed. It is an abomination to kill a totemic animal or plant. Sacred groves were also prevalent in African villages and towns. You can find in sacred groves all types of animals and plants. Sacred groves helped in modifying the negative effects of climate change. To help in the preservation of plants, animals and other aspects of nature Africans created taboos, stories, proverbs, rituals that promote care, hospitality, generosity, etc.

The Significance of ATEK in Ecophilosophy

What Africans believe about the universe, about plants, about animals, and humans impacted the way that they lived and behaved with regard to the universe. Their beliefs and ideas certainly had ecological implications. African ecological practices flowing from their worldviews include many of the followings: (1) the practice of allowing the land to fallow for years to preserve its nutrients, (2) the practice of hunting only for adult animals and birds, (3) preservation of various totemic animals, birds and plants, (4) generous sharing of farm produce and food items which helped to curb wastage, (5) communalism that fostered sharing and non-wastage of resources.

The various practices listed above may look little or of no effect to some people but in actuality they helped African people live sustainable lives before and even after the advent of colonialism. If not for the negative impact of colonialism many of these practices would have been heightened, magnified and perhaps more advanced than they are today. These values can still be recaptured more than ever before.

Western ecological knowledge is not value-neutral. They are based on western ideologies and philosophies. This is why they cannot simply be accept-

ed without adaptation. It should be understood that there are no group of people without a culture. People's cultures are rooted in their epistemology and traditional cosmic vision. African traditional view of nature is theistic. This runs contrary to many versions of western environmental philosophies that see no place for the creator. Nature is a gift from God coming to humans through the patrimony and matrimony of the ancestors. There can be no meaningful development that is not acceptable to the people of the locality. When western forms of environmental ethics are borrowed and pushed down into local communities to combat environmental problems, they can be problematic. They can create more problems than solving them. They may look grandiose and colourful but they run in conflicts with the values of the local people. Thus very often they may be resisted. Kalu (2001) has shown how in 1996 a state in southeastern Nigeria acquired irrigation pumps to combat the failure of an agro-industrial project. Kalu (2001) says: Government workers sent to Amanuke to dig trenches and install the pumps were driven out by the locals as they saw this as an infringement on their ancestral shrine. Kalu (2001) notes that: "They ignored how a people's culture, worldview and religion affect their perception of development" (p. 226). The paper is not arguing that indigenous ecological worldviews are perfect and free from limitations. No system of thought is but they all likely have some positive values.

Puffer (1995) is on target in asserting that development projects likely succeeds often when they are in consonance with traditional knowledge. From the viewpoint of the World Bank (1998) eco-knowledge of indigenous people have helped them to managing food supply, natural resources and health issues. Olupona (2006) writes regarding African ecological wisdom saying: "Contrary to the Western view of development, new forms of development programs are fast discovering that national cultural heritage and dimensions such as water and river heritage form an integral part of sustainable development. One cannot function without the other" (p. 281).

Indigenous ecological knowledge helped Africans in time past to preserve water supply sources, control erosion, preserve groves and shrines, rehabilitate endangered animals, overcome drought and famine, etc. There is no doubt that there should be a place in ecophilosophy for African traditional ecological knowledge. The wealth of experiential wisdom of how Africans cared and protected their environments in time past should not be ignored in the name of globalization or modern environmental ethics. Think of how Africans devel-

oped taboos to protect medicinal plants and animals, religious myths to protect some environments. That African traditional eco-thoughts had value and continues to have an abiding value is implied in the following articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples enunciated by the United Nations (2007):

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures... (art. 13)

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard. (art. 25)

Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination. (art. 29)

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions. (art. 31)

The above clearly reveals that transmitting, and conserving indigenous knowledge which includes ecological knowledge is a fundamental individual and group right of indigenous people. Though some African countries such as Nigeria refused to sign the declaration the fact is that there are many indigenous peoples in Africa in places like the central and eastern Africa. It amounts to injustice if people are denied of this fundamental right. If this is the case it equally amounts to discrimination, and racial bias to ignore the traditional ecological knowledge of African people in developing an environmental ethics for Africa. Any ecophilosophy for Africa then should be inclusive of African traditional ecological knowledge.

Ecophilosophy has been defined in simple terms as the critical love of wisdom that has to do with the ecology or environment. Philosophy, likely ecophilosophy cannot exist without knowledge. Epistemology is a vital branch of philosophy that deals with the critical study of the reality and certainty of knowledge. African knowledge or viewpoints about the environment and ecosystems constitute a vital source and resource for philosophizing in ecophilosophy or environmental ethics. African traditional knowledge whether in its critical or mythical form constitutes a platform for discussing African knowledge about the environment. All that has been said about the role of indigenous or traditional knowledge and indigenous ecological knowledge makes it imperative to incorporate the critical study of African traditional ecological knowledge into the study of African ecophilosophy. The paper agrees with the views of Wiredu (2000), Appiah (1992) and Oladipo (2002) that the role of African Philosophy is not to accept uncritically African traditional thought but to examine its conceptual frameworks and what is valuable it while being open to the benefits of a modern scientific and technological society.

Concluding Reflections

The point made by Etuk (2002) is quite on target when he opines that:

Nothing in the meeting of cultures forces a people to so completely abandon their own values in embracing a different culture as to lose their identity. But at the same time it is useless and dangerous for a people to struggle to retain dysfunctional structures, antiquated institutions and retrograde practices just to seem to preserve their culture...the cultures of technology and science, of rapid communication and the global village are upon us, whether we want them or not...we cannot keep looking back too often without either being left behind or falling out of step with everyone else. (p. 25)

The above viewpoint is at the heart of the arguments in this paper. Environmental and philosophical pragmatism require that since philosophy is not dogmatic or doctrinaire that it be critically open to converse with African traditional ecological knowledge to see what is useful in it in forming an African Ecophilosophical ethics. In this conversation the viewpoints of western envi-

ronmental ethics should not be totally discountenanced. No nation in a globalized world can fortress itself from the realities on the migration of people and transference of ideas. African traditional ecological knowledge whether seen as ethno-philosophy or critical ecological wisdom provides raw materials and intellectual ingredients for African philosophers and other scholars to midwife an African ecophilosophy for a sustainable African today and in the future. The task of doing that midwifery is not within the context of this present work. It is true as Appiah (1992) notes that philosophers like Towa, Wiredu, and Hountondji have been critical of the task of ethnophilosophy. Ethnophilosophy is philosophy in the ordinary and loose sense in the following the definition of philosophy. This paper is not proposing like African ecological worldviews should simply be gathered without critical examination. The paper concurs with Appiah (1992) that for African philosophers to solve African contemporary problems they need to deeply understand the conceptual frameworks that colours the life of Africans. This Appiah (1992) calls “a more truly critical discourse” (p.106). With this done African traditional ecological knowledge in its positive aspects can have a place in global environmental ethics.

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