# Advancing Environmental Ethics Through the African World-View

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**Abstract** *In this paper I intend to locate a fresh basis on which alternative theories of environment from the African worldview could be explored; one which will improve the literature on environment as well as diversify the basis for producing positions that could mediate in the tensions that define environmental problems and principles. I shall do this by (i) articulating the moral principles of the world and how it suggests an idea of environmental ethics;(ii)locating the philosophy that interprets traditional religious practices and the environmental principles that could be derived there-in. I shall demonstrate how (iii)these strands of ideas provide positions that strongly suggest alternative but valuable basis for environmental ethics anchored on African worldview and its theoretical and practical potentials for promoting the growth of environment.*

## Introduction

In this paper I intend to locate a fresh basis on which alternative theories of environment from the African worldview could be explored; one which will improve the literature on environment as well as diversify the basis for producing positions that could mediate in the tensions that define environmental problems and principles. I shall do this by (i) articulating the moral principles of the world and how they suggest an idea of environmental ethics,(ii)locating the philosophy that interprets traditional religious practices and the environmental principles that could be derived there-in.I shall demonstrate how (iii)these strands of ideas provide position that strongly suggest alternative but valuable basis for environmental philosophy anchored on African worldview and its theoretical and practical potentials in promoting a culture of the environment.

The reason for this attempt arises from the growing threat of environment as an aspect of man that needs theoretical and practical intervention. Every practical problem has a theoretical foundation. Thus it cannot be argued that the current environmental problems of the world do not have theoretical foundation in the idea of environment that has defined the socio-cultural evolution of the human society. The problem is to know the extent to which this is the case and how to articulate alternative but valuable positions that can be applied to address this problem.

The second reason for this paper is that mankind has witnessed/is witnessing several civilizations, each of which has a codified ethics and stand on its own as a worthy and meaningful way of interpreting and organizing life. For this reason, any one way of looking at life must be evaluated not as universal as such, but one with such tendency only on the grounds of how it approximates the ethical ideals of other civilizations. Arising from the fact that every cultural block of the world has specific cultural experience to contribute to the growth of world wisdom which we may only ignore to our detriment it is expected that there should be different ways of interpreting the world for which the world can only be better by exploiting such interpretations. In an important theory of difference making rounds world-over, Samuel Huntington in a famous article entitled *Clash of Civilizations* holds that human civilizations are basically different and that the differences that arise from them are reliable and legitimate enough as they are born from varied conceptions of life which grow to become articles of faith and values. According to him:

Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, custom, tradition, and most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing ways on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy ( *Clash of Civilization*, p.25*).*

On the strength of this claim, Huntington identifies eight major world civilizations namely: Western,

Islamic orthodox, Latin American, Indic, Confucian, Japanese, and African and argues that these civilizations are legitimate enough, morally, socially, politically. From Huntington we can deduce that different civilizations are anchored on different theories of life and meaning from which these various relationships are derived. Thusthere is the need to explore from the African world how an ethics of the environment can be derived, one which can be applied for a better interaction with the environment.

To achieve the goals of this study I shall (i) articulate how and why the African worldview could and should provide alternative basis for an environmental ethics ;(ii) itemize and discuss at least three sources of environmental ethics. These include environmental ethics through the bioethical principles of the African worldview; environmental ethics through the moral principles of the African world and environmental ethics through the African traditional philosophy of religion.

## The African World as Alternative Basis for Environmental Ethics

Although I have itemized the need and justification for the search for alternative theories of the environment there is still the need to do so, more pointedly in relation to Africa .The need for this arises from the fact that modernity in the western notion of it which has had strong influence in several parts of the world, hasharboured provocative ideaswhich do not capture the idea of man in Africa. Arising from this, African world view have been ignored in the formulation of relevant theories in philosophy. This state of affairs can almost be said to be as old as the enlightenment period of western philosophy. For instance Hume wrote:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites There never was civilized nation of any other complexion than the white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No indigenous manufacturer among them, no arts, no sciences…. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.( EmevwoBiakolo, in P H Coetzee and A P J Roux, 1998,p. 2)

Similarly, Kant wrote :This man was black from head to toe a clear proof  that what he said was stupid"(Cited in E.C.Eze ,p.215) just as Montesquieu wrote "It is hardly to be believed ,that God who is a wise being should place a soul, especially  a good soul ,in such a Black and ugly body".(*Spirit of the Laws,*Vol.IBk, as cited in S.E.Ogude,1983:109).I shall not border to articulate the fallacies in these ideas such as providing assertive positions on Africa based on suspicion(Hume) or colour(Kant and Montesquieu. I consider these as being too clear enough in the citations.

To further  demonstrate how and why modernity in its western version has been unfair to Africa and has ignored the need to study Africa properly in formulating  theories and positions let me articulate yet another early encounter of African civilization with modernity yet on African soil. In 1956 a Belgian catholic priest published a book entitled *Bantu Philosophy* .This treatise which set out to interpret the worldview of the Baluba people of Congo was published as a philosophical justification of the difference between the worldview of the Baluba people of Congo and those of the western world and an effort to account for this difference within the realm of philosophy. Fr. Tempel's work opposed ideals of the colonial administrative policy in Congo which portrayed the African as "an empty vessel, requiring education in the spheres of religion and civilization in order to be rendered truly human"(Moya Deacon cited in PH Coetzee and APJ Roux,2002, p.103.)  .The provocative and revolutionary nature of his work did not go down well with the colonial powers in Congo; hence "his  banishment from Congo by the Colonial administration and the catholic church  due to their notions of Tempels as posing a threat to their policies and practices." (Moya Deacon cited in PH Coetzee and APJ Roux,2002, p.110) The intellectual offence, or so it was conceived on Tempels is that:

If the African was recognized as having a "philosophy", the African could, by implication, be said to have civilization. This notion presented a threat to the superiority of the European, as justified by enlightenment philosophy, as well as to the economics of the colonial mission.(Moya Deacon cited in PH Coetzee and APJ Roux,2002, p.110).

Thus, despite the fact that Tempels wrote primarily to guide the Europeans on how to accomplish their mission in Congo; the fact that he designated the Bantus as philosophical people, people who had reason and justification for the way they thought and lived, did not portray him in a positive light. Hence his work did not achieve any form of relevance and acceptance from his people. In the light of these, we can locate how and why African wisdom and worldview has not commanded much attention in the theoretical formulation of principles and policies that define and direct the future of our world.

## Advancing an Environmental Ethics through the African Worldview

From the submissions so far available in our work it can be deduced that urgency for an environmental ethics based on African worldview is no longer in doubt for the following reasons. The first is that this is a reliable way to decolonize both African and non-African minds about the myth of African mind by debunking the myth of the poverty of the African mind. The second is that is a way of providing a viable alternative to address the environmental challenges of modernity. For instance, arising from the 2009 Copenhagen world summit on environment in which no consensus on how to prevent the environment was arrived at, it can be inferred thatthere is something wrong in the environmental ethics driving the world it should asked why the world should be led to the environmental challenges of the moment despite the ideas and positions around which environmental ethics has been conceived. Thethird is that environmental hazard is also found in Africa the classical case of which is the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. So it is necessary to locate the African experience in the dangers and dramas of the environment

But what should it mean to advance an environmental ethics through the African world and the expectation of such theory?To advance an environmental ethics is to articulate a view of the good and the bad that is an anchored on or is derived from the environment; one that defends the environment (since the environment provides the basis or grounds for such theory and without the environment the formulation and advancement of the theory would be doubtful if not impossible) andaccountable to the environment. An environmental ethics is one in which the environment achieves a space in the notion of the good and the bad; one in which the environment is understood to be a moral agent; one that can offend or be offended and for this reason cannot be allowed to be a non-moral agent. An environmental ethics should be able to specify what should be expected from the environment and what should be given the environment. Ethics as a body of knowledge studies morality, not just what is good but what should be good and why. Thus an environmental ethics may yet tell us the hidden notions of good and bad deducible from the environment and by doing so provide us intuitions on why the environment demands and deserves a certain from of conduct.

Certain specific issues deserve to fall under the theme of environmental ethics. They include: the theme of environmental rights: that which is justifiable to demand from the environment and man's relationship with the environment. Who should the environment be accountable to: to man, to God, to itself? Assuming the environment is permitted to generate moral basis for action and given that the environment is not a human agent and has no evaluative capacity how could the morality of such action bemeasured. They also includethe duties of environment to man and of man to environment: what is man in a position to expect from the environment which an environment must afford man by just being an environment? How does man pay back? Is man part of the environment or totally independent of and excluded when the notion or idea of the environmental is conceived? Assuming nobody were living in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria would the notion or idea of Niger-Delta be or remain? As what?

It is in the attempt to address these questions that environmental ethics finds its justification – that is, the effort to locate and address the notion or idea of the good in, for with and through the environment. Broadly conceived therefore, environmental ethics should amount to such concerns as ethics of the environment; ethics from the environment; ethics of the environment and ethics through which the notion of good and bad that regulates the environment is defined. By ethics through the environment is meant views that applies to the environment but which the environment may or may not necessarily benefit from its

position other than its being a mere agency of such belief or position. In essence environmental ethics is meant to articulate the rights, duties and responsibilities of man to the environment and vice versa.

I have chosen to provide this broad-based interpretation of the environment because the essence and benefit of this paper may not just lie in ethical positions advanced but how by such positions a broad way of relating and interpreting the environment could be advanced from various disciplinary angles. A valuable ethical position on the environment should regulate scientific, social, political and economic notions of the environment and provide the theoretical basis to explore and advance positions on the environment. Thus when I extend the concern of environmental ethics to any such ethical positions that may advance the concern of man even beyond the environment, I mean that such ideas find their root in the environment, there would be an idea of environment that would led to these and this idea of environment must persist before the intellectual dividend can remain. Assuming that a notion of man, of being human, which is good and protective finds its origin in man's notion of environment such idea can only be productive enough by nurturing and sustaining the notion of environment where this arises from.

After articulating the various ways of interpreting environmental ethics let me next proceed to discuss at least two different ways such ethics could be derived from the Africa worldview. The first is what could be called secular environmental ethics.The second is what could be called humanistic (secular) environmental ethics. The third is what could be called religious humanistic ethics environmental.

## Advancing a Secular Environmental Ethics Through the Bioethical African World

By secular environmental ethics I mean an idea that dictates environmental morality from the point of view of nature or from the point of view of a fact that finds its origin just from nature with no supernatural underpinning. The first of these as outlined is environmental ethics that derives from the bioethical principles of the African world.

A cluster of works on environmental ethics have been published and it is important to note this in the search for environmental ethics from the African worldview. In the last ten years we can cite important works in this area such as these of Michael Boylan (2001): Derr Patrick G. and Namara Edward M (2003); Folte Richard C (ed) (2003); Andrew Light and Roletem, III, Homes (eds) (2003); Loius P. Pojman, (ed.) 2001; Van De Veer and Pierce (eds.) (2003). This is not withstanding such important works such as those of Fox Warwick (1996); Robert Elliot (1991); Brennan Andrew (1998), and other too numerous to mention here. However not much literature can be found on this subject when discussed from the African point of view.

African thought and culture (to the extent that it is now known) have held a theory of life itself considerably humanist; one which harbours a potential for a form of thinking that could spur a people to seek for a man-centered and man desired world. This in itself suggests a fertile ground for environmental ethics. According to Iroegbu:

Africans have a deep reverential deference for life. Its beginning is elaborately celebrated in pregnancy, birth, naming and initiation ceremonies. Its growth and continuity is leashed in adulthood, and adolescence rites, family rites and communal festivities. Its end is buoyantly celebrated in death rites, and funeral rites (Iroegbu cited in Omonzejele, 2005).

If life is held to be good in itself there is the need to locate the terms on which this is the case. Which life is good and why?While we may not rule out several answers to this question, at least one answer deserves to be taken seriously and that is that life is so seen because of its ability to regenerate (to perpetuity). By perpetuity is meant the ability to regenerate life itself. Thus the African thinking in celebration life might not necessarily arise from the birth of the individual and the autonomy that arise from this (as in the western tradition) but in a distinct framework that can be captured by the cult of perpetuity and ancestorship. But ancestorship and perpetuity is about another issue is about the place of birth or land of birth or geography of origin which itself is about the environmental conditions/tradition of the body at birth. In a way then the environment at least in a metaphysical interpretation provides a moral lens (moral interpreted to

mean duty) that drives the Africa theory of life.

The western political theorist Patrick Chabal has provided insightful positions on this when he applied this notion of being human in the African content to interpret African politics.ForChabal, geography and locality plays such crucial role in the Africa life because "the attributes of the person are inherently linked to the identity of the locality, one is only "human" in so far as one is part of the kin network"(Chabal,2009, P.46). As he submits impressively further, Kinship in Africa "include the ancestors and, more generally, the dead... bound by a connection to land, or locality, in ways that are always compelling". (ibid, P.46).

From the above position we are then informed that the African idea of environment has a deeper worth and weight against which it is wrong to maltreat the environment. A particular African worldview presents an idea of environmentas a background on which to measure and locate the significance and relevance of the human life and which spells out the danger of maltreating the environment. Thus,the environment in the African thought ought not be seen and understood as an economic item only, or a social space only, but where and why to locate the significance and relevance of the life itself. In several African communities it is very likely that one would locate people who may be prepared to die for a land not worth one million naira even when such a person is offered ten, million naira for it. This may not arise from the economic worth of such land but the social, metaphysical and ancestral worth of such land. Put point blank, African environment have worth beyond economic value and this largely explains the significance of the environment in African ethical life. Thus it is then totally wrong and contrary to an African environmental world of the source of ill will and discard finds its root in the resources of the environment because by the desiring so, the environmental is a negative/destructive moral agent.

## Advancing a Secular Environmental Ethics Through the African Moral World.

Morality in Africa is grounded in a form of communitarianism which to a large extent, is a man-centered ideology (K. Gyekye, 1998; PH Coetzee (ed.), 2001; C.Nze, 1989; T. Metz, 2007, P. Ikuenobe, 2006; B.Bujo,2001).The kernel of this idea is that as T. Metz (2007) puts it;

An action is right insofar as it promotes a shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and leads to encourage the opposites of alienation and ill-will.

The implication of this theory is that *shared identity* and *good-will* are the basic principles which African morality tends to defend and that what is moral is what connects lives together. Arising from this, one can hold that core African values such as co-operation, consensus, reconciliation, commonality and related values sought by the African all serve to defend the principle of good will and shared identity. Thus, it is expected that other values as variously held by Africans: "sense of human value", (O. Onwubiko, 1991, G. Onah cited in Metz, 2007); "sense of hospitality", "sense of the sacred", and "the sacredness of life", "sense of community"  "sense of good human relations", "sense of identity" "(O.Onwubiko,1991) are all geared towards defending these principles.

What then are the implications of these and what does it suggest in the effort to advance an idea of environmental ethics from the African world? This first is that the idea of the environment that should be favorable to this idea of life should be one in which the environment serves to enhance the idea of identity and goodwill one which will promote the idea of identity and good will, one which will promote the capacity of the other to benefit from the environment and to benefit from the other. For this reason the idea of environment that generates discord or factions among humanity cannot be permitted by such ethics. A conception of an environment in relation to any/everyone can only be such as will enhance share in the best way and means the opportunity provided by the other (whether positive or negative)and enhance such capacity .In other words the idea of the other suggested by the notion of environment can only amount to one which by promoting an idea of the other would lead to a greater shared identity and goodwill.

Arising from this, it should be supposed that since the environment is meant to serve as a moral support then it should be treated as such. It is clearly wrong to except a good from an environment that has been badly

treated.Such terms of reciprocity is what the African moral world demands. Thus it is then totally wrong and contrary to an African environmental world if the source of ill-will and discord finds its root in the resources of the environment because by doing so, the environment is negative or destructive moral agent.

## Deriving Environmental Ethics Through African Traditional Philosophy of Religion

African traditional religion is a cultural and religious manifestation specific to  Africans. It is regarded as indigenous religion because it originates from the people's environment. The religion came into existence from time immemorial. The forbearers of the Africans have been practicing the religion before the creation of modern African state. Hence it stands a cultural legacy handed down from generation to generation.

African traditional religion can be described as a complete way of life. Everything about the religion can be found in the belief and practices of the people. For this reason, there were no written scripture as we have in Christianity and Islam. The religion is taught orally to the younger generations who in turn do same to the next generation. The religion is preserved everywhere through myths, legends, songs, dance, panting, carving, adages, symbol, sculpture, language. Even trees and rivers around remind the community of something about this religion and form of worship.

Traditional religion in Africa is a communal religion which individual becomes a part of by belonging to a particular community. Everyone in the community is expected to participate in rituals and festivals. It is impossible for individuals to disassociate themselves from the community rituals, festivals, worship or sacrifices. All these require individual inputs. Individuals in the society are expected to conform to religious rules and regulations for the good and well-being of everyone in the community.

Unlike other world religions, African traditional religion has no founder. Hence its origin is hardly taken as a subject of interest. It is believed to have evolved slowly through many centuries as people responded to the situation of their lives and reflected upon their experience. Some of the factors which have contributed to the development of this religion include the universal human longing for the infinite; the quest for origin and source of things; the problem of evil,suffering and natural disaster, etc. Man reflected on all these and in search for answer he discovered that there is a supernatural, superior and living being who is greater than him (man) and who controls and maintains the universe.

Traditional African belief suggests that the revelation of this religion happened at the same throughout the whole of African region. The response however varies as each cultural group responded independently in accordance with their immediate environment. This in turn brought similarities and differences that we have in Nigeria Traditional Religion. With the coming of the Europeans negative terms were invented to describe traditional religion in African as elsewhere. These include terms like: fetishism, idolatry, heathenism, paganism, animism, etc. The view was that traditional religions are worshipping a withdrawn god, god of the primitive people, or simply worshipping divinities and the ancestors. Others would even prefer to call it animism.

In relation to our discourse our interest is to point some aspects of this belief pattern and how they provide the grounds on which an ethics of environment could be deduced. The effort to address this issue would reveal that such ethics is embedded in (a) belief in divinities;(b) belief in ancestor worship and (c)belief in rites and rituals and (d) use of symbols.

Divinities in African traditional religion could be described as the messenger of the Supreme Being. They function the same way the Biblical angels function in the Christian faith. Divinities can be broadly grouped into three categories (i) The divinities in heaven: that is those divinities who were with God in heaven and have been with him since the creation of the universe. (ii) Deified ancestors: These are human beings who had lived extra-ordinary lives while here on earth. After their death man decides to give them a place among the divinities. (iii) Personification of natural forces and phenomena: These are awesome creatures associated with spirit in African Traditional religion. "Whatever people consider to be home of spirit is usually set apart as sacred places, and there people offer worship to the particular spirit" (Awolalu and Dopamu,

1979:73). It could be hills, mountains, rocks, trees, thick forest etc.TheYorubas for example, believe that rivers hills, forests in some locations have their own spirits, hence people offer sacrifices to the spirits that indwells the trees and the rivers. *Oya*is the Spirit behind Osunriver.In the mind of worshipper of African traditional religion, spirits are everywhere in-persons, trees, rivers, animals rocks, mountains and some personal effects. Such environments are usually regarded as holy and are treated as such. The ever-present nature of spirits helps in moulding or shaping the character or moral values of the people. These spirits in many ways act as moral agents of the African society because "they abhor crimes like adultery, stealing, cheating ad suicide" (Umaru: 2006).

Similarly African traditional religion includes belief in ancestors and this provides insight into environmental ethics.Among the Gabgyi people. For examples, ancestors are called *Azokwoyi*and are worshipped by family members at the ancestral shrine. Members of the family arrange stone serially; each of the stones represents members of the family beginning with the eldest who died to the least. The stone represent the departed soul. During the festival of *Zhibaje*, "*akuta*" (stone) is brought out as they celebrate. Ancestors are believed to reincarnate into some subsequent generations. Hence, it is believed by the Gbagyis that a child born when an elder dies caries certain resemblance of the dead relative. This is usually discerned after divination.

Generally speaking the ancestors are the many clouds of unseen witnesses that surround traditional believers, hence when they are eating or drinking they pour some on the ground for the ancestor. The ancestors own the land, *so whatever the African Traditional religionist does he/she remembers one day he/she will be buried in the ground to join the ancestors.* Ancestors form an important aspect of traditional belief in Africa. They are regarded as members of the family because they partake in decision making, protect and watch over members of their living family and serve as the guidance of morality and sources of blessing to their living members. This is why living members of the family venerate them.

Symbols also form part of African traditional religion in African and an insight into what they mean for this religion suggests an environmental ethics. Religious symbols are usually carved from trees or molded from the earth-hence they generally find their origin in the environment. Among the Igbos, Ikenga is an Igbo religious cult or shrine built and worshipped for the belief that it could promote success. It is called cult of right hand and so called, because it is the hand with which man carries out difficult tasks. The Ikenga cult is represented in a carved figure of a seated male with a weapon (gun, matchet, and spear) in the right hand and a human head in the left. The weaponry representations stress the value of courage which indeed is a significant virtue in the Igbo world. Other symbols in Igbo traditional religion include *ofo*symbols of justice used during religious functions and the *eben*used by the Benins during traditional worship and rites.

From the foregoing it can be seen African religious belief arise from the culture of people and therefore regulate their culture. The items of worship of these divinities are also rooted from among the cultural legacies found among the people. While those who cultivate yam would normally offer sacrifice with yam, those whose occupation are fishing offer sacrifice with fish, just as palm oil forms an item of worship for those who cultivate palm oil. There was never a case of believers having to import their items of worship. All these demonstrate the fact that these religious patterns were a clear testimony to the cultural history of the people and serve as a worthy evidence of cultural heritage in the African instance.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to locate a fresh basis on which alternative theories of environment from the African worldview could be explored; one which will improve the literature on environment as well as diversify the basis for producing positions that could mediate in the tensions that define environmental problems and principles. To do this I began by locating the justification for the study, that is how and why the African worldview could and should provide alternative basis for an environmental ethics .I itemized and discussed at least three sources of environmental ethics. These include environmental ethics through the bioethical

principles of the African worldview; environmental ethics through the moral principles of the African world and environmental ethics through the African traditional philosophy of religion. It is my hope that this study will provide positions for more insightful theories of environment grounded in the African worldview which will lead to wider environmental discourses in various fields of science and the humanities.

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