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A Critical Analysis of Ogungbemi's Ethics of Nature-Relatedness and Tangwa's Ecobio-Communitarianism

Krytyczna analiza etyki związku z naturą Ogungbemiego i ekobiokomunitaryzmu Tangwy

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Abstract: Global concerns about the environmental crisis have sparked diverse ethical responses, including normative environmental ethics, sentient ethics, biocentric ethics, ecocentric ethics, and ecofeminist ethics. While these approaches are deeply rooted in Western cultural perspectives, addressing global environmental challenges demands broader, cross-cultural insights. Given that African philosophers are now concerned with environmental issues and philosophising, it becomes necessary to contribute to this nascent field of African environmental philosophy. This paper contributes to the growing literature in African environmental philosophy by critically analysing the works of Segun Ogungbemi and Godfrey Tangwa. Ogungbemi advocates for an "ethics of nature-relatedness," emphasizing the interdependence of humans and nature, while Tangwa proposes "ecobio-communitarianism," which underscores the interconnectedness of all living beings and non-living entities within the ecosystem. The aim of this critical analysis is to deepen the discourse on African environmental ethics and highlight the potential contributions of ethics of nature-relatedness and ecobio-communitarianism to global environmental philosophy.

Keywords: African environmental ethics, ethics of nature-relatedness, ecobio-communitarianism, environmental philosophy, African philosophy

Streszczenie: Powszechne w świecie obawy dotyczące kryzysu środowiskowego wywołały różnorodny odzew na gruncie etyki w tym w postaci normatywnej etyki środowiskowej, etyki istot świadomych, etyki biocentrycznej, etyki ekocentrycznej, czy etyki ekofeministycznej. Wszystkie te podejścia są głęboko zakorzenione w kulturze Zachodu, jednak przewyżczenie globalnych zagrożeń środowiskowych wymaga przyjęcia szerszej, wielokulturowej perspektywy. Filozofowie pochodzący z Afryki skupiają się obecnie na kwestiach środowiskowych i w ten sposób wnoszą wkład w rozwój afrykańskiej filozofii środowiskowej. Niniejszy artykuł włącza się w ten nurt poprzez krytyczną analizę prac Segun Ogungbemi i Godfrey Tangwy. Ogungbemi opowiada się za „etyką powiązania z naturą”, podkreślając współzależność ludzi ze środowiskiem naturalnym, podczas gdy Tangwa proponuje „ekobio-komunitarianizm”, który podkreśla wzajemne powiązania wszystkich istot żywych i nieożywionych w całym ekosystemie. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest pogłębienie dyskursu na temat afrykańskiej etyki środowiskowej i podkreślenie potencjalnego wkładu etyki związku z naturą oraz ekobio-komunitarianizmu z globalną filozofią środowiskową.

Słowa kluczowe: afrykańska etyka środowiskowa, etyka związku z naturą, ekobio-komunitarianizm, filozofia środowiskowa, filozofia afrykańska

Introduction

Africa south of the Sahara has a rich heritage and it has faced multifaceted challenges in her cultural-political history. Since primordial times, Africans have formed humane and peaceful societies living and have formed their environment based on sound ethics. However, due to some internal dynamics in various African cultures coupled with some external forces, African states are now experiencing acute developmental challenges which have impacted negatively their environment. Besides political issues arising from leadership ineptitude and capitalist aggrandizement, which have brought about corruption, injustice, poverty and under development of the continent, there is now a new dimension to the African crisis, namely, the environmental imbroglio.

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

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

ecosystem of which human beings are but a part (Osuntokun 2001, 293).

In this paper, we seek to explore the role of African philosophical thinking in the efforts to conserve the African environment in particular, and the global ecosystem in general. The aim is not to merely ethnophilosophically describe how traditional Africans have managed their environment; nor is our focus to establish the primacy or superiority of the African option over and above the theoretical perspectives of environmental ethics in Western discourse. Rather, the primary objective of this paper is to engage in a critical analysis of the nature of African environmental thoughts articulated by Ogunbemi and Tangwa, thereby deepening the discourse on African environmental ethics and demonstrating its potential contributions to effective environmental management and to global environmental philosophy.

The paper proceeds with a review of the nature of African environmental philosophy, where we expose some of the African ethical perspectives to environmental concerns. It will then examine Segun Odegbami's ethics of nature-relatedness and Godfrey Tangwa's Ecobio-communitarianism. The section that follows will make some critical comments on the above two African environmental theories, showing their strengths, weaknesses and contributions to African environmental ethics in particular and global environmental philosophy in general, after which it draws a conclusion.

1. Some Western Environmental Ethical Theories

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

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

Biocentric and ecocentric approaches, both non-anthropomorphic environmental ethical theories, represent a radical break with anthropocentric ethics. Biocentrism maintains that all life forms are “moral patients” – entities to which we should accord moral consideration. We therefore have a duty towards all forms of life. It is its *telos* (purpose) that gives each individual organism inherent worth, and all living organisms possess this worth equally because all individual living beings have their *telos*. The equal inherent worth of all living beings warrants, according to them, equal moral status (Fadahunsi 2007, 6). Contending that biocentrism was not radical enough, ecocentrism emerged, expanding the definition of a “moral patient” to include nature as a whole. Ecocentrism focuses on the integrity of the ecosystem and the value of species. Under ecocentrism, we have the land ethic, deep ecology and the theory of nature's value. Aldo Leopold (1966) summarizes the land ethic in the maxim: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

There are two notable basic ethical principles in deep ecology. The ecosphere egalitarianism principle says that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic value (Callicott 1992). Furthermore, all things in the ecosphere have equal rights to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization. To harm nature is to harm ourselves, and to defend earth is self-defence. Rolston's (1989) theory of nature's value derives our duties to nature from the value in nature. According to this theory, nature

is a kind of subject with teleology, creativity, intelligence and a capacity to value. Instrumental value, intrinsic value and systematic value exist objectively in nature. These values in nature impose on us the imperative to care for the earth. Humans, therefore, ought to be Earth's moral overseers. However, ecocentrism has been accused of leading to unacceptable treatment of individuals, and of requiring excessive sacrifice from humans (Fadahunsi 2007, 7).

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

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

For instance, in a collection of works edited by Jonathan Chimakonam, the author observes that, the idea of “relationship” is an underlying phenomenon not just among humans but between humans and non-humans in the ecosystem (2018, 8). This means that both human and non-human as well as every other thing in the ecosystem stands equal to others and represents a necessary link in the network of existents.

Using the principles of complementarity and conversational thinking, which are drawn from African traditional worldviews, Chimakonam shows that everything in the ecosystem, whether human or non-human, while dependent on each other, are necessarily connected but that there might be unwelcome consequences if there is a rupture in such intricate connections (2018; 120). Corroborating Chimakonam’s view, Maduka Enyimba (2019) extends the discourse by arguing that the complementary relationship between humans and non-humans is more clearly expressed by the Igbo maxim “Egbe bere ugo bere,” which means; let the eagle perch and let the kite perch, anyone that begrudges the other form perching, let its wings break. This literally means “Live and Let Live” because the world is large enough to accommodate all entities, hence no one should attempt to prevent another form living.

Similarly, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu and Ejikemeuwa J Ndubisis aver that “in relation to Africa, environmental ethics is complementary as it responds to the questions from a balanced perspective that understands the human person and the environment as complementary realities” (2022). Thus, based on their conviction that proverbs occupy a pride of place in African life and spirituality, the authors present evidence drawn from a number of African proverbs to demonstrate quite convincingly that proverbs serve as a major source of African environmental ethics.

Many scholars of African philosophy and environmental ethics have investigated issues of practical and theoretical concerns

challenging the African conceptions and perspectives in human-animal and human-nature relationships. Such issues include moral status of nature, environmental justice, land ethics, decolonizing human-animal relationship, climate change problems among others (Chemhuru 2019; Murove 2009; Ojomo 2011). However, in this paper, we focus more closely on the thoughts of Segun Ogungbemi and Godfrey Tangwa as they relate to human-environment relationship. Our argument will be that though one might find some weaknesses in their thoughts, they are nevertheless, important contributors to African environmental ethics and, by extension, to global philosophy of environment.

2. Segun Ogungbemi’s African Environmental Ethics

In his paper, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”, Ogungbemi (1997) proposes some ethical considerations and practical measures to mitigate the challenges posed by the environmental crisis. Ogungbemi construes the environmental crisis as one of the greatest global challenges of our times. In his thinking, the crisis is a conjunction of natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and storms, together with human exploration and utilization of natural resources through the ingenuity of science and technology. He argues that in order to properly appreciate the nature of the environmental crisis in Africa, we need to understand the ways in which both traditional and modern social structures have led to environmental degradation. While recognizing the universality of the environmental crisis, Ogungbemi notes that in understanding the nature of the crisis within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, three factors are salient: ignorance and poverty, science and technology, political conflicts coupled with international economic pressures.

Concerning the factor of ignorance and poverty, Ogungbemi observes that the majority of Africans live in rural areas

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

For Ogungbemi (1997, 205), the way in which natural resources such as land, water and air are currently being used is contrary to the traditional African practice of environmental conservation. With respect to land, for instance, the drive to “develop” has led to increased deforestation, with its incalculable effects such as turbidity, erosion, flooding and desertification. What is more, in its bid to catch up with “developed” countries, contemporary Africa has exploited some of its essential minerals such as gold, copper, oil, diamonds, coal and uranium, thereby creating ecological imbalances. This often results in the degradation of agricultural land which the poor depend on, as well as significant pollution of waterways. Many African countries are rich in resources, but because their economies are not structured to take full advantage of them, they are exported with little or no value added to them. The net result is relatively few jobs and other economic advantages; and the few economic advantages that accrue are often siphoned off by the corrupt elite.

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

“In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water, land and air management. To our traditional communities the ethics of not

taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps this explains why earth, forests, rivers and wind and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious, but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved. The ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation” (Ogungbemi 1997, 204).

By the ethics of care, Ogungbemi (1997, 208) means an orientation in which one does not take from nature more than one needs. However, Ogungbemi is quick to note that this moral code is not unique to African societies, but rather has a universal appeal and application, and that there are some interlocking questions that may obliterate its justification and applicability in contemporary Africa. Pertinent among these questions are: (a) How do we know how much we need, given the nature of human greed and insatiability? (b) Who judges whether we are taking more or less of the natural resources than we need? (c) If we have been taking more than we need, what are the penalties and how fair are they? (Ogungbeni 1997, 208).

Ogungbemi goes on to attempt a reformulation of the traditional African environmental practice of the ethics of care in order to make it applicable to contemporary African circumstances. This conceptual reformulation is what Ogungbemi (1997, 208) refers to as “ethics of nature relatedness.” According to him, “ethics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions.... The ethics of nature-relatedness can be succinctly stated as an ethics that leads human beings to seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival and sustainability” (Ogungbemi 1997, 208-209). In his view, the ethics of nature-relatedness has three basic elements: reason, experience and the will. It does not view natural resources as having a spiritual character. With this new ethical thinking, Ogungbemi’s

expectation is that our present reckless use of nature can be curtailed. Furthermore, Ogungbemi offers some practical suggestions on how to mitigate the current environmental crisis in Africa. First, he recommends a turn-around in Africa's political leadership in order to put in place policies that are environmentally friendly. He urges the leadership to demonstrate the political will to reduce the amount of industrial and agricultural wastes and to properly dispose of them so that both our industrial and commercial centres, as well as our rural areas, are safe from air and water pollution (Ogungbemi 1997, 209).

Second, he proposes the generation, transmission and distribution of solar energy at a reasonable cost as a means of reducing African over-reliance on firewood, coal, kerosene, gas, and petrol as sources of energy. Third, on the issue of population explosion, he predicts that "when our population has reached an alarming situation, nature will invariably apply its break (through volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc.) and have a drastic reduction in our population growth rate" (Ogungbemi 1997, 208). We now turn to Godfrey Tangwa's ethical Approach to the environment.

3. Godfrey Tangwa's African Environmental Ethics

Although his work makes no reference to Ogungbemi's, Tangwa's focus is similar, directed towards developing an African environmental ethics that can confront the current environmental crisis. In his paper, "Some African Reflections on Bio-medical and Environmental Ethics," Tangwa (2004) bases his conception of an African orientation in environmental ethics on the metaphysical outlook of pre-colonial African societies, which he called "eco-bio communitarianism." This metaphysical worldview involves the "recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans" (Tangwa 2004, 389). This metaphysical outlook underpinned

the relations among human beings. It was also responsible for why traditional Africans were more cautious in their attitude to plants, animals and inanimate things and the various invisible forces in the world (Tangwa 2004, 389). He notes that traditional Africans were more disposed towards the attitude of "live and let live" (Tangwa 2004, 389).

Furthermore, Tangwa is emphatic that within the traditional African metaphysical worldview, the dichotomy between "plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a slim and flexible one" (Tangwa 2004, 389).

It is in the context of this metaphysical framework that one can coherently situate the people's belief in the transmigration of the soul into animals, plants or into forces such as the wind. For Tangwa, such a mindset has very significant implications for the way traditional Africans approached and treated nature. Illustrating his position on the conciliating relation between humans and the environment in traditional African culture, Tangwa cites the instance of his own ethnic group, the Nso of Cameroon. According to him, the Nso attitude toward nature is that of respectful co-existence, conciliation and containment: there are frequent sacrifices to God, to the divine spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, to the departed ancestors, and to the sundry invisible and inscrutable forces of nature (Tangwa 2004, 390). His point is that African culture is not against technology but rather cautions the piecemeal use of technology. Moreover, given the respect for the values that adorn traditional African culture, there are some lessons to be learnt by Western culture, which has subjected such values to the caprice of the god of technology, industrialization and capitalism.

In contradistinction to the Western worldview, which Tangwa sees as predominantly anthropocentric and individualistic, the African worldview, Tangwa maintains, is eco-bio communitarian (Tangwa

2004, 392). Notwithstanding this distinction, Tangwa is aware that it does not necessarily have an automatic consequence on the environment:

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

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

4. A Critical Analysis of Ogungbemi and Tangwa's Environmental Ethics

Ogungbemi's proposal of a reconstructed return to the traditional African attitude to the environment reflected in the “ethics of care” leads him to what he refers to as “the ethics of nature- relatedness.” It is an orientation that recognizes that we humans necessarily rely on the natural world for our existence. As such, we ought to treat the environment with due respect. As Ogungbemi (1997, 206) correctly observes, the environmental crisis in Africa, as anywhere else is primarily a consequence of human actions. Since value systems inform our actions, we need to search for a viable environmental ethics that agrees with African ontology. This is essential in order to pave the way for environmental policies compliant with the cultural experiences of the people. However, although Ogungbemi shows an adequate understanding of the African perspective of the environmental crisis, especially with his comparative analysis of the traditional

and modern African societies' contributions to the complexity of the environmental crisis, his prescription for environmental ethics is the alienation of the African spirit and peculiar experiences. In fact, Ogungbemi's alarming recommendation that nature should invariably apply its brakes through, among other things, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in order to have a drastic reduction in Africa's population growth rate, is an indication of the disconnectedness of his ethics of nature-relatedness from the African ontology. These questions raise concern for further research and conversation.

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

Nevertheless, the shortcoming of Tangwa's perspective is that it is an idealized ethnophilosophical defence of the indigenous African management of the environment. As such, it does not recognize the ways in which traditional Africans contributed to the degradation of the environment, albeit due to ignorance and poverty. In this regard, Ogungbemi's position is more commendable. Nevertheless, the accounts of both Ogungbemi and Tangwa, contribute significantly to the discourse on African environmental thoughts and hold potentials for mitigating the many environmental problems facing humanity.

The inference one can draw from the analysis of the thoughts of Ogungbemi and

Tangwa is that the solution to environmental destabilization in Africa and the globe, is not purely technological or exclusively attitudinal. Instead, a combination of these two factors driven by caution is more likely to present the required pathway for solving environmental problems and enhancing sustainability. In other words, environmental ethics, no matter how grounded in African experience or how intellectually sophisticated, cannot alone solve the environmental crisis in Africa. Despite the fact that technology, which is at the root of the environmental crisis, is craved for in Africa and indispensable today, it is our recommendation that only technologies that are significantly benign to the environment be allowed in the continent. In instances in which the effects of technology are yet indeterminable, the technology ought to be deemed guilty unless or until proved innocent. This reasoning is premised on the view that it is better to err on the side of caution than to discover hazards when great damage has already been done.

Conclusion

This paper has critically analysed the environmental ethics of Segun Ogunbemi and Godfrey Tangwa, and exposed both the weaknesses of their thoughts and also their contribution to African environmental ethics. The point of emphasis has been that due to certain peculiarities of environmental degradation in Africa today, not all kinds of environmental ethics are adequate for the continent. Africans can learn from various Western ethical approaches to environmental conservation, as much as the West can learn from African ethical approaches to environmental concerns. In doing this, the Africans must not lose sight of the African environmental experience.

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