



DECOLONISING AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: A PATH TO AFRICAN SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

There is a significant connection between environmental ethics and societal development. This is because environmental ethics are governing principles regulating human activities towards preserving the ecosystem; creating order and meaning, and fostering human self-actualisation and societal development. Environmental ethics is, therefore, the catalyst behind the equilibrium seen in the ecosystem. Since environmental ethics also gear toward coordinating human environmental interactions and experiences into a logical, beneficial system, the ethics are most importantly the fulcrum of sustainable societal development. Crafted from people's experiences and standing as rational responses to the environment, environmental ethics pragmatically prevail in traditional African societies. These ethics were at different stages of evolution and practices before colonialism. These evolution stages and practices are continuously distorted and hindered by colonial tenets. Today, African environmental ethics consists more of Western colonial elements, which draw back the African and do not satisfy human needs in the modern African world. The fundamental drift of African environmental ethics is therefore part of the root of the evident truncation and crises in the being of African societies and societal developmental trajectory. It thus means that the present crises of development in Africa are so because the traditional environmental ethics by which Africans realise, define, and actualise themselves has been ridiculed and dampened by the colonial episteme. This is such that Africans no longer find in traditional environmental ethics the stable and ideal foundation of their integral existence and developmental trajectory. Relying on colonial tainted environmental ethics, therefore, many Africans now neglect the autochthonous traditional environmental ethics that in the past held African societies in being and formed the ground of African gradual and peculiar development. Yet, the present race of African countries to develop sustainably along contemporary environmental ethics that are laden with colonial principles has remained unattainable. This is based on the unsuitability of colonial environmental ethical principles in the African world. This is more so based on the inability of the African to effectively identify with colonial ethical principles that do not emanate from nor cohere with her environment and nature. These saddening situations not only portray colonialism as an African predicament; they raise the question of how authentic African environmental ethics could be rescued from the Western hegemonic elements that gag human freedom and hamper human emancipation in the African context. The chapter attempts this philosophical rescue; analytically revealing some of those traditional environmental ethics, the hegemonic colonial tenets subduing their practices, and the ineffective discordance colonial ethical conundrum has brought to bear on the African. The chapter therefore opts for the decolonisation of contemporary African environmental ethics; upholding the excavation of traditional African environmental ethics and dismantling of colonial



principles that vary authentic traditional African environmental ethics. This critical endeavour really gears towards decolonisation of African environmental ethics. The discourse moreover argues for the hybridisation of African environmental ethics that should subsist in complementarity and integration rather than exclusion and dismissal of epistemic options or pragmatic practices that can guarantee African sustainable development. The chapter notes the importance of building African development on the autochthonous environmental ethics and rationally shifting from the present colonial discordant tenets brought to bear on African environmental ethics through decolonisation and reconstruction that will guarantee human self-actualisation and societal development in African places.

Keywords: Africa; Decolonisation; Development; Environment; Ethics

Introduction

In many ways, different African cultures were shaped by “positive moral attitudes toward the natural environment and its human and non-human components” (Kelbessa 2015:387). The post colonial anthropocentric environmental ethics in African countries are therefore, more of the dire aftermath of colonialism. Colonialism in Africa offered an “environment of strife, conflict, and contradicting positions” that now distorts contemporary African societies (Isife 2023:3). Horsthemke (2017:2-3) even recounts that with colonialism, the motivation for a focus on indigenous African environmental ethics was denigrated, despised, and suppressed through an already set colonial system of thought. Africa is consequently plagued by “several environmental issues, ranging from gully erosions, desertification, flooding, overpopulation, water pollution, and Co2 emissions” that afflict societal development (Ifeakor & Otteh, 2021:151). Most of the environmental predicaments in Africa might have resulted from the weakening earth, yet these occurrences are deepened by colonial anthropocentric environmental ethics that poorly check human activities and consider other components of the environment as only having instrumental value.

Colonialism, with its wave of Western civilisation, significantly transformed African perceptions, beliefs, traditions, values, norms, ethos, and other principles that make up traditional environmental ethics (Mawere, 2013:1). The resultant anthropocentrism from this unsolicited meddling is incongruent with African personhood; hence, it has persistently generated environmental crises, which ultimately have led to developmental crises. This is more so because African understanding of the environment is taken “to be fundamentally different from western approaches and so might augment some fresh insights into the global efforts to deal with the environmental crisis” (Chemhuru 2019:2). Given that African societal development and life support initially hinged on traditional environmental ethics, it has now become imperative for Africa to shift her thinking, decolonise and embrace most of these pristine environmental ethics again (Maathai 2010:272). But how then would Africans actualise effective environmental ethics that would guarantee societal development through decolonisation? The importance of this question is more glaring as the present generation and leadership of Africa are products and beneficiaries of the existing environmental ethics that are laden with colonial variables. This generation of Africans and their leadership, too, are products of African societies whose judicial,



educational, political, economic, and administrative systems are still controlled by colonial systems.

Decolonisation of African environmental ethics, however, gears towards the excavation of authentic African autochthonous environmental preservation values. These were the effective values that guaranteed a harmonious environment and societal development before colonialism. Thus, traditional Africans did not only have knowledge of the laws of nature; they observed the mathematical equations and measurements that accompanied the science of their environment. As such, African traditional environmental ethics holistically extended “moral community to include the entire ecosystem” (Tosam 2019:173). The pristine and pre-colonial African societies prescribed and regulated rights and modes of relating within and with the environment to preserve the environment, promote the circle of life, and ensure societal development. African traditional environmental ethics ensured that human activities are rightly directed towards nurturing interdependence and harmonious relationships among the entities within the environment. The ethics thus saved the African environment from degradation and fostered development in pre-colonial African societies.

Obviously, the lingering colonial environmental tenets alienate the Africans and keep them away from the pragmatic traditional environmental morality that spurred their societal evolution. The result is glaring in the exploitative way the Africans relate to one another and their environment, and these defective relationships undermine societal development in Africa. In line with this regrettable environmental situation, Ogungbemi (2008:332) also recounts that in present-day Africa,

The modern usage of our land by our society does not reflect a similar degree of awareness of the importance of forests and Trees for the maintenance of environmental values. The drive to develop has led to the wholesale abandonment of traditional practices...as if development and modernisation were incompatible with the conservation of the forest and protection of trees. The consequence of this has been a breakdown in environmental stability.

Logically, therefore, the unstable environment is a product of ineffective environmental ethics. Ineffective environmental ethics directly undermine positive societal modernisation and sustainable development. This is because positive societal modernisation and sustainable development are largely compatible with effective conservation of the environment. Positive societal modernisation and sustainable development are largely absent in Africa because the colonial anthropocentric environmental morality practiced on the continent places intrinsic value on humans and instrumental value on non-humans; hence, the ethics have failed to guarantee the fervent foundation needed for African societal development. The magnitude of this failure now makes germane the clarion call for decolonisation of African environmental ethics in complementarity with other environmental preservation moralities that can be pragmatic and useful on the continent.



The African Perception of the Environment

Quite many scholars hold that “each society’s perception of nature profoundly influences the way it treats nature, and how a society relates with nature can either enhance or degrade the health of the environment” (Gratani, Sutton, Butler, Bohensky & Foale 2016:2; see also Tosam 2019:173). The fair treatment of the environment in traditional Africa evidently indicates its positive perception of nature. In the African traditional relationship with nature, therefore,

men and women recognize the importance of water 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, forest, rivers, wind, and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine (Ogungbemi 2008:206).

Though the African population was then much less than now, this friendly situation explains why less degradation of the environment and environmental hazards existed in pre-colonial Africa.

The traditional African perception of the environment was not only inductive, deductive, or logical reasoning. Realities were perceived through other modes like imagination, intuition, and feelings. Hence, the “deepest expression of the Africans has been through art, myths and music, rather than through the western mode of logical analysis” (Isife 2023:49). A harmonious environment, however, existed in pre-colonial Africa because traditional Africans viewed the environment as a major contributor to sustainable societal development. The existing realities within the environment were indeed seen as contributing to human wellbeing and a hitch-free circle of life. At the peak of this perception was a general belief that conservation of nature in the environment and ecosystem was both for human and environmental survival. This belief was strongly based on the knowledge that human and nature’s “interests are mutually reinforcing” (Tosam 2019:181). This traditional African-nature relationship indeed reflects what could be called anthropo-environmentalism. Kelbessa (2018:309) depicts this interconnectedness in his assertion that,

Unlike mainstream Western ethics, African environmental philosophy has renounced anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and ethnocentrism, and recognises the interconnectedness of human beings with the natural environment and its parts. In African worldviews, the physical and the metaphysical, the sacred and the secular, The natural and the supernatural are interrelated. Human Beings are part of the natural environment.

Based on this interconnectedness, people were encouraged through cultural traditions and practices to act towards restoring to nature the loss human activities incurred on it. This underscored the various traditional restrictions African communities imposed on people regarding their activities against the environment and the realities within it.



There was also a pantheistic perception of the environment in pre-colonial Africa, which shaped the traditional environmental ethics. Invisible forces were taken to inhabit environmental entities like hills, mountains, rocks, trees, streams, forests, and so on. On this basis, Ikuenobe (2014:10) argues that in pre-colonial Africa,

Nature has an intrinsic value because it is sacred and divine, the repository and dwelling place of spirits, and contributes to the order and harmony of the whole universe. Given the pantheistic view of nature; to morally respect nature is to morally respect the gods, spirits, ancestors, God, and humans, all as an integral part of nature.

It is this African belief that the spirits and gods inhabit some of the environmental elements that underscored and explained the sacredness, reverence, and awe traditional Africans accorded the environment and environmental entities. This sacredness attached to the environment not only informed the traditional environmental ethics; it specifically became the reason why people were forbidden to pollute streams and rivers, or cheat or deceive others, or to kill certain animals, like totemic, rare species, pregnant animals, young and sick animals, and animals that are not edible. This perception also guided people against felling certain trees or plucking unripe fruits.

Because the environment was taken to possess forces, there was also much traditional personification of natural realities and anthropomorphism in pre-colonial Africa. In this way, environmental realities were immortalised in the human naming system, proverbs, songs, riddles, wise sayings, analogies, parables, celebrations, festivals, dance, and songs. In these intrinsic values, reverence and recognition are placed on the environment; traditional Africans maintained a slim line between humans, plants, animals, and inanimate things (Tangwa 2007:387). Along this line, Kelbessa (2015:400) reveals that in pre-colonial Africa,

different ethnic groups believed they had kinship or a mystical relationship with different animals, plants, or a piece of land. A particular physical object serves as an emblem or a symbol of a particular society recognized as its totem. The members of the group are required to refrain from attacking, killing, and eating their totem.

In the knowledge of these, Kasere (2010:1) claims that the African perception of the environment has “far more to do with the belief system of indigenous people who associated their survival with that of certain species.”

From all indices, therefore, the traditional African perception of the environment was that of accommodation. In this direction, human beings viewed themselves as co-occupants of the environment with other species, but without a mandate to dominate, subdue, and exploit nature. As such, non-human existents, unseen realities, and people yet unborn were recognised and accommodated in daily decisions and dealings (Ibanga 2018). Congruently, both young and old



members of the traditional African communities were discouraged from abusing, mistreating, or harming the environment by way of pollution, deforestation, indiscriminate fruit plucking, indiscriminate killing of other environmental beings, exploitation of fellow humans, and overexploitation of the environment. Based on these, Ikuenobe (2014:2) remarks that “the activities that have raised environmental concerns in Africa did not exist prior to colonialism because Africans had conservationist values, practices, and ways of life.” Quite remarkable still is that it was this balanced perception of the environment that formed traditional African environmental ethical concepts.

Concepts of African Environmental Ethics

The concepts of African environmental ethics were the autochthonous philosophical thought systems that prevailed in African communities before colonialism. These environmental moral concepts are premised on the knowledge that nature is independent of man for existence and function, while humans have to “seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival and sustainability” (Ogungbemi 2008:207). Concepts of African environmental ethics were articulated from the “human knowledge of the workings of the universe” (Isife 2023:39). Hence, they were laws for the smooth workings of nature and conscientious codes meant to be applied to balance human activities within the environment for the benefit of man and other ecological realities. Concepts of African environmental ethics indeed covered “a wide range of notions, philosophies, ideologies, and movements which are aimed primarily at addressing environmental conservation, preservation, protection, restoration, and improvement” (Omosolu & Inja 2019:88). No wonder (Ekwealo 2017:52) maintains that,

African environmental ethics deals with the fundamental principles that govern the relationship between man and the environment based on the African worldview [by analyzing] the basic terms like man, environment, spirit, et cetera, and examining the approaches by which [they are] known.

This means that the concept of African environmental ethics cuts across every aspect of the environment; their interrelatedness, dependency, and the whole economy and circle of life. It addressed the unwholesome habits of humans and other realities in the environment, and paves way for a beneficial circle of life (Osuji 2012:116). The concept of African environmental ethics therefore focuses on,

the fundamental governing principles that define human-animal-plant-inanimate-posterity nexus based on African worldviews, analysing the basic concepts such as human and nonhumans, animate and inanimate, and examine the processes by which they (ought to) relate, for the purpose of facilitating an understanding of the ontology of man within the context of an environment it shares with non humans (Ibanga 2017:1867).



This insight further portrays the concepts of African environmental ethics as sets of governing principles and philosophical thoughts that not only prescribe ways of life and values, but analyses the basic concepts in the African environment based on African experiences and culture.

Apart from these meanings, African environmental ethics could be understood as part of the African environmental philosophy that, unlike the Western colonial morality, recognised the “interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings and the more-than-human world” (Kelbessa 2015:387). On this note, African environmental ethics embody the conservation, preservation, protection, restoration, and improvement of the balance in human activities within the environment. Kelbessa (2018:312) explains this indigenous morality as a “branch of philosophical ethics that studies the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment” and comprehensively interrogates the wider “relation of environmentalism to philosophy, culture, life, and thought.” In this way, African environmental ethics stand as traditional pragmatic moral principles meant for the conservation of the environment for the present and future generations, and for the health of the mother Earth.

From every indication, therefore, concepts of African environmental ethics are those African traditional moral principles that distinguish right and wrong, good and bad, and just and unjust, in relation to the African environment. It is also the indigenous environmental morality that maintained harmonious relationship within the natural environment and emphasises that life within the environment is relational. In this direction, the concept of African environmental ethics focuses on those moral principles that “take into account the relationships and connectedness of everything in nature” and “seek to promote harmony, solidarity, respect, and mutual co-operation” (Kelbessa 2015:399). Among Africans, different indigenous cultural concepts, such as *ubuntu* (Bantu), *ukama* (Shona), *hunhu* (Shona), *ujamaa* (Tanzania), *igwebuike* (Igbo), and others, have been used to project the relational nature of African environmental ethics in the African world.

Traditional African Environmental Ethics

Emanating from this discourse at this juncture is the critical question of what constitutes African environmental ethics. The skeptical nature of this question, however, warrants the answer that if there were no effective environmental ethics in pre-colonial Africa, human and other beings in the African environment would not have had a harmonious existence before colonialism. Pre-colonial Africa, therefore, knew the laws and workings of nature, and were proficiently managing their environment and ventures; hence the recorded development at that period. In all traditional African societies, the natural environment was truly considered common property and was sustainably managed through the wise deployment of knowledge and ethical systems that were part of customary laws.

African environmental ethics however evolved from the African perception of nature and the great need to sustain “Africans in a diverse, complex and risk prone environment” (Isife 2023:47). Thus, Indigenous African societies employed different but related beliefs, religious tenets, and empirically tested practices, values, customs and traditions to sustain their



environment, to foster societal stability and development. Those religious-cultural tenets and praxis that stood as traditional African environmental ethics range from taboos, values, ethos, and norms. Other components of traditional African environmental ethics were totems, customs and traditions, concepts of humanness, and a conception of environment as a common property (Mawere 2013:6). These ethics were profoundly visible in the cautiousness traditional Africans applied in their attitude and relation to plants, animals, and inanimate things that constitute the environment (Ogar & Bassey 2019:80).

African environmental ethics indeed stood as moral codes designed to keep a reasonable balance among the various realities constituting the ecosystem. Application of these moral codes was truly the promotion of environmental well-being, greater shared identity, and human goodwill enjoyed in pre-colonial Africa. Worth noting, however, is that these ethics were profoundly part of the way of life of indigenous Africans who were connected to the environment. As noted earlier, the components of traditional African environmental ethics were indeed shrouded in myths, documented and captured in folklores; folktales, folksongs, folkdance, folk drama, stories, legends, proverbs, parables, riddles, jokes, festivals, naming systems, symbols, drawings, sculptures, carvings, and artifacts. They also reflected the values, norms, reverence, sacredness, and awe Africans place on the environment and ecosystem. With many equivalent terms, however, traditional Africans thrive with common environmental philosophical ethics that recognize the oneness of being and influence correct behaviour within the environment and towards nature. It is the knowledge of this common philosophical ethics that Kelbessa (2018:309) understands as “common features of African worldviews in relation to the natural environment and its parts.”

Most of the traditional African environmental ethics could, indeed, be traced to African traditional religion. It is on this basis that Ekei (2001:7) claims Igbo (African) ethics as “religious ethics or morality.” African traditional religion (ATR) was indeed very close to nature, hence it “created eco-friendly structures, practices and sanctions that were of enormous benefit in protecting the environment” (Onah, Ali & Eze 2016:304). Thus, most traditional African environmental ethics were thought to have been ordered by supernatural beings within ATR; those ethics were also kept as part of African traditional religious worship. Appearing to differ from these views however, Ogungbemi (2008: 206) holds that “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.” Yet, Ogungbemi (2008:206) was quick to espouse that “in our traditional relationship with nature, ...the ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code” that “explains why earth, forest, rivers, wind and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine.” In all these, the constituents of traditional African environmental ethics form the larger cultural traditions and traditional religious practices that define African relationships within and with the environment. At this juncture, Mawere (2013:13) points out that in these traditional environmental ethics,

There was an informal mutual understanding at all levels of the community in terms of how, when, by what means, and by



Whose resources were harvested and used. Activities like fruit harvesting, cutting down of trees, hunting, fishing, grazing and gathering of other resources from the environment was also regulated by these customary laws enshrined in indigenous knowledge systems. Notwithstanding their limitations, these management strategies had the merit that communities had a strong sense of ownership of the powers to conserve, manage, and administer their own environment and all the resources existing therein. This created a strong sense of responsibility and promoted a sustainable relationship between humans and nonhumans or nature in general.

Unfortunately, these environmental moralities are minutely applied in contemporary African societies. They have been overshadowed by colonial anthropocentric moralities that now hinder societal development on the continent. What then were the main reasons behind the hitch-free traditional environmental ethical practices in pre-colonial Africa? The answer to this question is predicated more on the socio-religious nature of these traditional environmental ethics.

Nature of African Environmental Ethics in Pre-Colonial Times

The environmental ethics practiced by Africans in pre-colonial societies possessed social sanctions, religious, and fear-inducing consequences. This is as those ethics were profoundly religious because of their link to the sacred beings in ATR. In fact, “religion and morality are closely interwoven,” complementary and inseparable in traditional Africa (Okafor 1992:32). Hence, religious-related practices were taken seriously by indigenous Africans “because of their strong belief in the intricate interactions of this world with the invisible world of reality” (Onah et al 2016:303). Africans also attached importance to their traditional environmental ethics and related fairly with their environment because of their belief that spirits and gods dwelt in environmental entities. Indeed, the need for unsoiled rapport with the spiritual realm and unseen world propelled the praxis of traditional African environmental ethics and esteem of those ethics, the ecosystem, and entire environment especially because of the thought of their being divinely ordered.

On these bases, Tosam (2019:172) adds that “African environmental ethics extends the moral community beyond anthropocentric concerns by including non-human animals, plants, the unborn and the supernatural into the moral universe.” As such, the religiously inclined environmental ethics required Africans to maintain unalloyed ontological and ethical balance with other realities in the environment for their welfare and that of others, and to avert the wrath of the unseen realities (Mbiti 1969; Ekwunife 2004). Thus, the larger result of the diffusion of traditional religion in the pre-colonial African world was the efficacy of African traditional environmental ethics visible in how it fostered a pragmatic check on human activities that contribute to the environmental crisis; such as unbridled dependence on wood as fuel, over-



cultivation and over-grazing that put pressure on the natural environment, ecosystem, biodiversity and societal development (Tosam & Mbih 2015).

Given that African environmental ethics was instrumental in maintaining social cohesion, peace, and social order in pre-colonial society, it was also hinged on many social sanctions (Okafor 1992:38). As such, those ethics did not only exist as virtue but consequential ethics. This was in the sense that they conveyed teachings on living correctly, good behaviour, upright living, being in harmony with the environment/other elements within the ecosystem, and preserving the environment in order not to incur the sanctions of the community nor the misfortune and wrath of the unseen realities. In the knowledge of these sanctions, Mawere (2013:7) reveals that social sanctions were not only “to correct the behavior of the young/to teach the young members of the society, but also the adults about how they should conduct and behave themselves before others and the natural environment.” Such social sanctions as known in traditional societies ranged from ostracisation, prohibition, fining, to banishment from the community. Based on these, traditional African environmental ethical principles became effective social practices and strategies that conserved and sustained the environment and ecosystem, and checked and balanced human activities within the environment. It became an effective restraint on people with a tendency to embark on activities that produce negative consequences on the environment and society.

Colonial Understanding of the Environment

The colonial understanding of the environment stems from the traditional Western ethical perspectives, which are anthropocentric in nature. The anthropocentric understanding of the environment is derived from the Western philosophy of the environment. This materialistic philosophy was glaringly projected by Protagoras who taught that man is the “measure of all things” (Stumpf 1994:32; Russell 2004:83). Worth noting is that this western moral episteme boosts human arrogance within the environment, but blocks a lot of what humans can learn from and about nature, daunts human quest that ordinarily birth new knowledge, and drives human to worsen the environmental crises. Aristotle in “Politics” (Bk. 1, Ch. 8) reiterated this Western colonial stand, insisting that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.” This human-centered environmental philosophy shaped the colonial ethics in Africa. Colonial ethics in turn, varied African environmental ethics significantly and accord a greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings. On the other hand, the non-human elements within the African environment are accorded instrumental value for the sole purpose of fostering human wellbeing. This means that non-human beings that make up the environment are at their expense considered, towards the protection or promotion of human interests. In line with this thought, Ikuenobe (2014:12) documents that,

European colonial powers view Africa’s communion with and respect for nature in negative terms; as a sign of savagery, barbarism, lack of intelligence and rationality; supposedly reflecting in African’s inability to see the utility of natural resources to exploit and use them for human interest.



The above colonial ethical thought in African environment encouraged the belief that the value of non-human things in the environment is merely instrumental to maintaining human wellbeing.

In spite of this understanding, colonial anthropocentric environmental ethics merely rejects some extreme anthropocentrism. Such extremity is often located in extreme anthropogenic or human-caused environmental devastation which will in a short while affect humanity or colonial interests directly. This later consideration is often taken because human existence and wellbeing are still believed by the colonists to be dependent on nature; hence the fear that extreme destruction of the environment might damage human wellbeing. This notwithstanding however, colonialism cared less about the dilapidating African environment nor the cruel treatment of humans and non-human beings, except when such treatments were viewed to portend dire inevitable consequences for colonial interests or the privileged members of the society. The hegemonic nature of colonialism made this mode of thought the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* in modern African societies--a culture that now ravages the African environment and draws-back societal development. This long term repercussion was why Kant (1997) in his moral lectures on "Duties to Animals and Spirits" warned that cruelty to the environment and non human beings encourage human development of character that would be congruently non sensitive to cruelty towards humans.

Colonial Distortion of African Environmental Ethics

The fundamental question facing this treatise is; why the decolonisation of African environmental ethics? What went wrong with traditional African environmental ethics that held pre-colonial African societies in being? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that these indigenous environmental ethics are now shrouded with western environmental morality. This hegemonic union even glued the African environment to western influenced environmental communities that today shape the trend of human relationship with and within the environment. These environmental communities like United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), etc, function to foster colonial environmental ethics elsewhere and within the African continent. Thomas Kuhn, in his work "The Structure of Scientific Revolution," admitted the existence of similar communities in the area of science which decides in every part of the world what paradigm is acceptable or not (Isife 2023:43).

Besides, the advent of western colonialism introduced a materialist approach in the African environment. This is an approach that is purely exploitative and discriminatory to the unprivileged humans, animals, plants and other elements in the environment. This is also a mechanistic approach that viewed African environmental ethics as anachronistic, and encouraged "subjection and destruction of the traditional African holistic and conservationist values and practices" (Tosam 2019:174). Colonial distortion of African environmental ethics was further propelled by "international economic pressures" which the colonists brought to bear on the African environment (Ogungbemi 2008:330). The colonial approach was deepened through western religion, education, technology, norms and values that undermined African environmental values. Wiredu in Ibang (2018:133) recognised the existence of these colonial channels and reveals that colonial distortion of African environmental ethics occurred through



“language, politics and religion.” In all these channels, the most active is language. This is colonial training in African environmental ethics is conducted in colonial languages and foreign concepts. The distortion of African environmental ethics moreover happened through religious and school activities, government legislation and local administration. Through these means, Africans were socially, economically, politically and psychologically instilled with human-centered notion of the environment stemming from western ethical thought.

Subtly, Africans were pushed to shroud their autochthonous environmental ethics, values and practices with western anthropocentric ethics that “ascribe very little or no moral worth to non-human creatures” (Gudorf & Huchingson 2010:4). Traditional African environmental ethics thus became increasingly marginalised by educational establishments, governments and policy makers despite its potential to contribute to human well-being, environmental and societal development (Kelbessa 2015:387). This was followed by the colonists’ enforced legislations, monitoring techniques and conservation measures that geared towards full exploitation of the African environment. The indigenous ethical strategies that previously conserved the environment and ensured societal development became despised and demeaned. Human activities in Africa then plunged to utter disregard for pro-environmental values and customs. As such, many Africans developed a moral attitude and responsibility towards self, and broadly towards other humans (Tosam 2019:172). All these culminated in human exploitation of their kind and the natural environment, thereby hindering societal development.

Colonialism further mounted pressure on African environment through draconian land use acts and colonial administrative laws. The land use acts and administrative laws undermined African traditional common property management of the environment that was characterised by community participation. Conservation of the environment and checks on human activities then depended on ineffective policing and colonial coercive force. The colonists, nevertheless, colonised the environmental ethics through censorship of indigenous African environmental ethics. This gave the colonists an edge and control over African communities, and explains why indigenous knowledge regarding the environment was not regarded. This environmental agenda deprived the environment and the entities therein the importance and priority they deserve despite their contributions to human livelihood and ecosystem. It also brought nature-culture-venture dichotomies that hampered African sustainable societal development (Mawere 2013:15). Yet, post-colonial governments flowed along this colonial tide. This gesture recalls the popular assertion that African politicians and those in government consider themselves as “colonial replacements” (Ona 2006:18; Chinweuba 2020:120). In the post-independence era, African countries were also left with drives to catch up with the developmental pace of the western world. This led to indigenous but unguided exploration of African natural resources, and deepened the distortion of the environment. Yet, this post-colonial exploitation of the environment has even been purposefully structured disadvantageously to the African environment by the colonists.

Be that as it may, it cannot be overemphasised that the African colonial experience paralysed traditional environmental ethics. Thus, the post-colonial African constitutions are replete with environmental conservation strategies and inalienable rights of human and non-human beings



that are merely in principle. Hence, in practice, many African countries are notorious for environmental rights abuse and the destruction of nature. Unfortunately, there is also the fact that interested persons or groups from some foreign countries are colluding with the indigenous people and governments in destroying the African environment through indiscriminate felling of trees, illegal mining of mineral resources, poaching, and so on. With the natural habitats destroyed in the endless pursuit of wealth and development along the colonial environmental ethical model, human, animal, and plant species are unprecedentedly alienated from the environment. The deprived natural activities of these environmental elements had, in turn, deprived Africans of the necessary conditions for societal development. This regrettable situation in Africa now shows vividly the human thinking that sustainable societal development can be achieved independent of traditional environmental ethics and that indigenous knowledge and other cultural ecological values are worthless and counterproductive. To set Africa on authentic societal development, therefore, decolonisation and reconstruction of her traditional environmental ethics in complementarity with other functional ethics has now become imperative.

Decolonising African Environmental Ethics towards African Societal Development

The place of traditional African environmental ethics espoused in this treatise makes the process of decolonisation quite imperative. Yet, the decolonisation of African environmental ethics has to begin with what has been referred to as “setting the record straight” (Isife 2023:45). This involves making contemporary Africans aware that the present environmental ethics are more of a colonial construction; hence the increasing corruption and backwardness in the African continent. From this vantage point, articulation of indigenous ethics based on common origins for collective survival of Africans from economic, political, educational, cultural, and administrative strangulation posed by the present environmental ethics is required. This is more so because decolonisation of African environmental ethics would be effective with a prior understanding of indigenous African environmental ethics and utilisation of its philosophies and perspectives. This exercise is more necessary towards fostering the public education of the masses on the decolonised environmental ethics and exposing the evil of colonialism on indigenous ecological ethics.

Besides setting the record straight on traditional African environmental ethics, one would like to ask the following questions: What then is the type of decolonisation Africa needs in this contemporary time, when comparative advantage is on societal development? What pattern must decolonising African environmental ethics take to ensure sustainable societal development? Africa needs a progressive decolonisation that expunges non-functional colonial and indigenous tenets from the indigenous environmental ethics. Decolonisation of African environmental ethics should then focus on the articulation of functional indigenous environmental conservative morality that underscored the evolution of development in pre-colonial African societies. Referring to this, Fasiku (2008:110) observes that the importance of decolonisation is because of the philosophical solutions to most philosophical problems in modern Africa, which are cognitive in traditional African environmental ethics. In resuscitating and applying functional indigenous environmental ethics, therefore, it means that “indigenous worldviews, philosophies,



and ways of knowing and applying those teachings in a contemporary context represent a web of liberation strategies [that] indigenous peoples can employ to disentangle themselves from the oppressive control of colonising state governments” (Simpson 2004, in Mawere 2013:6).

Through the auspices of African studies, indigenous education programmes and policies, genuine decolonisation will continue through clarification, expounding, and justification of the valuable aspects of the indigenous environmental ethics from the hooks of colonial tenets. Decolonisation in this direction will also follow the part of critically distilling and appraising the ideas stuck in traditional African environmental ethics and the colonial coated environmental ethics based on African functional ontology. This is followed by a critical reconstruction of pre-colonial and post-colonial environmental ethics, distilling traditional “anachronistic ideas” from ones that can “allow human flourishing within our African world” (Osuji 2012:111). In this sense, decolonised African environmental ethics will rid itself of ineffective and perverse knowledge that lacks philosophical benefits in modern Africa.

Evidently, colonisation of traditional African environmental ethics was also conceptual. Proportionately, decolonisation has to be conceptual; that is, de-centering foreign conceptual frameworks embedded in indigenous environmental ethics. This also calls for a general re-thinking of the colonial environmental moral concepts towards yielding more comprehensible traditional meanings. Along this lane, sifting off unimportant colonial environmental terms, concepts, and theorems that lack pragmatism in contemporary Africa is quite essential. This process includes incisive and intrusive analysis into terms, concepts, and meanings in indigenous environmental ethics in order to de-centre Western terms, concepts, and meanings imposed on African words, concepts, thoughts, and aphorisms. In this direction, Western concepts like humanism and objectification have to be de-centered to downplay their exploitative character on the environment. Reconstructing and replacing those colonial terms, concepts, and meanings with indigenous ones would ensure decolonisation and correction of colonial distortions of indigenous environmental morality. In this sense, decolonisation of African environmental ethics would entail deconstructing African environmental ethics, amending the many years of distortions of African environmental consciousness, and making functional indigenous African environmental ethics relevant on the continent. In this direction, understanding and internalizing decolonised African environmental ethics by indigenous Africans would be enhanced, and African environmental ethics would be more relevant to contemporary African societies.

In upholding functional excavated traditional African environmental ethics and dismantling of colonial moral principles that gag its practicality, African environmental ethics would once more lead to sustainable human endeavours and societal development. This is a development that would authentically reflect the nature of traditional Africa that does not consider development as merely material, “in terms of the material transformation of nature, but a process that was in harmony with all the forces of nature” (Tosam 2019:185). This is so because African environmental ethics harbour a variety of techniques that can protect the environment and mitigate environmental and societal problems. On this basis, Ugwuanyi (2011:108) even vouches



that “environmental ethics based on African worldview provides a viable alternative to address the environmental challenges of modernity.”

Decolonisation must, moreover, be complementary, giving rise to hybridisation to produce the desired effect. As the decolonisation of African environmental ethics requires reconstruction of existing indigenous morality, it also warrants integration of epistemic options or pragmatic practices that can guarantee African sustainable development. Africans must in this contemporary time not succumb to the present geopolitics with its alignment, nor to the existent pan-tribalism, nor to Western universalism on the continent. It rather has to recline to epistemic options in other places, which are relevant in contemporary African societal development. In this way, decolonisation of traditional environmental ethics must embrace cooperation and complementarity of what functionally ensures rapid development elsewhere. This is the sort of environmental ethics Lee Kuan Yew (2000) encouraged in post-independence Singapore. India, China, Japan, South Korea, the UAE, and Qatar also encourage similar environmental ethics through their educational systems, economic policies, administration, and skills acquisition, hence they are now among the first-world countries.

The Imperative of Complementary Environmental Morality for Decolonising African Environmental Ethics

There is no doubt about the larger efficacy of traditional African environmental ethics in pre-colonial times. But can this environmental ethics still be effective in contemporary Africa towards achieving societal development? This question has become relevant as time and space are changing in today’s world. Based on the changing cosmic situations, it however stands that traditional African environmental ethics can only be functional in decolonised, reconstructed, and complementary form. This is because traditional African environmental ethics are also dominant with practices that are not healthy to the environment. Such dominant practices ranged from environmental pollution to “excessive use of fuel wood and constant bush burning that increases air pollution, affects air quality and depletes the forest and other natural habitats” (Ifeakor & Otteh 2021:161). These extreme practices call for the reconstruction of African environmental ethics and deployment of other functional environmental conservation strategies towards a gainfully contemporary African situation. The need for this complementarity also depends on the reason that reconstructed African environmental ethics may not solve all African environmental challenges based on its limitations and the magnitude of African challenges in contemporary times.

How then can reconstructed African environmental ethics be effectively applied in diverse African societies? This question not only alludes to the need for multi-approaches in solving African environmental problems but also the cooperation of all Africans in this direction. The application of African environmental ethics can also be achieved through governments’ legislation. In this direction, the reconstructed African environmental ethics can be made functional in consonance with existing environmental laws. Of course, this environmental ethics and the laws backing them will be more functional with the enhanced collaboration and participation of the local people.



To achieve societal development that would meet the needs and aspirations of the present African generation without “compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” therefore, there is an urgent need for decolonisation of African environmental ethics (Mawere 2013:19). This decolonisation will give room for reconstructed customary laws and traditional environmental conservation strategies enshrined in indigenous knowledge systems to function effectively. It would then make African indigenous ethics available for incorporation in the educational programmes and policies of African countries, and also make the ethics render its service as the fulcrum of societal development.

Importance of Education in Imbibing Decolonised African Environmental Ethics

Decolonisation is incomplete without the decolonised contents being part and parcel of people’s lives. As such, one of the fundamental questions that begs for answers in this treatise centres on how decolonised African environmental ethics can be instilled into contemporary Africans. This question seeks functional or effective means through which reconstructed African environmental ethics can be instilled into the public. Apart from government legislations, programmes, and policies, Fanon (2001:161) appears to have answered part of this question when he exposes the importance of education in the decolonisation process. Making the reconstructed environmental ethics part of the African educational experience would therefore remain a critical step in the decolonisation agenda. In this direction, educational programmes, policies, teaching, and learning contents have to bear the reconstructed African environmental ethics. Such education will further reawaken environmental consciousness in the larger population and set Africa on its authentic, sustainable developmental trajectory.

For better results, public education in African countries has to project adherence to the reconstructed environmental ethics as civic responsibility. This will help to increase patriotism, make further decolonisation possible, and draw more indigenous people to embrace the reconstructed environmental morality. African educational contents stand to change the colonial perception of the environment prevalent in post-colonial Africa. It is in the knowledge of this that Onebunne and Kanu (2022:118) aver that “African development simply rests more on well-defined, mapped-out Africanised curricula and a functional African Philosophy of Education that is African.”

Problem of Colonial Languages in Effective Decolonisation of African Environmental Ethics

An envisaged hindrance to decolonisation of African environmental ethics is the persistent use of foreign languages in Africa. Those languages cannot guarantee effective decolonisation of African environmental ethics. This is because African environmental ethics embodies indigenous concepts, beliefs, thoughts, traditions, customs, values, norms, and aphorisms. These contents cannot be effectively interpreted in foreign languages. On this note, it has been argued that “the tool of analysis is germane for understanding of African worldviews and thought systems” (Ibanga 2018:131). In this context, therefore, only African indigenous languages are relevant to decolonising African environmental ethics and philosophy. This is due to the reality that only



African indigenous languages contain those forms and reasoning that can express African worldviews, concepts, aphorisms, expressions, etc as contained in African environmental ethics.

Decolonisation of African environmental ethics, too, requires clarification of the meanings of words, concepts, and aphorisms in use. As such, indigenous languages in the decolonisation process enable inward penetration of the ethics in context in order to appreciate and explore the valuable and esteemed philosophical data inherent and peculiar in the ecosystem and indigenous ethics (Fasiku 2008). Further, it is only with the indigenous languages that description, interpretation, and analysis of African environmental ethics can be “developed into coherent, unique and novel philosophical ideas and ideals” (Fasiku 2008:110).

Conclusion

The chapter viewed decolonised and reconstructed African environmental ethics as the basis for African societal development. It reveals that Western colonial environmental morality shrouded indigenous African environmental ethics and renders it redundant. These decades of siege became the historic provenance of crises in the African environment and societal developmental trajectory. Relying on environmental ethics tainted by colonialism for decades, many Africans neglect the autochthonous environmental ethics that held African societies in being and formed the ground of African gradual and peculiar development before colonialism. Yet, the present effort being made by African countries to develop sustainably along colonial environmental ethics has remained unattainable. Consequently, the piling magnitude of the crises resulting from colonial environmental conservation strategies indeed draws back African societies and does not satisfy human needs in the contemporary African world. This situation also creates other societal problems that make decolonisation of African environmental ethics quite imperative.

Decolonisation in this context revolves around deconstructing epistemic westernisation and indigenous ethical epistemicide, amending the many years of distortions of African consciousness and making indigenous conceptual schemes relevant to the contemporary needs of Africa. The success of these deconstructions will indeed promote African studies that derive from the African environment. It will promote indigenous environmental ethics that have the potential to foster social order in Africa, as it did in pre-colonial times. It will also foster the actualisation of profitable environmental ethics that would provide the needed ground for sustainable African societal development.

Due to the present changing human environment and the magnitude of the myriad of predicaments facing the continent, Africa now requires an environmental ethics that has the full potential to preserve the environment, ease societal crises, and guarantee sustainable development. Because of the complexity of these needs, Africa urgently requires decolonisation of environmental ethics in complementarity with other epistemic strategies that have solved societal challenges and ensured societal development elsewhere. Thus, Africa needs a decolonised but hybridized environmental ethics in which the pragmatic indigenous environmental ethics would incorporate other functional knowledge forms to ensure sustainable societal development. Obviously, the application of the decolonised and hybridised



environmental ethics needed by Africa requires modern legislation and incorporation into development and education programmes, strategies, and policies of diverse African countries.

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