

## **Ethical Implication of Environmental Crises on African Societies: A Challenge to Future Humanity.**

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**Abstract:** African societies are becoming aware of the shortcomings of Western capitalist value system, because of its aftermath on individual, society, and environment. Many of African conservationist values, moral attitudes and ways of life have been destroyed by the exploitative capitalist ethos of European colonialism and modernity. Three decades of African countries trying to build their economies like the Western models have left her people wallowing in poverty, and her environment exposed to hazards. With this new imbibed Western values, African population will continue to rise, as well as innovation in science and technology, thus, there is a growing need to put adequate measures in place against further environmental degradation. This paper tends to show the ethical implication of environmental crises on African societies. It concludes with the need for Africans to jettison western anthropocentric, capitalist and individualist values for her communal values. This paper further acknowledges that due to modernity, African value systems such as taboo and totems are being outdated. This paper proposes that scientific methods of environmental conservation and Christian ethics in the spirit of African communitarianism can go a long way in curbing ecological problems within the continent. This work is carried out with the philosophical method of analysis and exposition.

**Keywords:** Environment, Environmental Ethics, Africa, Environmental Crisis.

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### **INTRODUCTION: MAN AND SOCIETY AND NATURE**

Charles Darwin in *'The origin of Man'* gave an account of the origin of man [1]. He avers that man originated from the primate species monkey on earth, which was preceded by many other species of flora and fauna in their different forms [1]. According to him, life first originated in the sea, then later gave way to invertebrate and later the vertebrate animals - the latest being the mammals to dominate on earth. Different species dominated it at different periods of time. One of such dominating species was the dinosaur, with a minimal brain but a huge body, which failed to survive on earth as they failed to adapt to the newer ecology on earth [1].

However, man is believed to be one of the latest species coming to earth as part of evolution, and his late induction ensured a superior intelligence than all other animals. Also, from many religious perspectives, man is a superior being to other animals or at least unique in their identity on earth. However, Man is said to be a social animal [2]. He can survive without fellow beings in nature, but he will remain without a purpose and goal in life. He does not become separated in identity with other beings in such conditions. Man becomes motivated and inclined to implement his intelligence only in the presence of other fellow beings. He is endowed with the better gift of intelligence unlike most other species and therefore he is born with the ability to rationalize his decisions or thinking on the basis of rightness or wrongness of it. Nevertheless, all of these abilities become meaningful and applicable when he lives in a society with both human and other nonhuman beings. The gift of abstract thinking has helped man and his kindred progress and function in life in a relentless manner. It has also helped him to decide upon his future actions and activities in future.

According to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, in primitive time, group of men one day sat down to agree to sign the treaty of society, by which they became bounded by the law of society [3]. Although the treaty is defined differently by different thinkers, in reality, there had never been any, as human society did not develop uniformly in all places in the world or was literate enough at the beginning of it to sign it univocally. It makes only a symbolic representation of the rules of society since in all probability, man and society had been existing simultaneously since the beginning of humanity. Man and society remain integral to the identity of each other. Human remains a unitary part of his social identity in spite of his ability to function alone. Man and his unitary family in the society are like an atom in the molecule that expresses its individuality through its togetherness. But then, since human and his society is part of the evolutionary process, therefore it is a part of nature also, which is the receptacle of all the natural embodiments, living and non-living.

Therefore in spite of human effort in establishing its identity separate from the rest of the species in the world for various reasons, it cannot ignore its umbilical connection with its surrounding, - that is nature. Therefore, for human society, when man is its unit, then nature i.e. its surrounding is its basis or receptacle of its functioning. Human society, therefore, is born into and functions within the periphery of nature. But then, since human beings happen to be the most intelligent of the species, who by a gift of God is also attributed with the ability to function and creates on his own besides that of rationalizing, therefore he is also endowed with the ability to judge what is right or not. Besides man's ability to reason which has made him superior to other species, this sense of superiority ironically has made man to carry out his own activities, not considering other beings who also share the same environment. Man has become the most dominant species on earth by not only using and over utilizing natural commodities but also by pushing the other species to the edge of their existence, occupying, chasing or even by destroying the forest and land of their habitats in the process.

Prior to executing his act of intelligence, Man often scrutinizes his action, whether from individual point of view or that of society. He also has 'conscience', the ethical guide to assert the rectification of his act [4]. However, often times, the acts of man's intelligence supersede the dictation of ethical consideration; this is so to feed his ego and sense of superiority. In some other cases, over a period of time, he would even change his ethical views to conform to his supremacy mentality.

However, like supreme truth, which often gets clouded with half-truth only to be clarified over a period of time, man's conscience also treads its rightful path by following the truth of nature. Following the path of conscience, man is coming to realize the extravagance of his felony of over exploitation of the environment, the implications of such acts and its fall outs too. Therefore, man's ability of 'ethical scrutinizing' has led to the realization of not only retrieving the qualities of nature back to its origin, but also to remain ethically bound in doing so, that is, to reinstate his ethical values of believing in the equilibrium of man, his society as well as his environment for the well being of all men, his ethically guided society and nature.

## **MAN CREATED (ANTHROPOGENIC) CRISIS OF ENVIRONMENT AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS ON AFRICAN SOCIETY**

Urbanization and industrialization in Africa have utilized the optimum amount of natural resources, the natural commodities that provides man with various utility purposes. As a result, these processes are also causing an enormous amount of waste which are left out and unwanted part of them or being considered unproductive. This waste is often thrown out on the ground or water or even in gaseous form to the atmosphere, thereby making the environment exist not anymore in their purer form, therefore contaminated. This process of contamination is called pollution: It causes widespread environmental degradation and even destruction of the environment. For example, in a colour dyeing factory, after colouring the clothes, the left out chemicals are thrown in nearby water body causing pollution to the water and rendering it either as unworthy or dangerous to drink or use further. The more the natural resources are used the more waste and pollution are created thereafter as a result of their utilization. The polluting conditions are not only hazardous for human health; they are dangerous or even fatal for the species existing in the areas of the waste dumping.

Therefore it can be surmised that pollution does not merely affect one aspect of nature but set off the whole chain of food dependents of nature and thereby triggering the degradation or destruction of the natural resources, both animate and inanimate. Thus human greed for more resources for his own welfare results in the destruction of nature, making it more of an ethical issue rather than a materialistic problem. To this C.J. Barrow opine that,

At the root of many environmental problems are unsound ethics and development and modernization. There is a need to promote new development ethics and to identify critical threshold so that action can be taken in time to avoid, mitigate or response to threat. It is also important to review opportunities to maintain or improve the well being of people other organisms and environment [5].

The degrading process taking root in African societies has left a deep impact on human, both environmentally and socially. This root can be traced to the deviated ethical values, which were espoused and encouraged by the Europe colonialism on African colonies in the form of utilitarian ethics.

Utilitarian ethics is an ethical position in which the happiness of the greatest number of people in society is considered the greatest good to the detriment of other things.

The colonization of African societies marked the downfall of old African empires, kingdoms and their reconfiguration into diverse political entities. The political geography of Africa was restructured and new African societies were founded on alien social premises and ideological, thus marking the beginning of imposition of new culture over African traditional values. African Communal values have now been substituted for Western anthropocentric and individualistic values. Modern African man would tend to do things that benefit him-self or humanity to the detriment of all other beings within the environment. This is the theoretical reasons in which many African environmentalists (Tangwa, Ekwealo, Ugwuanyi, Bassey etc) believed to be the cause of African environmental degradation.

However, in the zenith of civilization in Africa, Africans has proselyte the processes of urbanization and industrialization and thereby has allowed the process of degradation to occur in maximum possible way. In its rapid progression, it has gradually started to affect almost every area of human occupations i.e. whether materialistic, psycho-social or even purely psychological states. The Degradation of the Environment has been two folds: -

(i) Due to the destruction and depletion of Environment in a direct manner, i.e., by cutting down forest areas, causing desertification and desalination.

(ii) Degradation of Environment in an indirect manner, i.e., by causing pollution due to industrialisation and urbanisation.

However, we must add another angle to these, 'The Population Problem' as Africa is experiencing unabated number of population added every day to the existing number, which is creating a massive problem as earth's resources is fast diminishing as the resources on earth is not only limited but also proving to be 'inadequate', especially in African countries where the ratio of the amount of food supply to an individual is coming narrower.

## **THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES ON MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY**

### **'A Priori' Implications of Environmental Crisis**

When regarding the various ethical implications Africans witness fallout of environmental degradation, we can call it 'a priori' and 'a Posteriori' implications. The 'a priori' implications stem out of a series of effects that are obvious within African society and are being evident through the following assessments: African tribes and societies are losing their traditional communal value system of safeguarding nature, adopting an alien attitude which enables them to commit further destruction on nature [6]. The 'a priori' degradation of ethical values and the consequent result is evident in African societies in various ways. Here, we find Africans losing their old value system, as people are now ignoring this value system by cutting down trees for industrialization and urbanization. We also see this having implications on some Africa tribes who had been revering nature as their primary idol, as they are now faced with modern-day challenges due to new imbibed values.

Also, many African within these societies now find themselves in the contradictory position of degrading their own value system by cutting down ancestral trees they have been revering from time immemorial.

Also, killing large number of animals on a daily basis existing in African society is leading to the scarcity or extinction of such animals, as such; taboo and totems which are rich source of Africa communal environmental protection is rejected and replaced with individuality and anthropocentric value system which is championed by European modernity [7]. In a way, the deteriorating value system of African societies is the first indication of the consequences of environmental degradation on man and his society.

The cause of overpopulation in many African countries is also leading to economic depression among masses, ultimately resulting in its environmental degradation by the masses. This is evident mostly in urban areas where economic depression due to initial overpopulation is evident. Overpopulation in these areas leads to scarcity of food or less amount of it due to greater number of per capita division, and ultimately driving people to forest and reserve areas to collect food, leading again to the vicious circle of killing animals and often leading to their extinction in that particular area and thereby making the local ecosystem imbalance [7]. Also, in approaching these areas, many

African now scavenge it for pieces of wood and twigs for fuel leading to disturbance of the equanimity of wildlife, driving them away either out of it or to deeper forest and thereby upsetting the whole of the local ecosystem. In more intent cases some Africans would prefer to cut down the trees of the forest areas for fuel or even sell animals caught in there so as to make money for their livelihood. Often a time, some Africans will even start poaching in tabooed and reserved areas for much bigger amount of gain out of it. Lastly, in African societies overpopulation which is a cause of pollution hazard, leads to ill health and various diseases, this spell as disasters on poor African natives and underdeveloped African countries with poor health facilities.

### **The 'A Posteriori' Implications of Environmental crisis**

'A Posteriori' here means 'After Effect or Implications of Environmental Degradation ' on both man and his society. While previous sub-topic has discussed the 'A Priori' implication reflecting ethical degradation on Africans and their society, it is also time to think of the possible consequences of the ethical propensity in respect of diminishing of 'Nature' from human's day to day life.

The absence of ethical guidance to the human mind in respect to nature can be devastating to humans. However, what would be the implications of a situation when such a devastating catastrophe occurs and mankind would be left to fend for itself? In such a situation how will man's ethical values be prioritized and dictated to cater to man's necessities?

However, the increasing degradation of Nature is a worry to every African life and would also affect the importance of his ethical value in a proportionate manner, as they are integral to each other. Nature provides the basis for human ethical values by exemplary tenets such as love, care, responsibility, duty, obligation, proper judgmental attitude, etc towards the same nature. Ethics, on the other hand, is the process that teaches humankind how to respect nature and make man realize he is part of nature, rather than devoid of it. From a practical point of view, ethical degradation leads to nature's degradation and further possible destruction of man's life in the future, if the situation is not properly managed.

However, the major problem with the situation is that the less privilege Africans will face an unimaginable shortage of basic supplies that are acquired from nature. As a result, societies in Africa may encounter further ethical devaluation as we may find people trying to destroy whatever little are left of nature for their own survival. It is a known fact now that African resources are being reduced on a daily basis. It will not be surprising that sooner or later, Africa may become exhausted of her resources, as a result, poor and developing African countries will be highly affected as they will now solely depend on the 'product' supply of resources from far East or Western countries.

Destructions of environmental components in a great proportion will not only affect individuals in Africa, but the society in itself will be affected. Plants release oxygen when they use energy from sunlight to make glucose from water and carbon dioxide. A Man breathes about 9.5 tonnes of air in a year [8], this means this spells doom for Africans as they will either have massive breathing problem or total elimination of existence since there are little or no trees available to produce enough oxygen on the earth.

Also, there will be a great disaster when the Rain Forests are gone in Africa. The Rain Forest Areas in Africa, being mostly concentrated in some of the tropical regions met with the precondition of moistness and heavy rainfall, are so thick with areas of trees that sun rays can barely intrude through them [9]. The top thick of trees called 'canopy, does not only help in retaining the moist underneath it, it also allows highest number of species to breed in, thus being the richest areas of Flora and Fauna existing in Africa. However, it is not of a single reason for its importance in Africa [9]. The huge areas in Africa, covered by the canopies, help the continent in retaining the required amount of oxygen which occurs as a result of oxygen cycle in the atmosphere [9]. The atmosphere requires balancing among the various polluted cash emitted by man so that gases required for living organism need not be overstepped by polluted gas in the atmosphere. Besides, the water vapour emitted by the huge wood helps in absorbing the carbon in the atmosphere in the process of inhalation, which helps the harmful carbon molecules becoming less harmful and therefore dominate the stratosphere.

There will also be a large amount of Acid rain often. The emitted gases and particles of various harmful substances from factories and motor vehicles in African will mix with the water vapour or moisture in the atmosphere. After a certain period, the harmful gas comes down on earth along with the raindrops formed from the carrying moist and it causes harm or even injuries to the society. Usually

such rain carries as harmful gas particles, such as sulphuric acid or nitrates, which are usually emitted from chemical and other factories [11].

The Ozone Layer Depletion will also be a massive problem. Above the layer of Stratosphere, lays another layer of Ozone. In that atmosphere the gaseous substance has been protecting the biosphere from being harmed by the dangerous rays coming from the Sun. However, it has not remained the same over the last one and half decade, as it has been put to threat due to certain elements used for human luxury, i.e. ChlorofluroCarbon (CFC), a molecule used in some spray materials or bed foams get strayed to the atmosphere where the ozone layer lies and displaces one of the three molecules to reduce it to oxygen gas, thus letting the gas to be depleted in the affected area [11]. Recently the depletion has become so ominous that it has created a big hole in the layer the size of a small continent each in areas such as over continents such as South America and Antarctica, thereby letting the dangerous kind of rays to infiltrate into earth's atmosphere. In the wave of terrible environmental degradation the earth will experience dangerous kind of rays into its atmosphere which will cause a lot of diseases and sicknesses.

### **AFRICAN SOLUTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

The consequence of environmental degradation has been of late showing evident in the day to day life of African natives. The root of which has been believed to be the deviated utilitarian values as in accordance with the views of most scholars and philosophers from the western world. With the growing level of environmental awareness amidst almost all of its strata, the African society is keeping abreast in finding a suitable remedy for the malaise of environmental crises being experienced within Africa. It is evident that environmental degradation is connected to human values since this value is being shared by people, collectively they can reorient themselves to decolonize themselves from such values.

This study thinks that it is important for Africans to reorient themselves on its African communal values. To begin with, African modern society has been largely influenced by acculturation, westernisation and globalisation. This has had an effect on the erosion of cultural values and mores that defines and identifies African people. As a result, the communitarian way of life is no longer pronounced as it used to be in the past. Therefore, constructing an environmental ethic based on African communitarianism is very much important to stress the interdependency of all beings within the environment. The argument emanates from the fact that African communal culture breathes an environmental spirit. African traditional religion, proverbs, and African morality are the facets of African communitarianism which can aid environmental ethics in Africa. The underlying fundamental assumption is that African communitarianism puts priority to the welfare of the community over the individual as such; people will try to protect the environment for the common good. Gyekye in his version of moderate communitarianism argues that communitarianism sees the individual as inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationship interdependence [12]. Opoku speaking on African communal environmental ethics points out that there is a community with nature since man is part of nature and is expected to cooperate with it; and this sense of community with nature is often expressed in terms of identity and kinship, friendliness and respect. Murove postulates that traditional African culture and religion had started from the premises that the whole universe, no mere man had been created in the image of God and so many African societies made some trees sacred, some hills holy, some animals totemic siblings, some forests the abode of ancestors [13]. African cultures made no sharp distinction between the human race and other species. Due to these reasons given above, Africans have respected other beings within the environment. Below are some few elements of African communalism.

African traditional religion, the study has found that generally, Africans believe in a supernatural Being whom they believe manifest through nature. This religious belief explains why certain trees, mountains, rivers, animals are considered sacred. It is because of the religious nature of traditional African people that creation myths, taboos, totems assist in the interpretation of African environmentalism [6].

Creation myths point to a mutual relationship between humans and non-humans in ancient African time. It has been observed that most creation myths involve God, human beings, land, animals, mountains and forests. This cosmic relationship between the supernatural, human beings and the environment shaped African people's understanding of traditional religion as well as their encounter with nature.

Taboos play a fundamental role in traditional African environmentalism. As prohibitive and avoidance rules, Taboos have ensured that public water sources, particular animals and trees are safe from human destruction [6]. Fear of making a well to dry if one uses a pot with black soot and causing no rain by cutting trees have regulated the behaviour of African towards nature. Totems have been found very environmentally friendly in the traditional African scheme of things. Totemic animals are considered sacred and cannot be killed for meat. If a person is of the elephant totem, he or she considers the same to be sacred. Totemism also shows the relationship between human beings and the environment.

## CONCLUSION

From the study, one can deduce three aspects which are very significant. Firstly, African continent is facing serious ecological problems and will face further problems if it is not adequately tackled. Secondly, Western utilitarian theories have not significantly solved environmental problems, especially in Africa. Thirdly, the ethos of African communitarianism can supply the required ingredients in the formulation of an African environmental ethic that can direct efforts in grappling with environmental problems. It has been indicated in this research that it is possible to construct an environmental ethic anchored on African communitarianism. However, the researcher has realised that Most African communities have been christianised. This is posing serious problems in the sense that, Christianity is replacing African traditional religious values. Most sacred mountains are no longer considered sacred. Sacred forests are being destroyed by people in search of timber for construction and firewood to mitigate acute electricity shortages. Capitalists' insatiable and rapacious desire for economic growth has not also spared the sacred land. Both local and multinational companies in Africa are competing in clearing land for commercial mining and agriculture. In their pursuit of profit maximisation, these business corporations are contributing to environmental degradation in Africa.

Sacred water sources such as pools and rivers have been subjected to agrochemicals which threaten aquatic life. Taboos which used to protect water sources are only read as part and parcel of the history of pre-colonial African societies. Taboos are no longer shaping people's encounter with nature in contemporary African society. In modern Africa, people of the same totem are marrying each other. People are eating meat of their totemic animals. Poachers are killing animals of their totems. Capitalists' insatiable and rapacious desire for economic growth has not spared the sacred land. Both local and multinational companies in Africa are competing in clearing land for commercial mining and agriculture. In their pursuit of profit maximisation, these business corporations are contributing to environmental degradation in Africa.

Scientific environmental conservation should not be ignored in the search for ideas that can assist in conserving the environment [14]. In most African countries, organisations and other environmental players are embarking on scientific methods of conserving the environment; however, this should only be done in the spirit of African communalism. Scientific methods of environmental conservation and Christian ethics if used alongside African communitarianism can go a long way in curbing ecological problems. This integration will not only ensure environmental pragmatism but will re-align the African communitarian principle with the realities of contemporary Africa.

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