

## African Philosophy: The Questions of Climate Change and the Environment

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**Abstract:** With the growing awareness of environmental issues in the twenty-first century, this study explores the extent to which African philosophy contributes extensively to the discourse of climate change and the natural world. However, some critics are of the view that African philosophy is inherently anthropocentric and has nothing significant to offer in addressing climate change. Against this backdrop, this undertaking illustrates that the natural environment for Africans is not labeled “other” as often observed among industrialists rather it is a vital part of the African traditional world equilibrium. Hence, anything that imperils the African peoples’ ecosystem endangers their very existence-socially, economically, morally, politically, spiritually and ecologically. The study demonstrates that there is a huge correlation between socio-political, economic and suppressive structures in Africa’s postcolonial condition which have brought about climate change, environmental despoliation and underdevelopment in the African ecological space. Taken together, the study employs Deep ecology--a philosophical approach which addresses ecological problems by bringing together thinking, feeling, spirituality and action. African philosophy along with Deep ecology emphasize that the engagements of modern-day civilization threaten ecological well-being hence, the drastic need to transform contemporary environments toward a better ecological sustainability.

**Keywords:** African philosophy, Climate change, Environment, Postcolonial condition.

### INTRODUCTION

Ecological, biological, scientific, literary and African philosophical thoughts emphasize that the natural environment is imperiled, and the over exploitation of natural resources contribute to the destruction of the natural world. In view of this, Africa has been pinpointed as one of the parts of the world most susceptible to the impacts of climate change. This perilous alteration across Africa indicates dangerous extremes. Against this backdrop, some critics have attributed the environmental disorder to the fact that Africans are anthropocentric in nature. They assert that human life is the fundamental concern of Africans thereby labeling Africans as ecologically unfriendly. In this regard, Baird Callicott says [1]:

*Africa looms as a big blank spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics for a very good reason. African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interests. Hence, one might expect to distil from it no more than a weak and indirect environmental ethic, similar to a type of ecologically enlightened utilitarianism, focused on long-range human welfare.... Or perhaps one could develop a distinctly African stewardship environmental ethic grounded in African monotheism (158).*

Similarly, Godfrey Onah, a Nigerian theologian and philosopher, pinpoints human life at the center of morality in African traditional religions. He maintains that everything in the natural world has a spiritual nature of some sort, including humans, plants

and animals, but human life is more highly valued than that of other living things (Onah Section 1) [2]. From the above pejorative comments, it is understandable that Africans have been written off as having no solution to offer towards ecological complications. Despite these, my paper will attempt to prove otherwise. However, before delving further, it is imperative to delineate these central words „environment“ and „climatechange“.

For Casimir, Chukwelobe and Ome, the „Environment“ is the “complex set of physical, geographic, biological, social, cultural and political conditions that surround an individual or organism and which ultimately determines its form and the nature of its survival. The environment is the earth we dwell in as well as the surrounding biosphere. The environment influences how people, progresses and economic development ... are closely linked...” (62-67) [3]. Tanure Ojaide acknowledges that the study of the environment “inevitably leads to issues of land, culture, agriculture, politics, and economy among others. These issues are related to ownership of land, oppression, and exploitation. These issues and the environmental call for an ecology of justice or human rights that will bring harmony to the relationship between humans and their environment for their respective well-being in the interconnected cycles of life” (66) [4]. For the most part, the environment is perceived as a mere empty space, an uncontested ground manipulated for the selfish purposes of greedy political rulers, multinational corporations and cohorts globally. Currently, their reckless actions have culminated into climate change

and other acute environmental issues in combination with the impact of industrialization, globalization and technological advancement.

Thus, „Climate change“ is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is reshaping the ways we think about ourselves, societies and humanities position on earth. Climate change happens due to rise in “global warming which occurs due to increase in temperature of the atmosphere by burning of fossil fuels and release of harmful gases by industries alongside the excessive waste of precious fossil resources such as oil, coal, gas and deforestation propelled by greed for profit. Climate change is everywhere... and is an urgent crisis. Its destructive effect is not limited to melting of polar ice, outbreak of diseases, frequent occurrence of flood, erosion, severe drought and extreme heat waves which escalates human suffering and the destruction of the natural world everywhere” (Taylor 8) [5]. It is a precarious threat dedicated to the totality of the problem of climatic inconsistency and change. This study demonstrates that African philosophy in combination with Deep ecology theory could be vital in responding to complex interaction between man and the environment manifesting as climate change, global warming, ecological and cultural disruptions ensuing in Africa. They display a number of similarities in raising awareness on the need to make sustainable relationships between man and his environment which could address major disturbances of ecological processes.

### **African Philosophical Thoughts on the Environment**

African philosophical ideas on the natural world abound. For Ikuenobe Polycarp, “activities that have raised environmental concerns in Africa did not exist prior to colonialism because Africans had conservationist values, practices, and ways of life [6]. African views and thoughts on ontology, cosmology, medicine, healing, and religious practices support their moral attitudes toward the conservation and preservation of nature. Traditional African thought sees nature as holistic and as an interconnected continuum of humans and natural objects which exist in harmony” (2). Leopold Senghor claims that “as far as African ontology is concerned, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, everything -- be it only a grain of sand-- radiates a life force, a sort of wave - particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfillment” (qtd in Oruka, Calestous 49) [7]. In other words, “the African is, of course, sensitive to the external world, to the material aspect of being and things. ... he is sensitive to the tangible qualities of things -- shape, color, smell, weight” (qtd in Oruka, Calestous 48) [7]. Africans have sound concepts and opinions which can assist mankind live in harmony with the ecosystem.

Thus, in African cosmology, the environment is considered as mother earth. Evident in African origin,

are beliefs, ethics and values which are closely connected to the forest, its animals and the land. The uniqueness of land to Africa is that it is a gift from God and ancestors, a source of livelihood which can be cultivated for food, shelter, spirituality and rituals. For instance, the Igbo’s and Yoruba’s like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, perceive the earth „ala“ and „Ife“ respectively– as the mother earth which sustains all things. The land is esteemed as sacred and not labeled „other“ as often indicated among industrialists, capitalists and supporters rather, it is a vital part of the African traditional world equilibrium. Anything that endangers the local people’s natural world violates and jeopardizes their survival and synchronization with the earth. Furthermore, African mythology conveys ecological awareness in riddles, proverbs, epics, songs, rituals and myths. The Nobel literary icon, Wole Soyinka writes that the notion of time, soul, human wellness and morality is intertwined to issues of the natural world hence ... “the African, exist within a cosmic totality and did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon...” (Soyinka 3) [8]. However, these cosmic forces differ in their essence so, there exists the divine, celestial or terrestrial, human, animal, vegetal, and material or mineral forces. The forces whether as non-physical and physical forms exist in unity and relate to achieve harmony. Thus, African writers address ecological issues through literature by focusing on environmental consciousness using imageries of the African forest to call for ecological sustainability noticeable in Chinua Achebe’s classical novel in his criticism of European colonialist exploitation in *Things Fall Apart*.

In turn, by linking African philosophy and deep ecology theory becomes vital in the face of ecological problems not just in Africa but globally. This is to demonstrate the urgency on how societies can ensure the flourishing of other living entities beyond human beings especially in civil decision making in contemporary civilizations.

### **Deep Ecology as a Theoretical Frame**

Deep ecology is a theory that promotes radical cultural changes in the way and manner that humans and nature relate in order to bring about better practices, routines and policies concerning the environment in the political space. Deep ecology was developed by Arne Naess in 1973. It is an ecological philosophy which argues for the equal rights of all living beings. Deep ecology promotes “radical cultural change as a pathway toward the establishment of ecocentric societies, arguing that humans should pursue a wider identification with nature to establish ecologically sustainable communities” (Fox 136-9) [9]. Ecocentric is a philosophy that places intrinsic value on all living organisms and natural environment in contrast to anthropocentrism. In this context, deep ecology

challenges “deep seated assumptions about the way humans see themselves thus, offering a basis for environmental advocacy which may in turn guide humans against self-destruction. It involves moving beyond the individualism of western culture towards seeing ourselves as part of the earth” ([www.thegreenfuse.org](http://www.thegreenfuse.org)). This steers for a deeper connection with life where the natural environment is not just seen as something „out there“ but something we are part of and have a role to play in. Therefore, deep ecology questions the „why“ and „how“ of way humans live and how this fits with our deeper beliefs, needs and values.

On this note, Chelsea Welker states that “deep ecology“s arguments in favor of widespread cultural change allow for a variety of interesting tactics to play a role in this cultural shift, including education, the immersion of individuals and groups into natural settings, religious practices, and the invention of new customs and traditions that account for nature in different parts of the globe” (Welker 7) [10]. Chris Johnson explains that “ecological science, which is merely concerned with facts and logic alone cannot answer ethical questions about how humans should live [11]. In view of this, deep ecology which focuses on deep experience, deep questioning, deep commitment, ecological wisdom and harmony” ([thegreenfuse.org](http://thegreenfuse.org)) should be engaged. Consequently, deep ecology involves four directions such as thinking, feeling, spirituality and action:

*The first central idea of thinking in deep ecology is that humans are part of the earth rather than separate from it. This is in contrast with the dominant culture of individualism. Secondly, by feeling the world’s huge social and ecological crisis could cause humans to distance themselves from the environment. Thus, deep ecology insists that if humans perceive themselves as part of the natural world would open a source of strength that comes from connection. Thirdly, deep ecological approach to spirituality emphasizes our relationship with something larger than ourselves. A life centered spirituality becomes a basis of inspiration to respond to the problems of our world. Fourthly, deep ecology accentuates the perspective that we are part of the world and every preference we make would have significant impact towards a life-sustaining culture ([www.thegreenfuse.org](http://www.thegreenfuse.org)).*

Deep ecology utilizes the above “ethical, political, and cultural arguments to explicitly incorporate the environment into the daily lives, thoughts, political and moral compasses of citizens, nation, states, governments, and communities alike” (Welker 13) [10]. In other words, deep ecology plays a distinct role in its assessment of contemporary society and the anthropocentric ideas in preference of cultural change. It believes that the world does not exist as a

source to be freely exploited by humans hence, offers the following tenets:

### **The Principles of Deep Ecology**

- The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on earth have value in themselves.
- Richness and biodiversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values.
- Humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.
- The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- Present human interference with non-human world is excessive and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting will be deeply different from the present ([www.thegreenfuse.org](http://www.thegreenfuse.org)).

From the tenets outlined, it is noticeable that deep ecology and African philosophy have much in common in confronting and challenging humans to modify their behavior to forestall ecological catastrophe such as climate change. The deep ecology and African eco-philosophy call for the acknowledgement of the intrinsic values in other natural entities therefore, humans have no right to deplete biodiversity since the harm to one part of the environment has an impact to other parts of the ecosystem.

In spite of this, ...Africa...from the earliest history of the people ...have continued to evolve according to the conditions of the times” (Ojaide 11) [4]. Environmental reports have emerged that industrialization, globalization and technological problems are the roots of climate change. Human economic activities have pushed the biosphere far from its “natural state” through reduction of biodiversity, climate change and other ecological influences ([www.newworldencyclopedia.org](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org)). The socio-economic impact of environmental deterioration on Africa continues to pose a major problem to development and daily lifestyles which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change and its consequences. For example, in Africa, the Niger Delta concern foregrounds the extent to which ecological disquiet is ensuing with negative impact on the welfare and livelihood of its inhabitants. In the region, and other states, unpredictable rainfall patterns, escalating pollution, dwindling natural resources are triggering increased human migration, tension, conflict and militancy.

The bearing of climate change has brought about off-season rains and dry spells on countries highly dependent on rain sustained agriculture. The result is fewer water supplies for use in agriculture. Of recent, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

(IPCC) assessment report explains that “Africa will be worst hit by the effects of climate change which Nigeria is part of along with devastating socio-economic consequences [12]. Nigeria accounts for roughly one-sixth of the world-wide gas flaring which in turn, spews some 400 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere” (1-32). The irony of it all, is that, Africa contributes relatively little to climate change globally in comparison to advanced nations - the region is suffering from the irresponsible activities of wealthier nations. The climate change caused by the human economic and industrial activities of the rich, highly developed countries is significantly robbing on poor and developing countries.

There is conspicuous indication that climate change is already taking a toll on sub-Saharan Africa with prevalence of diseases, declining agricultural productivity and a rising number of heat waves altering our ways of life. For instance, the declining rainfall in northern Nigeria is causing increasing desertification. Also, people in the coastline areas of Nigeria who depend on fishing have seen their livelihood destroyed by the rising waters. The deleterious effects of climate change manifesting in temperature rise, erratic rainfall, desertification, flooding and landslides are real environmental drawbacks. The role of climate change in weather patterns, particularly heat wave is that greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane prevent sunlight from escaping into the space in so doing raise temperatures. The most recent upshot of climate disruption is evident in the extreme destructive cases of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Hurricane Irma in Florida United States of America and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. As well, places such as India, Bangladesh and Nepal have suffered massive flooding which have submerged thousands of people while, in Africa, thousands of people are experiencing climate change related flooding in Nigeria, Niger, Congo, Uganda and Sierra Leone which have upset transportation, electricity and health thereby, forcing people to abandon their homes.

Without mincing words, “traditional African values, ways of life, and the moral attitudes of conservation” we have known and grown “have been eroded by the exploitative ethos of European colonialism and modernity” (Shutte 42) [13] environmental calamities such as climate change, global warming and its corollary have become the order. It is quintessential to mention that, African philosophy, contributes to ecological discourse, in its recognition of nature as a family. In the notion of family relation with nature, Ukpokolo Isaac upholds that “humanity is part of a community of nature and just as members of a community co-operate for the good of all, so should we co-operate with nature” (199) [14]. African thought fosters respect for the natural world by nurturing a bond with other living things-organisms, species, natural entities and forms in the ecosystems.

Similarly, just like some African thinkers have suggested, “the perception of interdependence of nature holds out much potential for environmental ethics” (Ukpokolo 199) [14]. In this regard, African viewpoint rejects anthropocentrism or human interest “pursued without considering the good of the rest of the environment. The setting apart from the rest of the natural world as objects to be exploited and devalued rather than seeing ourselves connected with the natural entities is the core mistake” (Ukpokolo 199) [14]. African philosophy, in connection to deep ecology blames anthropocentric culture for the ecological crisis and builds its theory around how eco-centric culture can replace contemporary human-centered precepts. Thus, African attitude of interdependence of the bi network offers much promise regarding climate change.

Another substantial contribution African philosophy makes to contemporary environmental conversation is the question of moral obligation towards future generations-conscious of the ecological damage that may impact over a long period of time. Against this backdrop, when renewable resources are depleted or species driven to extinction or habitats permanently despoiled just like the condition in the Niger Delta enclave of Nigeria where reliance on fossil fuels show that every speck of the ground and stench of the air indicates the overwhelming and devastating aftermath of human engagements. Therefore, African eco-thoughts emphasize ecological philosophy and calls for harmonious relationship between humans and other living aspects of the environment. Like deep ecology, African philosophy suggest that humanity must rethink its overall identity for how it relates to nature and its place within the broader natural balance. Invariably, like deep ecology, African philosophy does not accept that issues regarding the natural world should lie outside political discourses and resolution.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, African philosophy of indigenous people of Africa along with deep ecological theory employed in this paper is a response to the increasing global crises such as climate change triggered by toxic emissions, contaminations, gas flaring, environmental annihilation and the like. The radical approach of deep ecology in its call for deep cultural changes and African philosophy ethical call for cultural transformation critically reorient the human relationship in ways that favor recognition of the intrinsic value of all life and the right to equal flourishing of other biological entities and ecosystems. The selected approaches prove valuable for imagining how societies can combat the heightening environmental crises and initiate ways towards environmental sustainability for the benefits of humans and the nonhuman world. The theoretical frame emphasize that humans must not be excessively concerned with industrialization, globalization and technological advancement to the ruination of other

natural forms. Subsequently, straightforward political, ethical, legal, personal involvement, deep concern and respect must be given the environment for the sake of present and future generations to address the perilous issue of climate change.

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