

The Role of Africa's Moral Education in Environmental Care for Socio-economic Development in Contemporary Society

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Abstract: This paper examines African moral education and its role in environmental care for Socio economic development in Africa. This is informed by the observation that the moral system in African society permeated every aspect of life and viewed economic development in the light of human welfare. African cultural heritage has human welfare at its core and is not limited to people in actual existence but those departed too, yet believed to reside in nature. As such, care for the environment was part and parcel of people's beliefs as informed by the interrelated nature of every component that constitutes the universe. The paper begins by exploring the key elements of indigenous African moral education and how it impacted environmental responsibility and development initiatives in the various communities. A reasonable way forward for enhancing environmental care for socio-economic development in contemporary Africa, through learning institutions, is advanced. This paper is theoretical in nature but will also make reference to actual scenarios in society in order to substantiate any claims made. The philosophical method of analysis, and evaluation of documented information has been utilized.

Key words: Africa's moral education, environmental care, nature, socio-economic development.

I. Introduction

Socio-economic development is an achievement of global concern in contemporary society. Its realization can however be threatened where the tenets for sustaining a clean and healthy planet are not seriously pursued. World over, there is environmental degradation and climate change crisis which has over the years necessitated constant calls by the United Nations (UN) for governments, corporate organizations and individual citizens to join hands in addressing environmental concerns. For example, in the 2012 UN conference on sustainable development, governments agreed to adopt the green economy as an integral tool for sustainable development, while enhancing a healthy earth's ecosystem. In 2015, the UN developed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) which came into full force in 2016. Goal 13 on Climate action is intended for urgent action to combat climate change and its effects. In 2021, the UK hosted the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) and bold commitments towards mitigating climate change were made (<https://ukcop26.org/>). For example, countries committed to halting and reversing deforestation and land degradation by 2030 (<https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/COP26-Presidency-Outcomes-The-Climate-Pact.pdf>). The 2022 World Earth Day that was held on 22nd April was themed "Invest in our Planet" (<https://sdg.iisd.org/events/earth-day-2022/>) and centered on building healthy cities, countries and economies.

It is evident from the foregoing that there are efforts and commitments by governments towards salvaging the planet. However, environment and natural resource management continues to pose the most challenges in our times due to diverse human activities in various contexts. Additionally, studies show that anthropogenic climate change has had a big effect in most parts of the world, with Africa being most vulnerable to its effects (Attfield, 2014; Rolston, 2012). In Kenya, the National Climate Change Action Plan: 2018-2022 document outlines how effects of climate change such as flood, drought and increased temperatures have influenced agricultural, pastoral and fisher activities in the past 20 years (Government of Kenya, 2018:43). Hence, Earth is still in dire need of salvation given, what this paper opines is, an eroded relationship between humans and other fundamental beings in the ecosystem. In an attempt to address that challenge, the paper traces a possible solution from pre-colonial African moral education which is anchored on a comprehensive eco-spirituality that minds future generations.

II. Literature Review:

African Moral Education Framework

Morality, in the African context, can be regarded as habit or character that is driven by desired human values and virtues. Morality formed the basis of the African education to the extent that any instruction given to children and the youth was loaded with the ability to apply values in decisions and actions in any life situation. The education instilled values for a peaceful coexistence between human and the non-humans, the living and non-living beings.

The key framework for pre-colonial African moral education was informed by values and virtues as well as humanistic, holistic, and life-long world views. Education was generally holistic in order to enable individuals perform various tasks and most importantly to foster human wellbeing in its entirety.

The moral feature of pre-colonial African education ran through its philosophical underpinnings and formed its core because every element of education and general human responsibility was undertaken within a defined value competency. As pointed out in Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, Africans had a rich education whose purpose was to build the moral competence of every member of society (Kenyatta, 1961). The aim of society was to produce people who upheld values that enabled the community to remain integrated (Kinoti, 1992). Beside the direct teaching and learning of values and virtues such as generosity, solidarity, respect for elders and nature (Mwikamba, 1992), the African moral education entrenched peace and harmony that brought fulfilment in the individual and the society consisting which consisted of the living, nature, and the departed members.

That education also posed the need for a conscious personal attitude that enhanced a consistent commitment to cultivating and maintaining unity and harmony in the universe of both living and non-living things (Kinoti, 1992). The natural environment was revered due to its divine attachment. Thus, totemism was a part and parcel of African education in order to safeguard plants and animals. Among the Gikuyu of Kenya, for instance, the *Mugumo* tree remains sacred because it symbolizes spirits, gods and power of the community. For this reason, it is well guarded and protected since members of the community have been educated its spiritual value and dimension. The African moral education was coined around a spirituality that generally called for caution and care towards people and their environment. As a result, forests that support sacred totemic trees and animals were protected because they were believed to have spiritual or cultural values and associations. Further, religious ritual and medicinal plants played an overriding role in African religion (Quiroz & van Andel, 2018) and this formed part of education for the special groups such religious leaders, medicine women and men. These influenced people's management decisions concerning natural resources leading to discouragement of environmentally degrading activities such indiscriminate cutting of trees/shrubs and careless grazing.

The humanistic component in the African moral education is best exemplified in the *Ubuntu* philosophy which had the human being and human welfare at the heart of every human action. The African children and youth were nurtured and enabled to realize the necessity of the "other" and to respect and promote human life and flourishing at all times. That meant that any human action in his/her environment, for instance, minded the other person. The 'other person', in this context, refers not just to the present, but the future generation too. This was reinforced by J.S. Mbiti's observation that whatever happened to the individual did so to the whole group, and whatever happened to the whole group did so to the individual. The individual can therefore only say that "I am because we are; and since we are, I am" (Mbiti, 1969:262). This made the African education to be geared towards acts that built good human relationships and community, and made people to be conscious of the welfare of others in their courses of actions.

There is no system of education separate and distinct from the system of socialization and of loving in the indigenous African society. Education being life-long and embracing the whole way of living, to talk of the holistic feature of African moral education is best echoed by Akinpelu who pointed out that:

...there educated man is to talk of the ideal man in the culture. Thus, the educated man can be described as one who combines expertise in some economic skill with soundness of character and wisdom in judgment (J.Akinpelu, 1981:178).

In the context of this paper, an individual who is excellent in character should have a consciousness of the implications of his/her choices and actions on other people. Similarly, one who is wise in making judgements should eschew any behavior that hurts other people or generations. Thus the environmental irresponsibility in contemporary Kenya such as careless dumping, water and air pollution, that are evident in parts of contemporary Africa, attest to the missing of a holistic component in the education system currently implemented. The holistic dimension of education in pre-colonial Africa was embedded in the all-round learning processes that the young people were subjected to. This was meant to enable them perform both specific and related tasks that called for their attention. Among the Acholi of Uganda, for instance, a boy who was taught to construct a house was also expected to learn related lessons such as the geography of the site of building in terms of the source of water, geology and location of neighboring villages. He was also expected to possess knowledge of the right types of trees and grass for construction of walls and for thatching. That also applied to other specialties such as hunting, fishing, ruling, and general care-giving. The goal of education was to enable any individual who embarked on any task and occupation to do so with keen interest in order to ensure less disruption of relationships and societal progress.

The life-long component of the indigenous African philosophy of education was evidenced in the insistence on values, and not just knowledge and skills. The values were meant for posterity in order to enhance the fullness of life experience for all people whether in the physical or spiritual world (Moyo, 1992). In both worlds, the natural environment was core. For example, human beings found connections with the divine in sacred places such as forests and water bodies. Maintaining this relationship for posterity required a sense of care and caution in the ways in which people engaged with the environment.

The origin of Environmental Crisis in Africa

The African moral system which was largely enshrined in her culture and religion and various natural objects was partly eroded by European imperialism which exchanged African identity and moral system for the supposed Western superior values. This is because when a people's mind is colonized and their culture depicted as inferior, then their self-image, confidence and achievement is also tampered with. According to Tosam (2019) taboos, values, and norms prescribed desired behavior towards nature. But as a result of the colonial encounter, Africans were forced to abandon some of these indigenous environmental values and sustainable practices for an anthropocentric approach.

The African people in traditional society co-existed with nature in awe and reverence because of the strong cultural and religious beliefs that surrounded the complementarity of nature to human life and its posterity. The world as seen in the African eyes constituted "supernatural, invisible realities, the world of human beings, and the world of plants, animals, the earth, stars, moon and all other beings" (Moyo, 1992:50). Respect for nature is deeply rooted in African world view to the extent that to live in harmony with nature entailed a deep sense of people's divine life that was perceived in the universe. Thus, prior to colonialism, Africans had a very strong sense of environmental reverence and conservation that formed a part of her moral educational framework. For example, the whole concept of totemism that surrounded trees (such as the *mugumo* tree among the Gikuyu in Kenya) and animals (such as the crocodile among some Zulu tribes in South Africa) were an important part of Africa's cultural and religious belief systems that promoted the conservation of natural resources. Mandillah and Ekosse described a totem as "any natural or mythical animal, plant, bird or insect which serves as a symbol of a family or clan whose members feel a close connection to during their lives" (Mandillah, 2018: 2003). Thus, moral education consisted, among other things, of the cultural knowledge of one's ancestral totem such as sacred forests, rocks, mountains and rivers, which in turn enhanced the maintenance and protection of natural resources for the survival and peaceful co-existence of all living and nonliving beings.

After independence, most African leaders continued to follow in the colonizers' footprints whose agenda entailed enhancing socio-economic and political development at the unfortunate expense of the natural environment. In any case, Africa's natural resources were and are the primary attractions of Europe in the form of research, business and entertainment (Getui, 1992; Getui, 2000). Implicit in this move was the commitment of most African governments to ensure that their development agenda approximated the underlying values of western industrialized nations at the expense of African values which, might have been more oriented towards sustainable development.

A possible driving principle in the foregoing moral predicament is egoism- a Western morality, according to which right and wrong are determined by what is in one's self-interest. Thus, "one ought to do whatever will produce one's own highest good, determined by the amount of pleasures or happiness that the person will receive from the action" (Hollinger, 2002: 28). The theory is capitalistic in practice because in a way, the tendency to use other people or even the environment as a means to one's end is high as long as the exploiter's self-interest is served. This paper observes a share of egoism in the ecological challenges experienced in contemporary Africa. This is because of the dominant materialism, greed and individualism that reflect in how most people, local and multi-national companies treat nature. The pursuit of the egoistic agenda by individuals and multi-agencies has adversely affected the natural environment which has, in turn, compromised socio-economic development. When we look around us, the clearing of forests and polluting water sources with harmful chemicals for vested interests is no big deal for most people or companies as long as their own interests are served. In Kenya, for example, cases of deforestation and overgrazing for self-interest have constantly been experienced in forested areas such as the Mau complex. This is despite the one fundamental principle of rational morality that is: 'one's conduct and one's judgments should accord with one's principles in The Earth Charter (2000) which suggested that everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family (Kowasch & Lippe :2019).

This paper acknowledges that once upon a time, mother earth had abundance for every creature but at the moment, both humans, animals and vegetation are in want. The rational beings that were mandated to ensure the balance and coexistence within the world throughout generations have turned against their call. African moral philosophy stresses that our neighbor is not only a fellow human, but, also, nature as a whole (Kinoti, 1992). Hence, an eco-philosophical rendition of the biblical saying: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matthew 22:34-40), implying love and compassion beyond human beings to include nature in our moral consciousness (Tosam, 2019). This position is informed by the Catholic social teaching on care for creation and stewardship of the earth in which human beings are depicted as stewards of God's creation by virtue of their centrality in the whole of creation as necessitated by their possession of the rational faculty which should enable them to choose and act responsibly. For example, in a pastoral statement by the United States Catholic conference on renewing the earth gave rise to *An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* which reiterates the place of human beings in the care of creation. One of its statements highlights that "Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human..." (Catholic Bishops, 2000). One of the reasons why human beings have deserted their

nature-given task is the erosion of African values regarding ecological responsibility which is in turn a consequence of lack of a holistic education. This is reflected in CESA strategic objectives that focus on education in general without issues of environment. Further, Agenda 2063-Aspiration 5:42 and 44 that points that Pan-African ideals on values, culture and heritage among others will be fully embedded in all school curricula may be a mirage to attain by 2030 (ACU, 2015; Tikly, 2019).

The contemporary African governments' development ideologies are still borrowed from the Western European culture which, in our view, is egoistic and capitalistic in nature in the context of the manipulation and exploitation of the natural environment for blind scientific and technology, destructive tourism, and industrialization (Getui, 2000) without deliberate caution of their consequences on future generations impeding the spirit of sustainable development. That has been evidenced in the recent past by construction of roads via national parks and forests in Kenya, invasion of riparian land, pollution of water bodies by irresponsible dumping of waste and chemicals from industries, poaching, and deforestation among other ills. This paints a picture of moral irresponsibility and limited focus of the African people in general yet, prior to colonialism, none of these practices featured, or even if they did, the magnitude was not comparable to the situation at the moment.

This paper observes that Pre-colonial African moral education was characterized by a high sense of environmental consciousness and care, which was essentially tied to its moral system. However, her colonization entrenched some negative values such as individualism and self-interest which have negatively impacted on the planet life. In this regard, we strongly agree with Ikuenobe's assertion that before colonization and modernity:

Africans had conservationist values, practices, and ways of life. African views and thoughts on ontology, cosmology, medicine and healing, and religious practices supported 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 all natural objects which exist in harmony. People's actions and ways of life reflected the efforts to exist in harmony with nature. These efforts led to the preservation of nature. Many of these traditional African values, ways of life, and the moral attitudes of conservation were destroyed by the exploitative ethos of European colonialism and modernity (Ikuenobe, 2014: 1)

Given the global concern over the negative impact of climate change that emanate from environmental degradation and demographic pressures, millions of African people will continue to suffer if collaborative measures to salvage the situation are not considered. Negative effects of climate change were, for example, recently experienced in South Africa in the eastern coastal city of Durban where a storm left hundreds dead and thousands displaced (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/24/south-africa-floods-rain-climate-crisis-extreme-weather>). Socio-economic development is certainly hampered with such occurrences because they escalate the people's misery, cause instability and diversion of national resources to re-settle the victims.

A Unified Cosmos and Ecological Consciousness in Pre-colonial Africa

According to the online Collins English dictionary ecology is the pattern of relationship among organisms, and with their environment. The definition depicts a sort of relationship among beings in the ecosystem. The place of the human beings is, according to this paper dual, in the sense that being rational they can deliberately either enhance a healthy balance of the relationship or destroy it completely. The unfortunate bit is that either way, they reap the consequences and can express them unlike other organisms who suffer in silence.

Ecological consciousness is perceived in this paper as a value-based approach to pro-environmental friendly attitudes and behavior. It consists a moral mindset that enhances individual, corporate and governments' engagement in deliberate environmental conservation, and creation of environmentally friendly policies and practices. That entails engaging people in a deeper reflection of the value of other beings and all the numerous elements in nature (from the pre-colonial African perspective) as well as the consequences of their individual or collective choices/practices such as water pollution that results from dumping and toxic wastes from industrial activities.

We observe that in pre-colonial African cosmology, reality was perceived as a composite, unity and harmony of natural forces. In this regard, we concur with Ikuenobe's observation that in Africa, "reality is a holistic community of mutually reinforcing natural life forces consisting of human communities (families, villages, nations, and humanity), spirits, gods, deities, stones, sand, mountains, rivers, plants, and animals. Everything in reality has a vital force or energy such that the harmonious interactions among them strengthen reality" (Ikuenobe, 2014:2).

A keen evaluation of the African moral education reveals a sense of ecological responsibility because the education, in the form of riddles, songs, and stories, was mindful of the interconnected nature of every component in the universe since "God and spirits were believed to be interested in the equilibrium of man's total environment" (Kinoti, 1992:80). African moral education is anchored on a worldview that unifies humans and divine entities within an ecological consciousness. Thus, an eco-system is understood, by the African, to be composed of multiple entities that interact with each other, and that need each other to

live. Amlor and Alidza, for instance, point out how traditional Ghanaian societies “used folk songs and stories to protect their natural habitats” (Amlor & Alidza, 2016: 38). Oral tradition like songs and myths were avenues through which communities taught and transmitted ecological knowledge. The elders also created awareness during the narration of the stories about the natural environment, “its origin and relationship with humans, plants and animals” (Amlor & Alidza, 2016: 39). Emphasis, they state, was placed on ecological lessons that were drawn from song texts which talked about the benefits which human beings derived from co-existing with animals and plants for survival, hence, the need for humans to also reciprocate by caring and protecting them. As a result, learners were engaged in making sense of themselves and their surrounding through action.

III. Theoretical Analysis:

African Environmental Responsibility for Socio-economic and Sustainable Development

The social and economic development flourishing of any society depends on a people’s responsiveness to the demands of nature such as environmental care and responsibility. Another essential element for consideration is sustainability which means continued change and improvement that lasts long enough to benefit future generations. The United Nations document on *Sustainability, Our Common Future*, defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” At the core of sustainability is the concept of moral responsibility towards the environment (Tosam, 2019). However, given the environmental challenges that result from human activities such as pollution, animal poaching, destruction of forests, and carbon emissions, there is need to rethink our approach to sustainable development. Since environmental concerns cannot be divorced from the social, economic and political dimensions of development, a strong sense of ecological responsibility should be inculcated in the African people by revisiting the pre-colonial mode and content of moral education to inform the efforts of local as well as international bodies committed to the salvation of Mother Earth. For us, the gist of sustainability lies in an ardent ability to consciously maintain or change the status quo as far as environmental stewardship is concerned. Since the situation in Africa at the moment is wanting, we need a strong value education system to drive the current development agenda.

The preamble of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development has outlined, the planet’s flourishing as one of its objectives as stated in these words: “We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations” (United Nations, 2015). The Catholic Pontiff Pope Francis has also acknowledged and asserted the need for the care of the Mother Earth to be considered as a crucial part of any development agenda. Thus, his encyclical on the care for our common home, *‘Laudato Si’*, complements his predecessors’ position by using the phrase ‘Sustainable Integral Development’, to implore us to care for the planet alongside caring for human beings in their economic, social and spiritual contexts. He further condemns any human activities that destroy the planet in disregard for future generations and calls for a culture sensitive concerted effort of all people, as instruments of God, to arise and care for creation. This is in agreement with pre-colonial African moral education that was both holistic, value and future conscious. It not only reminds us of the importance of realism in education but also of the fundamental unity of the different elements in the cosmos which must be upheld for peaceful coexistence (Sifuna, 2006).

The contemporary philosophical theory called “ethics of care” is also evidenced in pre-colonial Africa moral education. Tronto and Fischer, define care as “a species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment” (1994:126). Bases on the foregoing, “ethics of care” can be regarded as an ethical theory that recognizes the moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. The component of care in indigenous Africa was much extensive because of the consciousness raised on the relationship of human beings to the rest of the universe as well as the usefulness of nature for human survival and vice versa (Getui, 2000, Kinoti, 1992). In our view, if ecologically sensible policies were carefully integrated in the curriculum and effectively implemented right from kindergarten, then the earth would still be a better place for ‘the beautiful ones to be born’.

IV. Application:

Infusing ecological consciousness in contemporary education as a way forward

In order for socio-economic development to be realized in the 21st Century, Sustainable Development Goal 13 must be taken seriously. That will entail rekindling a consciousness of African morality through holistic education which does not emphasize fragmentation, but values the connectedness of everything else in the universe; with human beings at the core as stewards and not exploiters. A serious value-based education that puts, at its core, human and other beings’ welfare should be infused at all levels of learning. The focus of education in contemporary African society should not be “economic gain” and “speed ups”, but rather, sustainability.

Kenya's Climate Change Act, 2016, requires the Government to develop action plans to guide the mainstreaming of climate change into sector functions. This is what informed the development of the National Climate Change Action Plan, (NCCAP) 2018-2022 whose successes are yet to be realized, given the pressure of continued harmful individual and collective human activity on the environment. As a way forward for future Action Plans in line with the aforementioned Act and borrowing a leaf from pre-colonial moral education, the Ministry of Education can be mandated to do the following:

- Make ecological literacy and education compulsory for all learners with emphasis on service learning/community engagement for the same. This should not only promote an understanding of the connectedness of planet life but also the threats that some human activity such poses on the climate as well as proactive involvement of learners in creating practical solutions for the same.
- Infuse knowledge on the need for ecological responsibility in every subject of learning with an emphasis on deliberate environmental stewardship that is supervised and assessed at the end of a stipulated period of time.
- Borrow the lifelong component of African moral education to initiate continuous environmental education for the public unlike the ones in a while activism that only showcases the rich and famous involved in activities such as planting of trees and cleaning of contaminated rivers during World Environmental Days or during commemorations of departed heroines such as Wangari Maathai.
- Design policies for a holistic approach to learning that does not emphasize fragmentation but values the connectedness of everything else in the universe; with human beings at the core as stewards and not exploiters.
- Develop a curriculum that enhances a consciousness of the "others" (which is at the heart of the African morality of the common good) rather than "myself" in learners' right from pre-school in order to nurture a positive culture for making choices and engaging in practices that are mindful of other beings other than themselves, that is, their fellow humans, animals and objects such as stones that constitute our universe, with future generations too.

These, in our view, can encourage the preservation and improvement of the environment, towards the global quest for realization of sustainability in development.

V. Conclusion

The core and success of sustainable development is measured by the proximity of human attitudes and actions towards the whole of nature's well-being with a deliberate commitment to preserving our natural heritage and safeguarding our posterity. Therefore, a harmonization of our development agenda and environmental policy frameworks with the components of pre-colonial moral education for a unified ecological responsibility discussed above is one way of ensuring that socio-economic development in contemporary Africa is achieved.

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