

## Book review

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*Jonathan O. Chimakonam (Ed.) (2018). African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation. New York: Routledge, pp.i-xx; pp.1-234.*

The book *African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation* comes at an appropriate time considering the current environmental crisis affecting the whole world as well as the lack of relevant literature articulating environmental and ethical issues from an African philosophical perspective. At the time of publication of this book, there was no single unified book addressing African environmental philosophy except for some essays contained in other titles on African ethics such as those by Ramose (1999), Imafidon and Bewaji (2014) and Murove (2009). This book is the first anthology on African environmental ethics consisting of 15 solid essays addressing fundamental issues on how environmental conservation could be meaningfully constructed in African philosophy.

The book draws from a variety of thinkers with different and diverse backgrounds and perspectives in African Philosophy. This diversity gives the book rich perspectives on which to critically draw on and construct an African philosophy of environmental conservation. It challenges African philosophers to critically reflect on how African philosophy might contribute to environmental conservation by confronting “big problems of our age, such as climate change, global warming, environmental degradation, women’s issues” (p.xi) and social and environmental injustice.

The volume offers a comprehensive survey of the philosophical outlook of African environmental ethics. It broadly addresses in detail, some of the central themes in African environmental ethics such as: African eco-feminist environmental ethics (chps. 1, 2, 7, 8), the question of animal rights (chps. 3, 6), African ecocentric environmentalism (chps. 5), African relational ethics (chps. 4, 9, 11, 15), African theocentric environmental ethics (chps. 10, 12), anthropocentric environmental ethics (chp. 13) and *ubuntu* environmental ethics (chp.14). In dealing with these important topics, the book provides an excellent mix of different perspectives from sub-Saharan African philosophy on each of these central topics. Regrettably, the chapters are not arranged in accordance with the thematic areas that they fit into, making it difficult for the reader to quickly identify those chapters that hang together. In this review, I will follow the chronology of chapters, as presented in the book.

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The first chapter is a provocative quest for African ecofeminist environmental ethics. It involves two unique approaches to African philosophy, namely, peripherality and non-philosophy. It sets out to think about womanist philosophy and environmental philosophy in Africa (p.10, p12), as areas that lack attention in the current discourse on African philosophy. Seemingly, one would think that this chapter is actually confirming that womanist philosophy and African environmental philosophy are peripheral and non-philosophical. However, the chapter offers a fresh approach based on the need to expand the circle of African philosophy by moving from the obvious questions of African philosophy (p.20), and instead focus on what is conspicuously *peripheral* and at least deemed *non-philosophical* in order to make sense of womanist philosophy and environmental philosophy.

Chapter 2 feeds into the ecofeminist discussion and connects well with the first chapter as it draws an analogy of the Gaia hypothesis from the ancient Greek mythology and relates it to African mythology in order to construct an African ecofeminist approach to environmental ethics, one based on understanding the social injustice facing women in society first in order to also understand and confront anthropocentric thinking in society and ultimately environmental injustice. It seeks to revisit or at least reject some hard-line cultural beliefs and practices that are responsible for propping women and environmental oppression (p.29). Except for the transition from particular Igbo mythology to somewhat universal African mythology which is not so convincingly explained, this is a very interesting, ambitious and creative submission that the authors can consider developing further.

Chapter 3 proposes to construct the nature of human-non-human relations within the context of African culture, values and /or ethics. It specifically considers the question of whether African ethics is capable of grounding animal rights. It answers it in the affirmative by appealing to the African modal relational account of moral status (p.33), defending it against some earlier objections to it in some other discussions (see Horsthemke, 2015). It insists that humans have direct duties not to seriously harm animals for luxurious lifestyles (p.30) because animals are also within their hierarchy of existence, are vital forces in themselves, and that they have moral status as they have some communitarian relations with humans. Certainly, this chapter stimulates further controversies and conversations in the area of African animal rights ethics.

Chapter 4 attempts to construct the idea of human moral obligations towards non-human beings based on African relational environmental ethics. It carefully and critically appeals to the notion of interrelatedness within the African web of life to defend how it enriches human obligations to preserve biodiversity (p.43) for its own sake particularly species qua species and future generations. One of the strengths of this chapter is to successfully defend this position in spite of the challenge of anthropocentrism (p.44), some misconceptions about African ethics and even granting duties to species qua species and future generations. However, the major undoing of this chapter, in the end, is to defend a somewhat anthropocentric approach-ecotourism as a reason for preserving biodiversity.

Chapter 5 offers what I consider a significant contribution to the environmental politics of sustainable development in Africa. It challenges some inherently anthropocentric notions of development and urbanisation in south-west Nigeria. The chapter takes a holistic view that considers human and environmental development as interconnected contrary to pervasive

anthropocentric views separating these, as well as other factors threatening moral values (p.66). The only misgiving in this chapter is the sustained emphasis on the promotion of human happiness and human development throughout which might be read as espousing an anthropocentric argument. Nevertheless, the chapter proffers a promising argument for an appraisal of the ethics of development.

Chapter 6 is rooted in Yoruba cultural anthropology, and it tries to search and “discover the Yoruba normative conceptions of human-non-human animal relations, and to show that there are other perspectives in addition to the dominant animal liberation and animal rights positions” (p.72). The chapter brings in new dimensions to the interpretations of African culture and values which have traditionally been presented as not so much prioritising animal rights and care ethics. Except that it might be read differently as some sort of cultural anthropology because of its hermeneutical interpretation of animal ethics within the Yoruba culture, this is certainly a fine contribution fleshing out some ontological animal care ethics that are not only implicit within the Yoruba culture alone, but in most communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Chapter 7 also adds a voice to the ecofeminist dimension of African environmental ethics by focusing on the contribution of African indigenous knowledge to environmental conservation. It is a comprehensive submission showing how women have continued to contribute to human and environmental well-being and bio-diversity conservation in spite of the hardships that they face (p.86) owing to indigenous patriarchal gender roles and excesses (p.90). Yet political players and “policymakers do not include the views of women to climate mitigation measures” (p.92). In the end, this chapter boldly recommends the need for women to be included in social, political and economic decision-making processes that have a bearing on the environment.

Chapter 8 carefully and critically engages with the chauvinistic and patriarchal complexion of postcolonial African environmental philosophy. It does so by “raising some pertinent questions” (pp.104-9) from contributions by predominantly male African philosophers so far. The chapter then brings these questions into conversation with some of the most influential African women voices in environmental ethics as a way of bringing their environmental ethical philosophy to light. Perhaps this chapter could have been much more appealing had it also considered other women identities in African environmental ethics that are outside Nigeria.

Chapter 9 is a proposal for a new account of the ecosystem that could ground human moral obligations towards non-human beings. It is based on an articulation of a new relational account of the ecosystem from communitarian ethics binding *Ohanife* (network of living and non-living things) within the *Ezi n'ulo* (environment). It adopts some sophisticated conversational tools from Igbo metaphysics to advocate for an eco-bio-communitarian approach to the ecosystem showing how ontological equality between humans and non-human species in the ecosystem could be defended. Apart from the ambiguity of the use of non-humans throughout, the chapter makes an exciting argument for relational environmental ethics in African philosophy.

Chapter 10 makes an interesting critique of what can be considered as theocentric environmental ethics by bringing various religious perspectives to the symbolism and significance of trees. It systematically interrogates the anthropocentric and economic reasons largely attributed to the purported spiritual relationships that are thought to subsist between humans and trees in West African Christian and Muslim traditions. Adding a voice to the

theocentric view of environmental ethics, this chapter brings in some important religious dimensions to the hermeneutics of trees as the basis for interrogating environmental ethics in Africa.

Chapter 11 makes a compelling effort at trying to make African intellectual heritage and philosophy relevant to the challenges that humanity faces. In doing so, the chapter confronts the challenge of global warming from an African philosophical perspective. It brings the notions of African integration (interconnectedness), African science and African relational ethics into conversation with modern science and technology. The chapter makes a courageous accusation against modern science and technology for being largely responsible for the boomerang effects of global warming because of their exclusivist epistemology (p.153). In the end, it settles for an African philosophical framework as being capable of rescuing the world from the tide of global warming in our time (p.157) if the African intellectual heritage is carefully explored.

Chapter 12 takes stock of the current environmental crisis being witnessed the world over. It then proposes the Catholic theological teachings such as “concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (p.165) as some of the cardinal social teachings to which humanity could plausibly appeal for environmental, ethical guidance. This is a fine theological reflection on how Catholic teachings could ground theocentric environmental ethics, although it is not quite clear how this submission fits within the discourse on African environmental conservation.

Chapter 13 remarkably confirms African worldviews and ethics as “fundamentally anthropocentric” (p.178). In the same spirit, it gives a courageous defence for moderate anthropocentrism as an alternative environmental, ethical model for Africa contrary to most non-anthropocentric arguments for African environmental ethics. Of interest, in the line of defence for this argument is the view that “it is the human being who problematises the questions of animal rights and the intrinsic value of physical nature . . . and that all our perspectives . . . are human epistemic windows” (p.183). This is a bold, realistic, fascinating, and honest although unpleasant position about the nature of African ethics in general as it is confirmatory that African ethics is entirely anthropocentric.

Chapter 14 is the only chapter in this book that specifically addresses *ubuntu environmental ethics* in greater detail. Although it also fits within the category of those that address relational environmental ethics, I think that this chapter is exceptional because of the way it invites the philosophy of ubuntu into conversation with the Zimbabwean environmental crisis. However, one would always think that this chapter could have broadly spoken to the African environmental crisis instead of limiting the environmental, ethical import of ubuntu to the Zimbabwean environmental crisis alone.

Chapter 15 ends the book by considering the environmental, ethical dimensions of totems and taboos in African meta-ethics. Although this chapter limits the import of taboo and totem wisdom to traditional Ghanaian communities, (which are not the only ones that rely on taboo and totem wisdom in Africa), it makes a protracted effort to argue why relational environmental ethics of totems and taboos ought to be infused into policy making processes in Africa. It persuasively argues for “the need to integrate modern laws, traditional customs and norms in the natural resources conservation and management for the benefit of generations yet unborn”

(p.210). In the end, it convincingly argues why the preservation of nature through taboos and totems might contribute to the preservation of African belief systems as well as the African economy through ecotourism.

Overall, the greatest merit of the book is that it has managed to articulate some of the pertinent environmental issues currently affecting humanity such as global warming, poverty, climate change, pollution and extinction of biodiversity. These issues are particularly examined using some essential African philosophical perspectives such as relational ethics, theocentric ethics, communitarian ethics, African ecofeminist ethics and ubuntu. However, some of the fundamental aspects of environmental ethics that are conspicuously absent from this book include questions on environmental politics with regards to the issues of environmental justice. I do not find any specific chapter that addresses the idea of environmental justice directly. Perhaps the editor might think about this in a revised edition of the book. Nevertheless, this book is very informative and of relevance to anyone willing to learn from and even contribute to conversations on African environmental philosophy.

## References

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