

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ETHICS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The importance of environmental sustainability cannot be overemphasized. But it has only recently gained traction in bioethics discourse in the West. Contributors to this traction include Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudatio Si'*, and the Paris Climate Change Conference. Conversely, environmental sustainability is ever present in African traditional ethics, albeit unrecognized in the Western discourse. Therefore, I concur with the African scholars that African traditional ethics is intrinsically orientated towards environmental sustainability, fostering the same values essential for sustainability. But I further argue that this sustainability is directed towards what I call the "cosmic communal good." To achieve this aim, I outline the following traditional principles and concepts of African traditional ethics: relatedness of all things, cosmic harmony, the cosmic common good, life force (vitality), the interest of the future generation, and respect for the earth; and discuss how they relate to environmental sustainability. Hopefully, this paper contributes to the discourse and literature on environmental sustainability and

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amplifies the traditional African values and practices essential for the achievement of ecological sustainability.

Key words: Environmental sustainability, *Laudatio Si'*, African traditional ethics, Climate change, Common good.

Introduction:

Debate pertaining to the environment receives more attention now than before, and unlike before, there is an increasing desire and willingness to accompany the discourse with actions aimed at safeguarding the ecology. In such discussions, issues like sustainability or environmental sustainability make it to the agenda. Scholars interested in such matters have spent time and labor trying to understand and define sustainability and environmental sustainability. It has reached the point where each discipline or profession has developed definitions that are relevant to their respective context and field.² There is a debate between scholars who view environmental sustainability as a three-legged approach that concurrently benefits the economy, environment, and society and others who understand it as a relationship that exists between nature or the ecosystem and human society.³

No matter which of the two perspectives of environmental sustainability one holds, one can safely posit that actions taken to

² Morelli, John. 2011. "Environmental Sustainability: A Definition for Environmental Professionals." *Journal of Environmental Sustainability*, 1 (1): 1-9. P5.

³ Robinson, John 2004. "Squaring the Circle? Some Thoughts on the Idea of sustainable Development." *Ecological Economics* 48: 369-384; and Morelli, Environmental Sustainability: 2.

eliminate threats to environmental sustainability or foster it ought to impact such a system.⁴ The reason is that it is becoming more evident that a sustainable socio-economic system relies on a sustainable environment. Likewise, the measures we take to threaten and harm the environment should detract from such a system. This idea is gaining better traction in the West, thanks to prominent leaders such as Pope Francis and his Encyclical, *Laudatio Si'*, and the Paris Climate Change Conference. Still, the idea has always been present in African traditional (Environmental) ethics. The problem is that it is not fully incorporated into the broader discourse on environmental sustainability. It is not sufficiently known or acknowledged that African thought or traditional African ethics addresses issues of the environment. Part of the problem is the need for more studies and literature on African traditional environmental ethics, a component of African traditional ethics. In this paper, I argue that not only is African traditional ethics not silent on the environment and its sustainability, but it is also intrinsically orientated towards environmental sustainability and fosters the same values entailed by sustainability. To achieve this aim, I outline and discuss the traditional principles and concepts of African traditional ethics and how they relate to environmental sustainability. After the introduction, I developed the essay in the following themes to facilitate the discourse: African Traditional Ethics vs. African Traditional Environmental Ethics, African Traditional Ethical Principles and Concepts, African Traditional Ethics Fosters Environmental Sustainability and Conclusion.

⁴ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 4.

According to John Morelli, the word "environmental" is almost always used in connection to human interaction with the ecosystem.⁵ It suggests some human impact on nature. The term "ecological" is more encompassing and is distinguished from "environmental" as describing the interdependency and interrelationship of elements in a system. Therefore, the term ecological sustainability is seen as more encompassing and broader in scope than environmental sustainability. Ecological sustainability is defined as "meeting human needs without compromising the health of an ecosystem."⁶ While environmental sustainability which is a subset of ecological sustainability, is defined as "meeting the resources and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them."⁷ This definition of environmental sustainability improves on the general definition of sustainable development – to achieve the current generation's needs while being careful not to compromise the future generations' ability to meet their needs.⁸

Morelli defined environmental sustainability in a more specific way as "a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs" and, at the same time, tries not to exceed the capacity of its ecosystems' support. By so doing, it continues to renew the necessary services towards meeting those needs⁹ and avoid diminishing biological diversity through our activities. There

⁵ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 4.

⁶ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 5.

⁷ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 5.

⁸ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 5.

⁹ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability: 6.

cannot be social sustainability without environmental sustainability because the latter provides the conditions for reaching the former.

Furthermore, environmental sustainability implies the ability to maintain the following a) valued qualities in the physical environment, such as human life and its quality for all people, including the livability and beauty of the environment; b) the components of the environment that produce renewable resources, such as water, timber, fish, solar energy; c) society's functioning notwithstanding the depletion of non-renewable resources like coal, oil, and other minerals; and d) the natural environment's abilities to sustain for people and other species their the living conditions. The living conditions include clean air and water, a suitable climate, et cetera.¹⁰

African Traditional Ethics vs. African Traditional Environmental Ethics

Compared to North America or Europe, Africa contributes little to ecological problems such as global warming or climate change. Yet, Africa is one of the world's regions that bears the brunt of global warming and the consequences of climate change. People are quick to point out the environmental degradation going on in Africa. These degradations result from the faulty exploration process of oil and gas and the e-waste (electronics wastes) that the developed and industrialized nations are dumping in Africa. My intention here is not to exonerate Africa

¹⁰ Sutton, Philip. 2004. "A Perspectives on Environmental Sustainability?" [A Paper for the Victorian Commissioner for environmental sustainability]: 1.

but to correct the wrong impression out there. Likewise, it is not sufficiently acknowledged that African thought or traditional African ethics addresses issues of the environment. Part of the problem is the need for more studies and literature on African traditional environmental ethics. This section will address this issue and further explain how African traditional environmental ethics is not silent on the environment and environmental sustainability. I will outline the traditional principles and concepts in African thoughts that underpin how we value and ought to treat the environment and its sustainability.

In African cosmology or metaphysical worldview, there is an interdependent existence among the earth, its fauna, flora, human and non-human animals, the gods and the spirits, the ancestors or the living dead, and the unborn or future generation.¹¹ In some respect, this relationship may appear anthropocentric as human animals sometimes emphasize their needs and challenge even the gods. Nevertheless, in general, human interactions and actions are less audacious and tend "towards humility and cautiousness."¹² It is not a relationship of domination flowing from greed. Godfrey Tangwa confirms this by noting that human beings were more doubtful and unsure of their knowledge and abilities. They are "more conciliatory and respectful of other people, plants, animals, inanimate things, as well as sundry invisible, intangible forces, more timorous of wantonly

¹¹ Osuji, Peter I. 2018. "Laudato Si and Traditional African Environmental Ethics." In *Integral Ecology: Protecting Our Common Home* edited by G. Magill and J. Potter, 184-208. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 185.

¹² Osuji, 2018. "Laudato Si and Traditional African Environmental Ethics" 185.

tampering with nature."¹³ The relationship is in line with the African aphorism – "live and let live" and with the traditional African value regarding the concept of the universe as a cosmic harmony and unity, which envisages and supports the idea of the cosmic common good. The next section continues with the ethical principles and concepts involved.

African Traditional Ethical Principles and Concepts

This section discusses the African traditional ethical principles and concepts about the environment and environmental sustainability. These principles and concepts are at the heart of the African traditional ethics and inform its approach to and stipulations on the environment and its sustainability. The ethical principles and concepts underscore the fact that the African traditional ethics approach to the environment is intrinsically oriented towards sustainability. It implies that African traditional ethical principles and concepts are inherently oriented towards sustainability. The concept of the environment is enunciated in African environmental ethics, which is a subset of African traditional ethics. Furthermore, the principles and concepts include relatedness (interconnectedness) of all things, cosmic harmony, the cosmic common good, life force (vitality), the interest of the future generation (the yet-to-be-born), and respect for the earth. I acknowledge the diversity in African culture and practices and so the focus here is on the salient ideas from across the continent that seem to be shared by, at least, some scholars. Besides, these ethical principles or concepts are ones that are found quite broadly in the literature and may be said to be

¹³ Tangwa, Godfrey B. 2010. *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame*. Mankon, Bamenda, Cameroun: Langaa Research: 57.

repeated enough as to be somewhat representative of the African ideas.

Relatedness (Interconnectedness) of All Things

A kind of interconnectedness and interrelationship exists between the Earth and its entities. The African metaphysical worldview espouses the relationship between human beings and other species of the planet, Earth, plus the interrelationships and interconnectedness among all beings and things. These include animate beings of current and future generations, inanimate or organic, divine beings such as supernatural beings, the gods, the spirits, and the natural environment. This network of relationships and interactions among beings and non-beings of the ecosystem is intended to sustain integration, balance, and harmony among the beings and the ecosystem. Although arguably true, some emphasis is placed on harmonious communal relationships and the humanistic nature of African traditional ethics. However, African traditional ethics, including environmental ethics, are not inherently anthropocentric. The belief that everything in nature - the universe or cosmos and its content, including humans, ancestors, the future generation, the gods, and spirits, are interrelated and interconnected and, therefore, mutually interdependent opposes an inherently anthropocentric conception. Humans are believed to be part of nature, not distinct from it. All animate and inanimate things are considered part of "a single web or fabric of life" mutually interdependent. Consistent with the vital force theory, being bearers of a vital or life force is a common characteristic they

share together.¹⁴ Because of this, Kevin Behrens concludes that the communal and harmonious relationship is extended beyond human beings to embrace all entities that make up the cosmos.¹⁵ Workineh Kelbessa claims that the Oromo ethnic group in Ethiopia has an anthropocentric conception of indigenous environmental ethics and that they seek the protection of the environment for a practical (utilitarian) reason. The Oromo ethnic group believe that the value or worth of the environment is judged simply by its use and usefulness to humans. Kelbessa further explains that for the Oromo, trees are considered useful as sources of capital, investment, and insurance against hard times. Also, they supply humans with timber, wood, and food, protecting the soil from erosion. According to him, the Oromo are conscious that the deterioration of the environment means harm to their own lives and future generations.¹⁶ However, Kelbessa noted that the bond between the Oromo and the environment goes beyond material reasons to include spiritual and moral grounds. Therefore, there are implicit normative principles in the concept and practice of the Oromo. So, the land is not considered only as having utilitarian ends for humans but also as possessing inherent value gifted by God (*Waaqa*), who creates and guards all things. Therefore, we are not free to destroy

¹⁴ Behrens, Kevin G. 2014. "Toward an African Relational Environmentalism." In *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*, edited by Elvis Imafidon and John A.I. Bewaji, 55-72. Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.: 55-56.

¹⁵ Behrens 2014. Toward an African Relational Environmentalism 55-56.

¹⁶ Kelbessa, Workineh 2005. "The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa." *Diogenes* 52: 17-34. p22.

nature to satisfy our own needs.¹⁷ Moreover, the Oromo believe that land belongs to *Waaqa* (God), and the laws of society are based on *Waaqa's* law given in nature.¹⁸

Judging from Kelbessa's account, the Oromo indigenous environmental ethics is not anthropocentric. It may be arguably true that there is an emphasis on harmonious communal relationships and the humanistic nature of Oromo ethics. However, it is not strictly anthropocentric. The Oromo concept will fall into the general African metaphysical worldview and the idea of traditional environmental ethics described above.

Anyway, based on the relatedness and interdependence, Behrens endorses an African relational, environmental ethics that considers non-human nature as morally significant and emphasizes "a moral obligation to treat nature with respect and promote harmonious relationships between humans and other natural entities."¹⁹ This concept of the relatedness and web of relationships helps explain our chosen principles - the cosmic common good, the cosmic harmony, and respect for the earth, the vital force, and the interest of the future generation.

Cosmic Harmony

The principle of cosmic harmony speaks of the universe's orderedness or balance, the content, and life. The story of creation

¹⁷ Kelbessa 2005. *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics*: 22.

¹⁸ Kelbessa 2005. "The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics 22.

¹⁹ Behrens 2014. *Toward an African Relational Environmentalism* 57.

in the African metaphysical cosmology portrays God as "ordering existence from an unstructured reality or chaos to an ordered and harmonious state. This idea has important normative implications as manifested in social justice, righteousness, and truthfulness. Any wrongdoing or social injustice causes disbalance or disharmony of this orderedness. Disharmony is a sign of malaise in the community.²⁰ People should fulfill their duties and obligations to one another and the natural environment to maintain social equilibrium or harmony.²¹

Recall that the relatedness and interconnectedness of the environment and all the occupants of the cosmos (the supernatural beings - the gods, spirits, and deities; human beings both living and dead, ancestors, unborn; plants, animals, fauna and flora, rivers, mountains, hills), as well as other elements and phenomena and the environment, create a bond. This bond creates a network of relationships and interactions arranged to maintain the integration and balance of beings and things and the ecosystem - cosmic harmony. What happens to one member impacts another and their environment, eventually affecting the existing balance or harmony. For the traditional African metaphysical worldview, maintaining this cosmic harmony or orderedness is vital to the survival and flourishing of one and all involved. They strive to maintain this harmony is of paramount importance to the cosmos ecosystem. Harmony and order permeate African conceptions of the world and life. For instance,

²⁰ Mkhize, Nhlanhla. 2008. "Ubuntu and Harmony: An African Approach to Morality and Ethics." In *Persons in Community: African Ethics in Global Culture*, edited by Ronald Nicolson, 35-44. Scottville, S. Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 39.

²¹ Mkhize 2008. Ubuntu and Harmony 38.

in the concept of health and illness, health is not just the absence of disease but the presence and maintenance of balance and harmony between a community member, their social surrounding, the environment, and harmony with oneself. It implies that disease results from a breakdown in relationship, relatedness, and harmony between the individual and the ecosystem.²² The well-being of a community or its members rely on harmony with the totality of the cosmos.²³ This is why Africans believe that when things go wrong and awry, they have fallen out of step with nature or the gods and the ancestors; that is, they are out of harmony with the ecosystem. To repair things or the relationship again (i.e., to heal) is to restore the equilibrium, the orderedness. Conversely, when things go well, people are at peace with nature, the gods, and ancestors, *et cetera*. Cosmic harmony brings about unity – cosmic unity because everything is in harmony with one another and the cosmos. The network of relationships and interactions among beings and non-beings, that is, all members of the ecosystem, including the Supreme Being, the gods, the spirits, and the deities, are meant to maintain the ecosystem's integration and balance.²⁴ In other words, it is to keep harmony among the ecosystem and its occupants, hence, the cosmic harmony. In this web of relationships, what affects one impacts another and the ecosystem. The effect could disturb, weaken, or strengthen the equilibrium. Therefore, in the traditional African metaphysical

²² Mkhize 2008. Ubuntu and Harmony 37.

²³ Asouzu, Innocent I. 2007. *Ibuanyiadanda: New Complementary Ontology Beyond World Immanentism*. Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions. Zweignieder Lassung, Zürich: Lit Verlasg Gmbtt & co KG wien 71.

²⁴ Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie 1987. *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*. Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers 70.

worldview, maintaining harmony and a balanced relationship with all creatures and supernatural beings is paramount.²⁵

Taboos are another means of achieving maintenance and restoration of balance and harmony in the ecosystem. It is interesting to observe that some of these taboos that instruct against environmental degradation might not have originated as environmental ethics. Nevertheless, they evolved into them. For example, the taboos against water pollution include prohibiting menstruating women from going near streams and rivers and banning people from urinating or defecating anywhere near the source of or into the water pond, stream, and river. The belief is that these prohibitions would prevent the pollution and destruction of the "vital force" - the life of the river, humans, animals, plants, and other things that depend either on them or their vital force.

Respect for the Earth

In African thought, as I noted earlier, there is an emphasis on the well-being and interests of human beings, which gives the impression of anthropocentric environmental ethics. However, that is not the only emphasis. As I have been arguing, there is also the idea of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all beings, things, and the universe. For example, according to Harvey Sindima, Africans emphasize the fact that all living beings are bonded and interconnected.²⁶ Tangwa confirms that the African

²⁵ Asouzu 2007. Ibuanyiadanda 71.

²⁶ Sindima, Harvey 1990. "Community of Life." In *Liberating Life*, edited by Charles Birch, William Eaken, and Jay McDaniel. Pages. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 137.

worldview recognizes and admits the interdependence and peaceful coexistence among the earth and its entities, plants, animals, and humans.²⁷ Other scholars are of a similar opinion. For example, Bénédet Bujo asserts that "The African is convinced that all things in the cosmos are interconnected."²⁸ Munyaradzi Murove, on his part, writes that "... human well-being is indispensable from our dependence on and interdependence with all that exists, and particularity with the immediate environment on which all humanity depends."²⁹ This belief in the interrelatedness and interdependence of all things, nature, and the universe grounds the reason for interest in and care of nature and other entities other than humans. It gives rise to the feeling of and the consciousness of the concept of being in it together. That our existence and well-being are intertwined; we either sink or survive together. This attitude gives rise to respect for nature/earth.

Furthermore, affirming this concept of respect for nature or earth, Kofi Asare Opoku writes, "There is 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

²⁷ Tangwa, Godfrey B. 2004. "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by K. Wiredu, 387-395. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 389.

²⁸ Bujo, Bénédet 1998. *The Ethical Dimensions of Community*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications 22-23.

²⁹ Murove, Munyaradzi Felix. 2004. "An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation: The Shona Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu." *Mankind Quarterly* 45 (2): 195 – 215, pp195-196; and Behrens 2014. Toward an African Relational Environmentalism.

identity and kinship, friendliness and respect."³⁰ Likewise, Workineh Kelbessa affirms the respect for all nature in African thought and explains that it is part of the reason for prohibiting irresponsible or reckless and unrestrained exploitation of resources as well as human beings.³¹ I agree with Kelbessa that this requirement not only reflects profound respect and brings about equilibrium between various beings and things but signifies that human virtues such as **integrity**, justice, and **respect** do not just apply to human beings but they are extended "to non-human species and Mother Earth."³² As I have argued in another work, these examples imply that the earth or nature holds its integrity or value and that it evokes "a moral obligation to treat and care for the earth and non-human entities with respect for their sake and not solely for the sake of human beings."³³ So, nature (the earth) is not merely respected because of its economic value to humans but also for itself.

Life or Vital Force

The next principle to consider is life or vital force. As we have seen above, the African traditional metaphysical worldview holds that God, the creator of the universe, permeates its creatures, that is, everything in the universe. There is no ontological separation

³⁰ Opoku, Kofi Asare. 1993. "African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage." In *Religious Plurality in Africa*, edited by J. Olupona and S. Nyang, 67-82. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter 77.

³¹ Kelbessa 2005. *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics* 24; & Behrens 2014. *Toward an African Relational Environmentalism* 58.

³² Kelbessa 2005. *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics* 24. The emphasis in the text is mine

³³ Osuji 2018. *Laudato Si and Traditional African Environmental Ethics* 193-194.

between God and the rest of the universe and its content because God, the source of being, is continuous. However, there is a hierarchy of being.³⁴ Everything shares in God's essence, the creative force, or what Placide Tempels called "the life force"³⁵ or vitality. In his Bantu philosophy, Tempels maintains that life or vital energy constitutes all things' inmost nature. It is the ontological principle that vitalizes, energizes, or animates all beings, things, and even events. The activities performed by all beings and things are to maintain, intensify, or increase this force.³⁶ This life force guarantees the fundamental unity of all that exists and preserves the balance or equilibrium.³⁷ According to Mambo Ama Mazama,

for Tempels, an African ontology essentially entails energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all that is – human beings, animals, plants, minerals, and objects, as well as events. This common energy shared by all confers a common essence to everything in the world and thus ensures the fundamental unity of all that exists.... This

³⁴ Karenga, M. 2004. *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*. New York, USA: Routledge.195; Mkhize 2008. *Ubuntu and Harmony* 37.

³⁵ Tempels, Placide. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris, France: Presence Africaine 175.

³⁶ Also Okafor, S.O. 1982. "Bantu Philosophy: Placide Tempels Revisited." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 13 (2): 83-100; Imafidon, Elvis. 2014. "On the Ontological Foundation of Social Ethics in African Tradition." In *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*, edited by Elvis Imafidon and John A.I. Bewaji, 37-54. Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 38.

³⁷ Mazama, Mambo Ama. 2002. "Afrocentricity and African Spirituality." *Journal of Black Studies*, 33 (2), 218-234. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180935>; Imafidon 2014. On the Ontological Foundation 39.

energy constitutes the active, dynamic principle that animates creation and can be identified as life itself.³⁸

The ethical implication of this idea is that because of the shared life force, all things ought to co-exist with one another harmoniously. Humans ought to live harmoniously with one another and the rest of nature and all creatures.³⁹ Likewise, arguing in favor of this idea of mixed reality and the resultant harmony, Polycarp Ikuenobe maintains that human beings are a harmonious part of the complex reality, basically a collection of mobile life forces.⁴⁰ For him, nature or reality is a continuum because God, as the creative source of Being, is continuous. No conceptual or interactive gap exists between the community, the human self, whether living or dead, the noumenal: the spiritual or metaphysical beings, as well as the phenomenal realms.⁴¹ Rather they interact and are interconnected and interrelated. Therefore, the life force is an ontological principle of unity and connectedness of all beings and things based on a common essence. This implies a principle of harmony based not on mechanical solidarity but on organic solidarity (or social integration arising out of the need of individuals for one another) and complementarities of all forms.⁴²

³⁸ Mazama 2002, Afrocentricity 219-220; and Imafidon 2014. On the Ontological Foundation 39.

³⁹ Mkhize 2008. Ubuntu and Harmony 37-38.

⁴⁰ Ikuenobe, Polycarp 2006. *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. London, England: Lexington Books 63-64.

⁴¹ Ikuenobe 2006. Philosophical Perspective on Communalism 64.

⁴² Okafor 1982. Bantu Philosophy 94; and Imafidon 2014. On the Ontological Foundation 39.

The Cosmic Common Good

The next principle or concept to consider is the cosmic common good. The Akan people of West Africa have a mythical Siamese crocodile story with two heads and a common stomach. This Siamese reptile is considered a symbol of unity and democracy. However, more importantly, the common stomach symbolizes all the community members' common interests. In moral terms, it implies the common good.⁴³ The concept of the common good is intrinsically tied to community. The common good is understood as the good of all the members of a community or society, for example, the world community and an ecosystem. Such an understanding aligns with and supports the belief that the concept of communal life in African thought envisages shared ways of life, responsibility, mutual assistance, and interdependency. Members advance their interests in a manner that is regularly respectful and attentive to foster others' good, the good of the community, which is the good of all. In this way, it reflects the objective concept of the common good, wherein this concept does not threaten the individual's interest.

This idea of communal life and the common good is carried over to the relationship with non-human entities and all of nature. Here, community is understood as inclusive of the universe, all of nature where everything is interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent. Leopold Senghor summarizes it thus "... the natural and the supernatural, the mundane and the divine, the

⁴³ Gyekye, Kwame 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. NY, USA: Oxford University Press 45-47; and Osuji 2018. *Laudato Si and Traditional African Environmental Ethics* 188.

material and the spiritual, are united in an inseparable oneness."⁴⁴ This communal life and the interrelationships and interdependency resulting from it fosters a feeling and a consciousness of the concept of being in this together; that our fate is intertwined. We either survive or sink together. The well-being and survival of all creatures and all nature, that is, the ecosystem are understood as interwoven with ours and the deities. It is about the common good with everyone and everything orientated towards the good of all rather than each seeking its selfish interest. In this way, the concept of the common good is both cosmic (cosmic common good) and harmony. It safeguards a collective legitimization that is yonder than personal desire and forbids the quest for "absolute possessiveness and exclusiveness."⁴⁵ Again, it is about the philosophy of "live and let live," flowing from the awareness of our interdependency and that our survival is intertwined. This idea is the basis for the moral obligation to seek the well-being of all - the cosmic common good.

It becomes unethical to take from nature more than one requires to survive. Rather, there ought to be judicious management and use of resources, as well as the prohibition of reckless and limitless use of resources, including human beings. This belief manifests profound respect and equilibrium among a variety of

⁴⁴ Senghor, Leopold Sedar. 1964. *On African Socialism*. London, England: Macmillan 72-74; Sindima 1990. *Community of Life* 137; Bujo 1998: 22-25; Tangwa 2004. *Some African Reflections on Biomedical* 389; and Behrens 2014. *Toward an African Relational Environmentalism* 58ff.

⁴⁵ Asouzu, Innocent I. 2004. *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and beyond African Philosophy*. Calabar, Nigeria: University of Calabar Press. 380.

creatures.⁴⁶ For example, the Oromo of Ethiopia do not care for only cash crops or entities with economic values. Instead, they also care for all species because they consider them as possessing value in and of themselves. Some indigenous practices and codes reflect the awareness of things like the ecosystem, the possibility of the impoverishment of land, and the importance of vegetation -trees, and forests- in maintaining environmental standards.⁴⁷ Likewise, some indigenous practices and codes express the need to preserve a reasonable equilibrium among the ecosystem's different resources.⁴⁸

Along this line of maintaining harmony and ontological order, seeking the cosmic common good, and preserving nature for the future generation, the codes about totems and taboos get a rich meaning. For example, in most traditional African societies, some forests, mountains, streams, and rivers, including their flora and fauna, were designated as sacred or malevolent. People were forbidden from entering or climbing and using them. It was taboo to cut such trees, poach animals, or fish in those places as the case may be.⁴⁹ Such practices helped to preserve the forests, and the ecosystems of such mountains, streams, and rivers. Sometimes,

⁴⁶ Kelbessa 2005. The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics 19-20; and Behrens 2014. Toward an African Relational Environmentalism 59.

⁴⁷ Osuji 2018. *Laudato Si* and Traditional African Environmental Ethics 189.

⁴⁸ Osuji 2018. *Laudato Si* and Traditional African Environmental Ethics 189; and Ogungbemi, Segun 1997. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," in *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, ed. Louis Pojman Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Publ.

⁴⁹ Munamoto, Chemhuru and Dennis, Masaka. 2010. "Taboos as Sources of Shona People's Environmental Ethics." *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 12 (7): 121-133. pp128-130.

such forests and other trees were said to be unfit as firewood because they produce terrible smokes that could choke, or they do not burn. I think it is safe to go along with the explanation of this claim given by Francis Duri and J. Mapara.⁵⁰ Munamoto and Dennis agree with Duri and Mapara too, that the claims about the trees and their smoke were invented simply to protect those trees and the cash crops, if any, they produce. Therefore, taboos about vegetation are attempts to preserve nature's resources for the good of all, the cosmic common good, for both the current and future generations.⁵¹

Equally, in different traditional African communities, various species of plants and animals were categorized as totems, which meant it was a taboo to kill, eat, or destroy those plants and animals.⁵² The totemism practice aided the preservation and strengthening of the species and life energy or "vital forces" of these beings. Also, totem belief, as attested by Bassey Samuel Akpan and Okpe Timothy Adie, "focuses on promoting rapport between humans and humans, human and animals, animals and the deity, humans, and nature and lastly, humans and deity, the living and the dead.... attempts to enumerate and approximate the ideal mode of life which assures a sustainable future for all existence."⁵³ Consequently, they maintained the desired harmony in the universe. Also confirming the totems and taboo codes and

⁵⁰ Duri, Fidelis and Mapara, Jacob 2007. "Environmental Awareness and Management Strategies in Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe." *Zimbabwe Journal of Geographical Research*, 1 (2): 98-111.

⁵¹ Munamoto and Dennis 2010. Taboos as Sources 129-130.

⁵² Munamoto and Dennis 2010. Taboos as Sources 128-130.

⁵³ Akpan, Bassey Samuel and Adie, Okpe Timothy. 2018. "Eco-communitarianism: An African perspective." *International Journal of Advances in Scientific Research [IJASR]*, 4 (11): 88-94, p92.

practices, Benson Ohihon Igboin writes that some animals are considered totems, and this results in their preservation. Equally, some rivers are held sacred and, therefore, people are required to refrain from polluting them. Otherwise, the culprits are punished. Furthermore, some forests are believed to be evil and, as such, held sacred. Consequently, the members of such forest habitats are shielded from human selfish exploitation.⁵⁴

Some scholars contest the account and implications of the belief and practice of totem and taboo. They think the beliefs and practices are not intentionally geared towards maintaining a healthy ecological relationship. For instance, Nisbert Taringa argues that the traditional African religion's ecological approaches were grounded more on fear and respect for ancestral spirits than on respect for nature itself. Thus, some species' designation as totems leaves other (non-totem) species vulnerable, and the designation of some places as sacred exposes those that were not so designated to exploitation and degradation.⁵⁵ Although Taringa has a point here, he fails to give credit to the wisdom of traditional African thought and environmental ethics in designating certain species and places as totems and sacred, respectively. After all, there is no separation or division between the traditional African religion and culture. Therefore, it is difficult for him to claim with certainty that the traditional African religion ecological attitude is more about the

⁵⁴ Igboin, Benson Ohihon. 2012. "African Religion and Environmental Challenges in Post-Colonial Africa." *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 2 (1): 17-38, p27.

⁵⁵ Taringa, Nisbert. 2006. *How Environmental is African Traditional Religion?* Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: The Netherlands. <http://enviro.lclark.edu/resources/EastAfrica/Hadzabe/How.pdf> pp191-213.

peoples' fear of and respect for ancestral spirits and less about respect for nature itself.⁵⁶ It is known that the belief and practices helped to preserve species and forests, thereby maintaining a healthy environmental relationship with other beings in the cosmos. Moreover, ethics and morals are not entirely devoid of fear and the threat of punishment. Given the importance of ecological and environmental sustainability, it matters little whether traditional Africans' attitudes to nature were or were not based on respect for the environment itself.

Furthermore, how does one fully explain the fact that different clans have different species of animals and plants as their totems? For example, the Ihiala, Okija, Nnewi, Awo Ommama, Okigwe, Owerri and Njaba in Igboland (Nigeria), all have different totems. It would seem that the people in their wisdom are aware that their well-being is intertwined with that of other beings and things; a theory that many scholars have acknowledged as presented above. The people knew they must not endanger these other beings in a manner that would lead to their extinction, thereby putting themselves in danger and running the risk of disrupting ontological and ecological harmony. Finally, there does not seem to be (and I have not heard or read of) any species that has been hunted to extinction by any clan or community in traditional Africa. Even at that, aside natural death, it would be much more difficult to hunt a particular species to extinction from the traditional African universe because what is eaten in one clan is protected in another as totems.

⁵⁶ Taringa, Nisbert. 2006. How Environmental is African Traditional Religion? *Koninklijke Brill* NV, Leiden: The Netherlands. <http://enviro.lclark.edu/resources/EastAfrica/Hadzabe/How.pdf> pp191-213.

The Interests of the Future Generation/the yet-to-be-Born

The last but not the least principle or concept to consider is the interests of the yet-to-be-born or future generations. In the African traditional metaphysical worldview, the community includes the unborn or the future generation, the living dead, ancestors, and of course, the living or current generation. It means that all these people are considered or thought of when making considerations about the community. The community resources are meant for all, the common good of all, the current and future generations and ancestors. The dead need little of the existing community resources while the living and the future generation seriously need it, depending on what type of resources is in question. Concerns about pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, human population growth, and loss of habitats and species - biodiversity, are considered issues for current and future generations. Crucial to the discourse on the interest of the future generation is the role of ancestors. Although they are dead (also known as the living dead), they are involved in and exert influence over the lives of their descendants, which is the current generation. The belief is that ancestors protect, guide, and even punish and reward the living. In return, ancestors are venerated, and treated with respect. These actions imply that the living owes some obligations towards the ancestors.⁵⁷

Part of the obligations we owe to our ancestors, according to Behrens, is the responsibility to conserve and preserve the environment for future generations. Kwasi Wiredu (1994) confirming this, writes,

⁵⁷ Behrens, Kevin G. 2012. "Moral Obligations Towards Future Generations in African Thought." *J. of Global Ethics*, 8 (2-3): 179-191 p181.

Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be nonplussed by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In upshot there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal.⁵⁸

So, in African thought, it is unthinkable that the present generation has no moral obligations towards the yet to be born. However, the obligations to them remains a contentious debate in Western bioethics and philosophy. It is a given and evident in African thought, and hence in African bioethics and philosophy. To the Africans, our obligations to the future generations arise from and serve as a realization of our duty to the ancestors - the earlier generation. We owe them respect and gratitude because of their continuing assistance and guidance, which helps preserve and bequeath us the environment and resources we have now. Therefore, it is the current generation's responsibility to continue the responsible stewardship of the environment in the emulation

⁵⁸ Wiredu, K. 1994. "Philosophy, humankind, and the environment." *In Philosophy, humanity and ecology*, edited by O. Oruka, 30–48. Nairobi, Kenya: ACTS Press 46.

of the previous generations and hand over the environment in a condition beneficial to future generations.

Furthermore, confirming this belief in our obligations towards both the previous and future generations, Bujo asserts that the African ethical community goes beyond the current generation to encompass the ancestors, who, even after their bodily death, play some role in guiding the moral life of this community. Bujo speaks of "anamnestic solidarity,"⁵⁹ a concept he employs to describe the sense of community and relationship between the present generation and their ancestors. The living members of the community maintain the memory of the previous generation and share their lives with their ancestors to ensure harmony in the future. So, while the present generation is grounded in the past, it still, according to Murove, provides and adds to its own conservation and existence into the future when it has become the past. Through anamnestic solidarity, the communal life of both the living (i.e., the present) and the dead or of the ancestors (i.e., the past) is re-enacted in the form of a gift to be shared by the current and future generations.⁶⁰ It means that the interconnectedness of the web of life transcends generations, even though the yet-to-be-born cannot now reciprocate the current people's deeds on their behalf. Still, we must continue carrying out our moral responsibilities toward future generations. The inability of the yet-to-be-born to reciprocate does not liberate us from our ethical responsibilities on their behalf.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Bujo, Bénézet. 1998. *The Ethical Dimensions of Community* 27.

⁶⁰ Murove 2004. *An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation* 184.

⁶¹ Behrens 2012. *Moral Obligations Towards Future Generations* 182.

Additionally, in the African worldview, the environment is a communal asset shared across generations. For example, land, which represents more than a geographically defined piece of earth, is owned by the community. Recall that the concept of community transverses generations. So, the land belongs to the present and future generations. The ancestors act as guardians of it, ensuring it remains available to the community through unspecified time.⁶²

African Traditional Ethics Fosters Environmental Sustainability and Cosmic Communal Good

Comparing the definition of environmental sustainability to the African traditional ethical principles and concepts described here affirms that African traditional ethics is orientated towards environmental sustainability and fosters it. We may debate the levels of people's adherence to and practice of the principles and stipulations, but that is a different matter.

In the discussion above, we saw that Morelli defined environmental sustainability as "meeting the resources and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them,"⁶³ and more specifically, he sees it as "a condition of balance,

⁶² Sadomba, Wilbert. 2009. "Philosophical battles of Zimbabwe's land occupations: Indigenous African peasant vs European agrarian capitalist, jurisprudence." Unpublished paper. Cited by Kevin G. Behrens 2012. Moral Obligations Towards Future Generations in African Thought. *J. of Global Ethics* 8(2-3): 179-191.2; and Behrens 2012. Moral Obligations Towards Future Generations 182.

⁶³ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability 5.

resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity."⁶⁴ The demands of both definitions are well reflected in the African traditional ethical principles and concepts discussed above, that is, relatedness (Interconnectedness) of all things, the cosmic common good, the cosmic harmony, and respect for the earth, the vital or life force, and the interests of the future generation. For example, in the definition, he speaks of balance, resilience, interconnectedness, etc. This request is what the two African traditional ethical principles and concepts: the relatedness (Interconnectedness) of all things and cosmic harmony are about. The idea of relatedness (Interconnectedness) of all things asserts and insists on the relatedness, interconnectedness, and interdependency of all beings and things among themselves and the universe. Cosmic harmony asserts the necessity of equilibrium, balance, and harmony among all beings, entities, and the cosmos.

Furthermore, according to the definition, environmental sustainability also requires "human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity...."⁶⁵ Again, this issue is dealt with in African traditional ethics' principles of respect for the earth, cosmic common good, and cosmic harmony. African traditional ethics emphasizes the

⁶⁴ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability 6.

⁶⁵ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability 6.

judicious use of resources for the good of both the present and the future generations (respect for the earth and cosmic common good). People should not take more from nature than they need. People are required to fulfill their duties and obligations not only to one another but also to the natural environment to maintain social equilibrium or harmony.⁶⁶ It leads to maintaining and preserving the life forces of all beings and things and the universe, including biological diversity. Obligations are the awareness that allowing the diminishing of biological diversity is disrespectful of nature, and causes cosmic disharmony, disequilibrium, and eventually harming human beings because our well-being is intertwined with biological diversity.

Evidently, then, the focus the sustainability is for the cosmic communal good and not just for the humans and or animals and nonliving things. African traditional ethics recognizes that if the ecosystems are not taken care of to continue to regenerate the required services to meet the sustainable needs, the harmony and balance will be dislodged, leading to malaise and diminishing of the vital force. Likewise, in such a process, "the resources and services needs of current and future generations"⁶⁷ are taken care of. This, then, is the reason why African traditional ethics emphasizes the interests of the future generation and the cosmic common good. The obligation to seek the cosmic common good entails fulfilling the needs (resources and services) of both current and future generations.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Mkhize 2008. Ubuntu and Harmony 38.

⁶⁷ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability 5.

⁶⁸ Morelli 2011. Environmental Sustainability 5.

Finally, one can conclude from this and the preceding discussion that African traditional ethics are intrinsically orientated towards environmental sustainability and foster it. That form of sustainability is directed toward what I call the “cosmic communal good,” wherein the good of all is envisaged and ensured, whether it is human beings, animals, plants, nonliving things, or the ecosystem. It is directed towards the good of all in the cosmic community.

Unfortunately, African traditional ethical principles and concepts are not very much incorporated into the broader discourse on environmental sustainability, and indigenous people have been left on the periphery. Even the process of environmental policy formulation in Africa seems more influenced by donors and expatriate advisors than the African environmental philosophers and bioethicists and the traditional African environmental, and ethical principles and practices. As Kelbessa rightly noted, when it comes to the formulation and implementation of various policies there hasn’t been much attempt to include peasant farmers and pastoralists. Likewise, the rural people have not often received their well-deserved credit for their farming skills and environmental knowledge.⁶⁹ What’s more, local knowledge embodies many generations of experience and problem-solving by human beings worldwide. Yet, indigenous values, knowledge systems, and practices are crucial to achieving environmental sustainability and sustainable development. This is why the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) underscores the

⁶⁹ Kelbessa, Workineh 2014. “Can African Environmental Ethics Contribute to Environmental Policy in Africa?” *Environmental Ethics*, 36 (Spring): 31- 61, p59.

fundamental importance of indigenous values and knowledge in achieving sustainable development. For instance, Article 8 (j) asserts that:

Subject to its national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations, and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices;⁷⁰

Conclusion

Although it needs to be sufficiently known and acknowledged that African thought and African traditional ethics address environmental issues, I have tried to explain and espouse through the work of African scholars that African traditional ethics is not silent on the environment and its sustainability. It is intrinsically orientated towards environmental sustainability. In my opinion, this sustainability aims to achieve the cosmic communal good of all things living and nonliving and not just the profit for humans. In addition, African traditional ethics fosters the exact values required by sustainability, as shown by the traditional principles

⁷⁰ Tosam, Mbih Jerome 2019. "African Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development." *Open Journal of Philosophy*. 9: 172-192. Retrieved December 15, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2019.92012> 185ff.

and concepts of African traditional ethics. I hope this paper will contribute to the discourse and add to the literature on environmental sustainability. It will help to amplify the traditional African values and practices that are beneficial and necessary for achieving environmental sustainability for the cosmic communal good.