

Traditional African Environmental Ethics and Colonial Legacy

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Abstract

Concerns have been raised about environmental problems in Africa. I argue that these environmental problems did not exist prior to colonialism because traditional Africans had conservationist values, moral attitudes, practices, and ways of life. I articulate African thoughts on ontology, cosmology, traditional medicine and healing, and religious practices that supported their conservationist moral values and attitudes. Many of these traditional conservationist values, ways of life, and moral attitudes were destroyed by the exploitative ethos of European colonialism and modernity. I show how the colonial social structures left behind still continue to engender and contribute to the environmental problems in Africa today.

Keywords: Traditional African Thought, Colonialism, Environmental Ethics, Environmental Problems, Colonial Social Structures

Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been worldwide interest in the state of the environment in Africa and the damage being done to it. Concerns have been raised about the massive destruction of the rain forest, the poaching of elephants for ivory, the pollution of rivers, the endangering of various species of plants and animals, the wanton killing of wild animals, the harvesting of their parts for various purposes, and the destruction of various habitats due to deforestation. As a result, some argue, that empirically, Africans are environmentally unfriendly because they seem to have a bad environmental record. Given this record, some say Africans cannot be expected to make substantive contributions to the world's environmental problem and that they have no ideas or solutions to offer to many environmental issues. (Kelbassa, 2006: 21).

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I argue that the activities that have raised environmental concerns in Africa did not exist prior to colonialism because 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.

African View of Ontology, Nature, and the Environment

Traditional African views of ontology can be understood in terms of their view of cosmology. Reality is seen as a composite, unity and harmony of natural forces. 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. For some African peoples such as the Bantu, things in reality can be placed in the following hierarchically ontological categories, based on their power to strengthen interactions and harmony in reality: God, ancestors or spirits, humans, animals, plants, and non-biological things (Burnett & Kang'ethe, 1994: 149). According to Leopold Senghor (1995: 45-54), this idea of nature as life force is substantially different from the modern Western view of reality. He argues that for traditional Africans, "the whole of the universe appears as an infinitely small, and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of life. It is He who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces" (Senghor, 1995: 49). God is seen as the source, creator, and origin of life in living creatures, gods, deities and spiritual entities.

Senghor argues: "As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, everything--be it only a grain of sand--radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfillment" (1995: 49).

This idea is captured by Innocent Onyewuenyi's (1995) description of African ontology as a dynamic life force. He argues that: "The concept of force or dynamism cancels out the idea of separate beings or substances which exist side by side independent of one another..." (424). Such independent conception of substances in reality, he argues, is what characterizes Western ontology and distinguishes it from the African view. This point is also captured by Placide Tempels when he argues that the African thought system, as instantiated among the Bantus, holds that things in reality are forces that help to preserve the bond that one has with others, and that reality involves some intimate ontological relationships and interactions among beings. In his view, "It is because all being is force and exists only in that it is force, that the category 'force' includes of necessity all 'beings': God, men living and departed, animals, plants, mineral" (Tempels, 1995: 67). However, forces may differ in their essence; thus we have divine, celestial or terrestrial, human, animal, vegetal, and material or mineral forces. These forces exist in unity and interact in order to achieve harmony. The proper interaction among different forces, or lack thereof in some situations, is the basis for explaining causal phenomena with respect to events.

Modern Western thoughts see reality in terms of a dichotomy between a subjective reality from the perspective of humans and an objective reality. The objective reality exists independent of human subjects and it is logically different from human subjective conceptions of it. Vernon Dixon (1976) articulates thus the difference between the modern Western and traditional African world views:

In the Euro-American world view, there is a separation between the self and the non-self (phenomenal world). Through this process of separation, the phenomenal world becomes an Object, an it. By Object, I mean the totality of phenomena conceived as constituting the non-self, that is, all the phenomena that are the antithesis of subject, ego, or self-consciousness. The phenomenal world becomes an entity considered as totally independent of the self. Events or phenomena are treated as external to the self rather than as affected by one's feelings or reflections. Reality becomes that which is set before the mind to be apprehended, whether it be things external in space or conceptions formed by the mind itself (54-55).

This Western objective view of reality is instantiated in the ideas of Western philosophers such as Newton, Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant among others.

For instance, Kant distinguishes between the noumena world (things in themselves) which is not knowable by humans and the phenomena world, which represents things as known by humans. The modern Western view of ontology, as influenced by science especially biology and physics, seeks to dichotomize between things (inanimate and animate objects) and then find features by which things can be categorized into types.

According to the African view of ontology, there is no distinction between 'object' and 'subject'; Africans do not believe that objects exist unknown by a subject or known objectively. The African view of ontology which blurs the distinction between object and subject implies epistemologically and cognitively, what Rosalie Cohen (1971) describes as, a narrowing of perceived conceptual distance between the observer and the observed. The observed is perceived to be placed so close to the individual that it obscures what lies beyond it, and so that the observer cannot escape responding to it. The individual also appears to view the 'field' as itself responding to him; i.e., although it may be completely objective and inanimate to others, because it demands response, it is accorded a kind of life of its own (47).

Traditional African thoughts have no use for the idea of an objective reality that exists independent of its being known by anyone. Reality is what it is known or experienced by humans' robust communion with it. Traditional Africans' epistemological view is, fundamentally experientialist, in that people get knowledge from their robust experience of and communion with reality.

As Senghor (1995) indicates: "The African is, of course, sensitive to the external world, to the material aspect of being and things. ... he is sensitive to the tangible qualities of things--shape, color, smell, weight, etc ... " (48). The subject is not passive with respect to an objectively unknown reality; the subject is an active aspect of reality; the subject understands, experiences, and knows reality by interacting with and shaping it. An unknown or unexperienced reality does not exist; it is not a reality if it is not in some form experienced; it is only when something is experienced that it becomes a reality. The existing reality is the experienced reality, which is considered substantive and given due reverence. Human beings are a part of this composite reality which is fundamentally a set of mobile life forces. Reality always seeks to maintain an equilibrium among the network of life forces in nature. As a continuum, human beings constitute "the end of three orders of the mineral, the vegetable, and the animals, but beginning of the human order" (Senghor, 1995: 49).

The human order consists of spirits, ancestors, deities, gods, and God. God is the end of the human order. In this sense, God is generally understood as transcendent but also immanent in nature, and He is all good. His qualities and attributes are potentially manifest in humans, hence morally, humans attempt to actualize such potential in all their actions to emulate God and manifest reverence for Him (Mbiti: 1989: 29-38; Idowu, 1973: 140-61). The ability or effort to do this, which is what makes one a moral person, is also what morally distinguishes humans from other living creatures, animals, or wild beasts.

There is no conceptual or ontological gap between human activities and supernatural activities of God, gods, spirits, ancestors in African thought; they are interrelated and one is an extension of the other. However, God, the gods, spirits, and supernatural entities are experienced by humans as part of nature in their manifestations in physical events and natural objects. In Senghor's (1995) view, the African view of ontology reflects a kind of naturalistic pantheism: that everything is holistically natural and God is in everything and the source of everything natural. Traditional Africans believe in the omnipresence of God, but the presence of God is considered stronger in some place more than others (Burnett & Kang'ethe, 1994: 150). The African view of ontology has religious implications because, according to Mbiti (1989: 15), "to understand their religions we must penetrate that ontology." To underscore this, he argues: "Expressed anthropocentrically, God is the Originator and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the centre of this ontology, the Animals, Plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives, provides a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them" (Mbiti, 1989: 16). African religious beliefs presuppose unity, harmony, and balance in the different categories of things such that one mode of existence depends on another.

The African view of reality is manifested in different aspects of people's actions and ways of life, especially in terms their religious practices. Their religious practices seek to maintain the harmony and balance that exist in nature, reality, and the natural community of things. For instance, in various religious practices, people consider natural objects as divine and as things in which gods, deities, spirits, and ancestors are made manifest. Traditional Africans see mountains, trees, rivers, and different animals as representations or embodiment of deities or spirits, and as such, they are divine, sacred, and are given due reverence.

Various physical and natural objects have religious and spiritual significance and they are designated as religious shrines in which the divine or sacred is manifested. Religious rites are performed with various natural objects and, the spirits, deities, gods, and God are appeased by making offerings and sacrifices with various natural objects. Natural objects have religious significance, and as such, they are treated by humans with reverence. Africans believe that rites such as pouring libation, praying, and making sacrifices and offerings in shrines, which are usually natural objects, are some of the ways in which humans are in communion and fellowship with the spiritual world, the sacred and divine. Some shrines are at the bases of trees, mountains, and banks of rivers, which are adorned with gifts of natural objects, and usually, sacred animals are sacrificed and offered to the deities that are embodied in these natural objects.

According to Mbiti (1989), natural objects are deemed sacred because "people hold that the spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains, or just around the villages" (74). Hence nature is accorded due reverence and not treated anyhow. This view is reflected in the belief and practice of totemism, where different families, clan or villages respect different animals, plants, or natural objects as totems or sacred objects in which ancestral spirits reside. People believe that a mystical relationship or spiritual connection exists between them and the totem. According to Burnett and waKang'ethe (1994), an animal totem, for the Bantu, "was not killed except in self defense, and it was never eaten. Kindness toward the totem was expected, and in turn, it was expected that the totem might assist in times of need or desperation" (156). The belief is that people need totems, deities, gods, ancestors, and spirits as intercessors and intermediaries in the spiritual realm to communicate directly with God because people cannot do this directly with God. According to Mbiti (1989: 70), "it is held that God specifically created the spirits to act as intermediaries between Him and men." It is believed that God works with the gods, deities, ancestors, and other spiritual entities to cause and bring about harmony in nature. People usually invoke the spirits by offering prayers and sacrifices through those natural objects in which spirits reside to help convey people's prayers and requests to God.

According to this view of ontology and cosmology, things that occur in reality are explained by reference to harmony or disharmony in the order of nature. This view of cosmology suggests that there is the semblance of a harmonious arrangement of things in nature. Following in the ideas of Mbiti, Vernon Dixon (1976) argues that the aim of Africans is to maintain balance and harmony among the various aspects of the universe.

Disequilibrium may result in trouble such as human illness, drought, or social disruption. ... According to this orientation, magic, voodoo, and mysticism are not efforts to overcome a separation of man and nature, but rather the use of forces in nature to restore a more harmonious relationship between man and the universe. The universe is not static, inanimate or 'dead'; it is a dynamic, animate, living and powerful universe (62-63).

Anything that happens to a person, such as an illness is caused either by the frailty of human nature, (to be cured with natural ingredients such as herbs), or by the spell of supernatural powers which can also be altered or restored by using supernatural powers. The practice of sorcery or divination involves efforts by people with supernatural powers to decipher the order of nature, whether there is disharmony which is the source of problems, and what should be done to bring about harmony. Usually, diviners and sorcerers are able to communicate with the spiritual world.

The African cosmological view regarding harmony in nature gives credence to the practice of sorcery, divination, and belief in witchcraft, with respect to the explanation of event causation in nature. Witches, spiritual entities, supernatural forces and their manifestations are a part of the cosmos and the arrangement of things in nature, and things happen for a purpose according to that arrangement. The explanation of events can be pursued from two perspectives. Any occurrence may be natural--due to the forces and purpose of nature, and may appear random--or it may be caused intentionally by supernatural forces, which are also an integral part of nature. Traditional Africans do not believe that things happen by chance or at random, which cannot be explained by the forces of nature in the broad sense--of which witches, spirits, and supernatural forces are a part (Sodipo, 1973: 12-20).

Traditional African thought systems seek to explain and understand phenomena by placing them in a causal context of common sense experience. Robin Horton (1995) argues that it is wrong to argue that the thinking in traditional African cultures is fundamentally spiritual. In his view, Africans explain phenomena not only in terms of supernatural causes but also in terms of material causes. He argues that "the intellectual function of its supernatural beings ... is the extension of people's vision of natural causes" (Horton, 1995: 310).

Traditional Africans do not make any distinction between the natural and supernatural; they are both seen as two aspects of a unified and harmonious ontological category, and the primary mode of accessing reality is through experience. For Mbiti (1989), "the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much so that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them" (74). Supernatural entities or forces are a part of or a different dimension of the all embracing nature. The quest for explanation is basically an attempt to find some underlying unity in an apparent diversity in nature, simplicity in what appeared complex, order in what appeared to be a disorder, and regularity in what appeared to be random or anomalous. Horton (1995) indicates that, "the diviner who diagnoses the intervention of a spiritual agency is also expected to give some acceptable account of what moved the agency in question to intervene. And this account very commonly involves reference to some event in the world of visible, tangible happenings" (306).

Traditional African views of ontology and cosmology are also manifested in traditional practices of medicine and modes of healing. Africans rely on the use of herbs and the products of plants and animals for healing. As such, they felt a need to respect nature and preserve or conserve animals and various plants, which provide roots, leaves, barks, and various natural products for traditional medicine. But Africans also believe that illness is caused in part by disequilibrium in the order of a person's connection with the cosmic order of nature. According to Makinde (1988), African traditional medicinal herbs and medical practice imply the existence of the nature, classes, or kinds of causes and effect which empirical investigation brings to light through observation and inductive method, followed by tests and verification from specific deductions. On the other hand, oral medicine implies the existence of latent kinds of natures which mystical research contemplates as magical or supernatural. Thus oral medicine (Ifa divination and moral incantations) has its metaphysical foundations in the nature of things. In addition, oral medicine demonstrates to the fullest the power of words and the relation of these words to natural phenomena such as the herbs and animal substances which are used as ingredients for such traditional medicine as ase or afose. Here we may note that aseandafose consists of natural ingredients chemically diluted into powdered form and put on the tip of the tongue before incantations are said. The substances are either from animals or plants or both (92). Makinde's account indicates that traditional forms of medicine and healing presuppose a metaphysical belief regarding interconnections and cosmological order among various things in nature. Healing brings different physical and spiritual aspects of and interconnections in nature into harmony.

Spiritual healing may involve appeal to and the appeasement of the gods, spirits, ancestors, or the use of supernatural forces to restore harmony in nature and the order to things in one's life. This may be done in various ways by relying on nature's life forces, such as giving food and wine to the gods or ancestors or sacrificing animals and putting their blood on the floor, shrines, or under trees to appease the gods. Because of this belief system, nature and natural objects are given due reverence. These different aspects of nature are considered important for various reasons. They are useful to humans, but such usefulness is also dependent on the need for harmony in nature for its own sake. This is the reason that nature is viewed holistically and it is morally respected and given due reverence for its own sake. There is no conceptual gap between human interests which we want to achieve by using natural objects and the respect for nature for its own sake. The respect for nature thus serves human interests, given that humans are an integral part of nature. The use of nature for serving human needs which may appear to be aiming at human self interests is actually a way of respecting and bringing about harmony in nature viewed holistically to include humans. Thus, serving human interests and the respect for nature for its own sake are coextensive. For instance, using natural objects—in terms of herbal medicine or sacrificial offering for appeasement of the gods—to bring about healing in a person is a way to respect nature for its own sake and to bring about harmony in a person in terms of cosmic order or ontological connections with nature. It serves both human and nature's interests insofar as both interests are mutually reinforcing.

Understanding the African view of ontology as a foundation for African modes of life and beliefs with respect to their religious beliefs and practices, and the practice of medicine, will help to illuminate the African moral views or attitudes in general, and more especially, toward the environment. Contrary to some views, I contend that the African view cannot be characterized solely as utilitarian.

For instance, Baird Callicott (1994) argues that "African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interests. Hence, one might expect to distill from it no more than a weak and indirect environmental ethic, similar to the type of ecologically enlightened utilitarianism, focused on long-range human welfare" (273). The moral views and attitudes of traditional Africans are a hybrid of moral teleology (the anthropocentric moral view that an action is good if it maximizes human interests) and moral deontology (the non-anthropocentric moral view that an action is good if it has or affirms some intrinsic moral worth).

This hybrid ethical view, which William Frankena (1964: 35) calls 'mixed deontology', recognizes the principle of utility as a valid one, but insists that another principle is required as well. This theory instructs us to determine what is right or wrong in particular situations, normally at least, by consulting rules such as we usually associate with morality; but it goes on to say that the way to tell what rules we should live by is to see which rules best fulfill the joint requirements of utility and justice (Frankena: 1964: 35).

From a deontological (non-anthropocentric or biocentric) point of view, Africans consider nature as an end in itself which should be respected for its own sake: it is sacred and divine, it is in harmony with humans, and it has an inherent moral worth which derives from its role in cosmic and ontological order and its moral and religious primacy. This moral attitude toward the environment calls for a sense of justice, what is right, and what humans have a duty to do.

From a teleological (anthropocentric) point of view, nature is given due respect by Africans because it is in the interests of humans, in that there is some utility to be derived from it. This moral attitude involves an appreciation of the bad consequences of not having such moral attitude and an appreciation of the good consequences of such moral attitude. It is in our interest to use natural resources to our benefit and to also maintain a balance and harmony in nature because what affects nature affects us as part of the cosmic whole. Keeping such balance and harmony makes the world a good place for us to live; it helps our well-being both physically and spiritually. This idea is bolstered by the general belief that human ill-health, some natural disaster, or any bad occurrence is the result of disharmony in nature—either in the micro sense of our natural body or in the macro sense of our bodily connection with all other aspects of nature. To prevent a disaster, an illness, or any bad occurrence, and to stop it, we must bring about harmony in nature. It is in our interest not to offend the gods, spirits and ancestors by mistreating nature and the environment, their dwelling places, because the anger of God, the gods, spirits, and ancestors will harm humans gravely. Given the pantheistic view of nature, to morally respect nature is to morally respect the gods, spirits, ancestor, God, and humans, all as integral part of nature.

A similar mixed deontological view of African moral attitude toward the environment is articulated by Workineh Kelbessa (2006) as the view that captures the thought system of the Oromo people. He argues that "the Oromo protect their environment for utilitarian reasons.

They think that the value of the environment lies in human use. Trees are a source of capital, investment and insurance against hard times. Trees ... provide the supply of timber, wood and food. Peasant farmers and pastoralists are conscious that, when their environment deteriorates, their life and future generations of humans will be harmed" (Kelbessa, 2006: 21). In addition to this utilitarian moral attitude, the Oromo people also have a deontological moral attitude, according to Kelbessa. He argues that: "For them [Oromo people], land is not only a resource for humans' utilitarian ends, but also it has its own inherent value given to it by *Waaqa* (God)" (Kelbessa, 2006: 22). So, because God is the guardian of everything in nature, people do not have the freedom to destroy nature simply to satisfy their needs and interests. David Millar (1999: 131) makes a similar point when he argues that in some traditional world views, people did not see the earth or nature as individual property or commodity that they can dispose of at will and as they please or wish. This moral view, which is deontological or non-anthropocentric in outlook, can be found as a dominant or common theme in many African thought systems.

Kelbessa (2006) goes on to bolster his account of the deontological moral view among the Oromo people by articulating the idea of *Saffuu*, which reflects the idea of justice. This idea of *Saffuu* which regulates human relationship with other animals reflects a deep respect for and an effort to maintain a balanced existence with other natural things. According to him, "The Oromo do not simply consider justice, integrity and respect as human virtues applicable to human beings but they extend them to nonhuman species and mother Earth" (Kelbessa, 2006: 24). It appears that these African views and moral attitudes toward the environment are not known and no efforts are being made to articulate, study, understand, and appreciate them. According to Senghor (1995), "If the moral law of the African has remained unknown for so long, it is because it derives, naturally, from his conception of the world ..." (49). It is my contention that the African conception of the world has not been well articulated, known, and understood in order to also understand their moral attitude in general, and more specifically, the moral attitude toward the environment.

Some suggest that African views have not been well known because of a type of contemporary racism which ignores and denigrates African views based on the assumption that Africans have no ideas to offer or such ideas are inferior and not worth taken seriously (Kelbessa, 2006: 21). As such, many Westerners have not been willing to explore African ideas.

Moreover, many Africans themselves have not made efforts to articulate and argue for these ideas because many have been educated or indoctrinated to adopt a 'colonial mentality' and to think that anything that is traditionally African is backward, bad and uncivilized.

Africa's Environmental Problems And Colonial Legacy

A significant difference between Africans and Europeans during colonization was their moral attitudes toward nature. And the difference between the African and Western moral attitudes is shaped strongly by their different conceptions of reality. Since according to the modern Western view, nature is seen as an external or objective reality and impersonal system, it is not a moral object and it is not necessary for humans to morally respect it, thus, humans can and should exploit it solely for their own interests (Dixon, 1976: 58). For Europeans, Africa's rain forests and jungles can be destroyed, lumber can be harvested for homes, furniture, and as export to Europe. The land and forests are to be converted into industrial and real estate complexes or into farms and plantations to produce cash crops and export for industrial Europe. The mountains are to be mined indiscriminately for minerals, the rivers dammed for electricity, and the swamps drilled for oil. These economic activities destroyed various habitats for plants and animals, caused massive erosion, and led to the pollution of the air and rivers.

The African metaphysical and religious views, which are the bases for their moral attitudes toward nature, may have contributed to European stereotypes that Africans are savages, uncivilized, barbaric, irrational, undeveloped, and backward. One motivation for Europeans in the colonization of Africa was the need to get raw materials for their industries and the need to get markets for the products of their industries. Africa had significant natural resources, and in the eyes of Europeans, Africans lacked the intellect or initiative to exploit them to meet their needs. This fact had some implications for how Europeans saw Africans. Africans lived in the jungles, in the midst of these natural resources and did not exploit them. Such mode of living, as already indicated, reflected African's communion with and respect for nature and the need to preserve it. This was seen by Europeans as a sign of savagery, barbarism, and lack of intelligence and rationality, which was supposedly reflected in African's inability to see the utility of natural resources in order to exploit and use them for human interest.

These different forms of exploitation of nature for economic activities were considered by Europeans to be the prime indicators and model of civilization and development. As far as Europeans were concerned, Africa was the “Dark Continent” with uncivilized peoples that needed to be civilized, saved, and modernized. The civilization processes included giving them material, economic, and spiritual salvation. As pagans and savages, the souls of Africans needed to be saved by being converted to Christianity. Africans had no religion that could save their souls, only Christianity could save their souls. Traditional religious worship and practices required Africans to respect nature, because nature is the repository and dueling place of spirits and gods. The traditional African religions which called for the respect of nature were brandished as paganism; their underlying practices were idolatry. The modernization of Africans involved getting rid of their traditional African practice of medicine and healing which relied on the use of herbs and divination; these practices were denigrated by Europeans as uncivilized and primitive. For Europeans, illnesses are to be treated and cured solely by using the modern scientific and technological methods that relied on chemicals and synthetic drugs.

Colonialism destroyed and supplanted African ways of life and beliefs to create, according to P. P. Ekeh (1983), colonial social structures which were eventually left behind in Africa. These social structures which involved models of development, system of education, Christianity, capitalism, urbanization, Western medicine, and industrialization, constitute enduring social structures and legacies that are active in Africa today. Some colonial social structures were based on the modern European view of ontology, scientific method, and utilitarian ethics. The European model of economic development imposed on Africa, which was left as a legacy, culminated in Africans destroying the jungles and its animals for economic gains. Africans had been indoctrinated by Europeans and forced to accept this model of development. The image of real estate or industrial complexes in Europe, among other things, represent in the mind of many Africans, the idea of development; this was an idea or ethos that colonialism brought to Africa and left behind as a legacy.

One may argue that colonial social structures have created for Africa very interesting problems that have a bearing of the current environmental problems in Africa. Some economists and political scientists have argued that the many economic, political, and social problems in Africa can be traced to their colonial experience and environmental problems as epiphenomena of these social, political, and economic problems.

This raises the issue of the complex nature of colonialism and the complexity of the problems that it created, which many people have not properly appreciated. The complex problem of colonialism created social structures that support and encourage Africa's environmental problems. To see this, we have to, Ekeh (1983) argues, understand colonialism as a social movement or an event of epochal nature, which has created social structures, a culture, and a system of values and norms, powerful, influential, and pervasive enough to determine people's actions and way of life. He argues that colonialism should be analyzed as a situation involving "the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized, between the elements of European culture and of indigenous culture" (Ekeh, 1983: 4). Not only has colonialism destroyed the existing traditional African social structures, the new structures it created and left behind, which is a mixture of European and indigenous cultures, represent an anomalous hybrid culture, which Africans do not fully understand, do not know how to manage or make adaptable to the African situation.

Apparently, people have not fully appreciated the anomalous, enduring, pervasive, active, and intractable nature of these structures as the relics of colonialism. According to Ekeh (1983: 4), "the impact of colonialism cannot be terminated abruptly in one day or one year. ... Colonialism therefore implies that the social formations ... could be traced to issues and problems that span the colonial situation into post-Independence social structures in Africa." Given this point about colonialism, the argument that colonialism happened many years ago, and that current environmental in Africa cannot be traced to colonialism, is specious. Colonialism must be studied as "a social movement of epochal dimensions whose enduring significance, beyond the life-span of the colonial situation, lies in the social formations of supra-individual entities and constructs. These supra-individual formations developed from the volcano-sized social changes provoked into existence by the confrontations, contradictions, and incompatibilities in the colonial situation" (Ekeh, 1983: 5). So, colonialism created social structures which are still very active today even many years after it has apparently disappeared. Because the unhealthy mix of European and African cultures created enduring, pervasive, and currently active anomalous hybrid cultures and social structures, Ekeh (1983) has questioned the conceptual adequacy of the notions 'decolonization' and 'neo-colonialism'.

Colonialism created three social structures, which are, transformed social structures, migrated social structures, and emergent social structures (11-12).

The transformed social structures are those indigenous pre-colonial institutions and practices that were transformed to operate within the context of the new meanings and symbols of colonialism and the new socio-cultural system it created. This transformation resulted in the destruction of the moral and social order within which these pre-colonial indigenous institutions formerly operated. These institutions sought new anchors in the changed situation that was created by colonialism. The new powers and functions of traditional rulers and government functionaries in Africa are examples of such transformed social structures. As part of this transformed social structures, colonialism removed the ownership of land from communities to the government. When the land was owned by communities, it was respected and preserved based on the traditional values that saw nature as something with intrinsic value that must be revered. When the land became government's property, it became something to be used and not cared for; in some sense, it did not belong to anybody because land was removed from the primordial public realm of the local communities to the civic public realm of the state. In Ekeh's view (1983: 22-3), people have an amoral attitude in their various activities within the civic public realm. The lack of morality in this realm explains the mass corruption in government.

Many of the environmental problems in Africa are the results of exploitative colonial activities and their legacies. For instance, the exploitative and destructive economic activities of multinational corporations (which are a legacy of colonialism), aided by corrupt and ineffective governments of various African states, have contributed to most of the environmental problems in Africa. Kelbassa (2006) has argued that one major obstacle to solving global environmental problems, and African in particular, is the increased power and the exploitative and destructive economic activities of transnational corporations. Their main interest is the exploitation of natural resources for profits. They have no concerns for the environment and how the destruction of the environment by their economic activities affect people, their health and well-being. The pollution of the Niger Delta in Nigeria by oil companies is a case in point. Colonialism destroyed the traditional system of peasant farming which ensured the respect for nature and the conservation of land and forests. The transformation of peasant farming into commercial large scale plantation farming by multinational corporations led to the destruction of large acres of the rain forests.

Because traditional African peasant farmers did not use fertilizations and chemicals, they preserved farmlands and left them fallow for many years after it has been farmed originally, to allow the soil to acquire nutrients organically over many years before going back to farm the land again. Traditional African peasant farmers have been organic farmers for centuries. Mechanical commercial farming by multinational corporations use fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides, which have polluted ground water, rivers, and lakes. I appreciate the argument for moving away from peasant farming, which is to be able to produce enough food for people. However, this can be done by recognizing the moral and conservation attitudes of peasant farmers which involved the need to preserve the land, forests, and the environment. The multinational commercial farmers have not done this. Kelbassa(2006: 24-29) has argued that contemporary environmentalist can learn something from the conservation practices and moral attitudes of traditional African peasant farmers. But the attitude of Westerners in Africa regarding environmental values has been presumptuous. They assume that they know it all and that Africans have nothing to offer in the efforts to solve environmental problems. This point is underscored by efforts to teach Africans Western environmental values. As Burnett and waKang'ethe (1994) indicate, "efforts to instruct Kenya school children in Western wildlife and wildland values and idea is predicated, at least in part, on an assumption of an indigenous attitude to wilderness that is unacceptable to the West" (159).

Emergent social structures are those structures that were not indigenous to Africa and were not brought from Europe, but they were generated by the colonial situation itself and may be analogous to some structures in the West. They have a logic of their own which makes them unique and peculiar to the situation created by colonialism in Africa, thus having their own distinct political and social structures (Ekeh, 1983: 12). Urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism are examples of such emergent social structures. For instance, the African brand of capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization, which provided the underlying foundation for the models of development that emerged out of colonialism, have had tremendous implications for the environment in Africa. Industrialization and capitalism in Africa created the environment and structures for the exploitative and destructive economic activities of multinational corporations. Their economic activities have led to the destruction of the rain forest.

The colonial structures in Africa have led to the North/South economic relation where the South is economically dependent on the North. Such economic dependency relation has led to the growth of capitalism in Africa with the excessive economic activities of multinational companies, which have exploited natural resources and destroyed the environment. For instance, the problem of poaching elephants for ivory is the direct result of colonialism and capitalism. As Burnett and waKang'ethe (1994: 159) point out, Africans never engaged in hunting for sports or commerce. While Africans built structures to minimize contacts with wildlife, Europeans killed wildlife for sports in large numbers without mercy. "The hypocrisy of lectures on the glories of wildlife and the virtues of its conservation from a people capable of killing animals for self-actualization, sport, and pure vindictiveness, surely eludes Europeans in ways that are dreadfully obvious to Africans" (Burnett and waKang'ethe, 1994: 159). Those who buy ivory and ivory products from poached elephants are not Africans. The economic dependency relation that resulted from colonialism is such that African states depend on the industrial countries of Asia, Europe, and America to buy these products in order to survive financially and economically.

Migrated social structures were brought wholesale in their original forms from imperial Europe to the colonized countries of Africa and juxtaposed on the new colonial situation (Ekeh, 1983: 11-12). Examples of such structures are democracy, the rule of law, universities (Western formal education), Christianity, national statehood, bureaucracy, and Western medicine, all with their peculiar Western connotations and characteristics. According to Ekeh (1983), "It is important to note that the European organizational pieces that came to us were virtually disembodied of their moral contents, of their substratum of implicating ethics. And yet the imported models were never engrafted onto any existing indigenous morality" (17).

These structures did not come to Africa with their Western social and moral order or norms, which contributed to their sustenance in the West, and as such, they do not fit into the African order. There were no fundamental moral and social norms in Africa to which they could be engrafted for their sustenance; the prior existing norms had been destroyed or transformed by other social structures of colonialism. Because these structures were brought wholesale from Europe to a totally different context, they acquired their own unique forms of social existence to create anomalies which neither Africans nor Westerners fully appreciate or understand.

This point may illuminate why, for instance, the migrated social structures with respect to the system of education, religion, and medicine has had negative impact on the environment, in that the colonial patterns of behavioral expectations regarding the environment are fundamentally inconsistent with indigenous social-cultural practices and moral norms that sought to conserve natural resources and preserve the environment.

Because the essential normative order was not available to sustain the migrated social structures, there has been organizational immobility of these structures. They have been fixated and have not adapted to the African situation to suit the people's needs. Such immobility has arisen "largely because the morality and ethics that provide the stimulus for homegrown organizations in Europe for self-sustained refinement and expansion are absent from our migrated social structures" (Ekeh, 1983: 18). For instance, the educational system in Africa has been immobile and has failed to serve the needs and interests of Africans, especially with respect to the environment. The models and theories of development that Africans learn in schools are European models that are relative to European contexts and assumptions. As such, they are not adaptable to the African situation and they do not seem to have been able to solve Africa's unique social, economic, political, and environmental problems. Western education has not taught Africans to synthesize the African and Western modes of thought, and to adapt the Western thought to the African condition. Western scientific theories and modes of inquiry taught Africans to see nature as an objective reality that must be used and exploited for human needs. There is no emphasis on the phenomenological or empathic method of inquiry which is conducive to the preservation of the environment. With emphasis on science, Africans threw out their traditional modes of healing because they were deemed to be incommensurable with the Western scientific modes of healing brought by colonialism. By getting rid of their herbal mode of healing, they did not see any need for leaves, plants, roots and bark of trees and the need to preserve them. Thus, they have sought to destroy or exploit them for economic gains.

The migrated social structures destroyed some of the foundations on which Africans developed their moral attitudes regarding the environment. The consequence of the fact that no indigenous moral order existed onto which the colonial social structures were grafted was "particularly pronounced in the various apparatuses of the state and in the conduct of those aspects of public life associated with the migrated social structures" (Ekeh, 1983: 22).

The state governments that emerged from colonialism did not have sound moral foundation to guide the formulation of public policies regarding what the people's attitude regarding the environment should be. Indigenous moral values had been destroyed by colonialism. Political leaders relied on alien European moral values that led the governments to make anti-environmental policies that were consistent with European moral attitudes toward the environment, which is that of exploitation as opposed to conservation. This explains in part why African governments have not been able to develop comprehensive environmental policies and why there are no systematic efforts to prevent the destruction of the environment and rain forest. And because of the economic dependency relations between the North and South, where African states must survive on the earnings from exports and North/South trade, making environmentally sensitive policies will imply economic doom for the respective governments: loss of the essential source of revenues. This is one reason why African governments are not able to stop or control the poaching of elephants for ivory or deforestation for lumber, some major sources of revenue for African states.

Contemporary environmentalists are again coming to Africa like the European colonialists did before them, with what appears to be a 'new' set of environmentalist ideas to save Africa and their environment. Yet these 'new ideas' represent the old traditional Africans' moral attitudes or ideas of conservation, which were not only rejected and destroyed by colonialism, but were also the bases for the negative stereotypes about Africa and Africans as undeveloped and uncivilized. It is now obvious that the models of development brought by European colonialist to Africa, which led to the destruction of the environment, are to a significant degree, wrong. This point is bolstered by the environmentalist movements of deep ecology, which has sought the implementation of a sustainable development that places values on ecological balance between humans and nature—a view that is traditional to Africans. Arne Naess substantiates my point in his criticism of the shallow Western model of development. He argues that: "Industrialization of the Western industrial type is held to be the goal of developing countries. The universal adoption of Western technology is held to be compatible with cultural diversity, together with the conservation of the positive elements (from a Western perspective) of present nonindustrial societies. There is a low estimate of deep cultural differences in nonindustrial societies which deviate significantly from contemporary Western standards" (Naess, 1993: 202).

Conclusion

African people have been educated or indoctrinated to accept the glamour of the Western ways of life and models of development that are usually presented with hidden normative values and subliminal messages: the Western ways of life and values are good, and the traditional African ways of life and values are bad, uncivilized, and barbaric. A fundamental problem with environmentalism in Africa is that many Africans are beginning to understand that the underpinnings of the contemporary environmentalist views and movements represent traditional African beliefs, ways of life, and moral views that have been rejected by Europeans; these are views or beliefs which Africans have been taught to accept as bad and uncivilized. So, Africans must be convinced that they should abandon what they have been made to see as good, i.e., the European modern views of development and ways of life, which involve the destruction of the environment for economic gains. Africans have to be further convinced to embrace their own 'old' traditional ways of life, values, and beliefs which they have been made to see as bad and uncivilized. This creates an obvious tension among (i) the traditional African views, (ii) the modern European views that came with colonialism, with the underlying utilitarian moral attitude toward the environment—views that Africans have now imbibed, and (iii) the 'new' environmental values that indicate that Africans must respect and preserve the environment, and not use it solely for human economic interests. This tension is at the core of the environmental problems in Africa that must be addressed; how they are addressed will have practical implications for finding solutions to Africa's environmental issues or problems.

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Endnotes

i. My reference to traditional African belief system or thought is not to suggest that Africa is monolithic in its belief or thought system, but rather, to indicate some common, similar or dominant themes or ideas that can be found among African cultures and traditions. I am interested in how these ideas among traditional African cultures are similar, as opposed to how they are different. It is usually in this sense that people also talk about 'Western' or 'European' thought or philosophy, and thus compare 'African' and 'Western' thoughts. This sense is commonplace in the vast literature that seeks to articulate African thought systems or philosophy and thus compare such systems or philosophy with Western thought or philosophy.