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Revisiting the Discourse on Human-Nature Relationship in African Traditional Religion and the Responses to Environmental Change.

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Abstract: The pantheistic view of nature enshrined in African traditional religious beliefs and thought system has propelled a myriad of African scholars to hold that human-nature relations is environment-centered. This is a result of the ineptitude of some scholars to critically analyze the complexity involved in the discourse on human-nature relations in traditional African religious beliefs. An in-depth understanding of African traditional religious environmental ethics requires a full grasp of African ontology. On this note, to clear this age-old misconception about traditional African notions on human-nature relations, this research aims at simplifying the complexity or ambiguity surrounding the discourse. The paper argues vehemently that African religious belief in human-nature relations is absolutely anthropocentric.

Introduction: One of the fundamental arguments in environmental ethics is the question of the place or position of human beings in the universe (natural environment). This question is borne out of the assertion that the way humans see themselves in the universe determines their mode of interaction with the natural environment. For some scholars, in the discourse on human-nature relations, the Western worldview (whether religious or philosophical thought system) places humanity as a distinct entity from nature, a notion that has its etymology traced back to antiquity and climaxed in the modern

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epoch of Western history. It has been argued that this anthropocentrism is inherent in the Western thought system but promulgated by Judeo-Christian religious belief [1]. Over the years, scholars (Western and non-Western) have attributed this anthropocentric mindset to being the main catalyst of the environmental crisis. On the other hand, some African scholars have argued that traditional African religious beliefs and thought systems on human-nature relations are not human-centered. "Unlike the West, where there is discord and separation from nature, African environmental philosophy or ethics has a background belief in the linkage of nature, community, and man, from which an ethical relationship is defined"[2]. For them, the traditional African ethical view on human-nature relations is not purely anthropocentric because there is a prevalence of religious belief and thought patterns among Africans that man is an integral part of nature, propelling the notion of a symbiotic relationship between Africans and the natural environment. However, the fundamental question remains: is African religious ethics' perspective on human-nature relationships truly non-anthropocentric?

It is unarguably true that the religious beliefs that are responsible for environmental control and management are human-centered[3]. The debate on the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of traditional African religious views on human-nature relations has paved the way for a new environmental ethical school of thought in African environmental ethics known as anthropoholism, a school of thought initiated by Chinedu and Bassey[4]. This research agrees with Chinedu and Bassey that African environmental ethics is obligatory (deontological) but holds that humans' duty to nature is occasioned by their duty to the Supreme Being, which makes their duty theocentric. The end product of this duty is for the benefit of humanity (anthropocentric). "The [traditional] African presents all things as being owned by God and the human being is just acting as a custodian of such divine property. This belief makes him careful about the dealings he must have with nature and the world around him"[4]. The research argues that this anthropocentric and theocentric view of human-nature relations is a product of African ontology. The research submits that the cause of the environmental crisis in Africa is the denial or negation of the obligations humans owe to nature (God) and that there is a line between African and Western (Christianity) religious views of human-nature relations. Africans' religious belief that man is saddled with the sole responsibility of caring for nature (the abode of the gods and a reflection of the Supreme Being) is a verisimilitude of the Christian view of stewardship.

Methodology: The research adopts the phenomenological and analytic research tools in investigating the subject under consideration. applying these tools, the research lay aside previous notion or assumptions about this subject and interprets the data as it is presented. The information used in this research is derived from existing literature (both from online publications and hard copies of journal articles and textbooks) with related views on the subject. The research submits that though some scholars have argued logically that African environmental ethics is anthropoholistic because of human's deontological functions. The truth is this supposed duty is not the Kantian duty, but duty with a motive that is anthropocentric.

African Ontology: A Critical Evaluation: The ontological perception of a person about reality serves as the substratum of their cultural, religious, economic, and political life[5]. "The way reality is seen in Africa has an impact on African life and activity, both individually and collectively"[6]. We can invariably posit

from a phenomenological-existential position that every culture has its own unique perception of reality, which gives room for categorization or classification of people, such as Africans, Europeans, and Americans, etc. The perspective of reality held by each of these groups of people makes them unique[7].

In general, Africans, whether traditional or contemporary, believe that reality is a complex whole made up of various units, and that no unit can exist independently of the others. This implies that reality for an African is a web of complex entities, with each having its own level of importance based on its mode of existence. Unlike the Hindu religious worldview, which holds that all beings are equal, the African religious view holds vehemently that all beings are not equal. African ontology could be described as hierarchical and complementary in its outlook and approach. This explains the argument that being from an African complementary perspective is anything that exists, and everything that exists serves a missing link in reality. Missing links are components that are complementarily connected to make up the whole and that also enable us to grasp reality in its entirety[8]. For Africans, every being has a purpose for its existence. That is to say, no natural entity is useless. Simply put, every being is teleological. This teleological understanding of existence is realized in various forms of being that stretch from higher to lower forces in terms of the order of existence[9]. Consequently, African ontology could be seen as having three dimensions e.g. hierarchy, complementary (harmonious mutual coexistence) and teleological.

In the hierarchy of beings, God (the Supreme Being) is at the apex[7]. He is seen as the creator of the universe. This idea is not endemic to the African thought system; it could be found in Western philosophy. The belief in the existence of a Supreme Being in African religion has propelled some researchers to describe this religion as monotheistic. African religions believe in the existence of one supreme being, but they also believe in the existence of a pantheon of gods (deities or divinities). In traditional African societies, divinities were conceived as the messengers and agents of the Supreme Being (God) and they acted as intermediaries between God and mankind[10]. At the third stage, there are other special kinds of beings known as the living-dead (ancestors)[10]. The religious belief in the existence of ancestral spirits defies the Western law of thought (the Law of Contradiction). It is believed that though these people are dead, they still communicate with the living and interact with them. This is the rationale behind the pouring of libation. As we have seen, there is a clear demarcation or difference between the Supreme Being, deities or divinities, and ancestral spirits. Ancestral spirits, on the other hand, are linked to the living community[11].

Humans are considered the next inline after ancestral spirits. In the hierarchy of beings in African Traditional Religion, humans play significant roles. The existence of other beings at the apex will have no meaning if humans cease to exist. Human beings, according to Africans, are "the center of creation and the main actors in the drama of existence and life. Their actions evoke reactions from the gods and have deep implications for human beings themselves, the lower beings, and forces"[12]. Finally, at the bottom of this ontological structure, we have plants, animals, and other beings (non-sentient). As low as they appear in the ontological ladder, plants and animals are regarded as important because they are the reflections of God (the Supreme Being and the abode of divinities). These entities (plants and animals) are venerated and revered by Africans through religious practices such as totem, metempsychosis, transmigration of the soul, and taboos.

One attitude some scholars seem to have when dealing with issues of a comparative study of African and Western (ontology) is that emphasis is usually placed on the areas of divergence. This attitude is borne out of an ethnocentric mindset with the motive of projecting the African worldview as unique and superior, but failing to understand that the thrust of philosophy is the search for the truth. A critical analysis of African and Western ontological views of reality reveals that both are anthropocentric in nature. Humanity is given a prominent place regardless of whether one believes in the existence of supernatural beings. However, the idea of a human-centered notion of reality in African metaphysics does not project superiority, as humans are nothing more than a component of the complex whole. "The notion of ontological balance requires that the hierarchical order inherent in the categories that make up reality's structure not be disrupted"[13]. African ontology recognizes the spirit of complementarity. This implies that the spirit of communalism is not restricted to humans alone but involves all beings in their diverse modes of existence.

African Traditional Religious Environmental Ethics: The discourse on the factors responsible for and the solution to the global environmental crisis, commonly referred to as "environmental change," ushered in environmental ethics as an applied philosophy. Though being an applied philosophy, the central debate of environmental ethics is not sacrosanct to philosophers alone, as a myriad of scholars from diverse fields of study have dabbled in this debate. Since its incipience through contemporary times, the general consensus amongst scholars is that all the factors responsible for environmental change are anthropogenic (human-induced). While most scholars have attributed the origin of this problem (the anthropogenic causes) to the Western thought system (Philosophy), others attribute it to Western religion,

precisely to the Judeo-Christian religion, an idea initiated by Lynn White [14].

Lynn accused Christianity of being extremely human-centered with the claim of dominion over nature bestowed on humanity by God and the climax of this religious belief manifest in Western science and technology. Lynn blamed Christianity for the environmental crisis, claiming that "man" is "created in the image of God, given dominion over the rest of creation, and commanded to subdue it"[14]. Interestingly, Lynn strongly believed that this problem could only be averted by religion. The premise of Lynn's position could be linked to the notion that humans' actions are mostly influenced by their religious beliefs. The veracity of the matter is simple. Over the years, it has been proven that humans can lay down their lives for the course of their religious beliefs. The influence of a person's religious beliefs could be seen in their social, economic, political, and even educational sectors. Lynn's thesis propelled many scholars to propose the inclusion of non-human beings in the discourse on morality. Until we break with tradition and acknowledge that nonhuman nature also has moral standing, only then will we resolve the environmental crisis[15].

However, while Western scholars are propounding theories that include non-human beings in discourse on ethics, African scholars are projecting those religious beliefs and practices that encourage environmental friendliness. This presupposes that the thesis of Western environmental ethics is not new to traditional Africans, though it was not known as environmental ethics. From the religious beliefs and practices of traditional Africans, scholars have drawn Africans' perceptions of human-nature relations. The fundamental question is: what are the central theses of environmental ethics?

In general, environmental ethics is a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment. Environmental ethics assumes that ethical norms can and do govern human behavior toward the natural world[16]. The preponderant concerns of environmental ethics are: a shift from the anthropocentric principles of morality, recognition of the intrinsic value of nature, and protection of nature's interests. These concerns have caused thinkers to raise sensitive questions such as: Does nature have an interest worth protecting? Who is to protect this interest? Should the extension of morality to nature be individualistic or holistic? Do humans owe nature the moral responsibility of caring for it? Western scholars have come up with theories like weak anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, biocentrism, and deep ecology to try to figure out how to answer these questions. The argument of environmental ethicists is more than the moral perception of human-nature relations; it has a lot to do with the ontological perception of each being that makes reality as a whole.

For some academics, the African Traditional Religious view of human-nature relations (environmental ethics) is that of stewardship in regard to the creation (like that of the "Abrahamic religions"), that of partnership, and that of a participant in the processes of nature, unlike the Hindu and Buddhist view of human-nature relations, which is mainly that of a participant in nature[17]. Some African scholars, in their bid to promote African environmental ethics, unintentionally fall into the trap of ethnocentrism. They misconceive Africans' pantheistic view of nature to mean ecocentrism—that African environmental ethics is environment-centered. This misconception could be traced to their inability to understand fully the complexity of African ontology. "The African ontology gives rise to the African

anthropological frame of mind. In fact, human beings, generally speaking, are a constant point of reference in the scheme of things about reality"[4]. African ontology places man above nature but considers man as an integral part of nature. The rationale behind the notion of symbiosis in the African view of human-nature relations is the understanding that man needs nature to survive; his existence solely depends on the condition of nature.

The African concept of environment is anthropocentric. This anthropocentric Environmental system where values possessed by non-human entities are dependent on human usefulness, contrasts with the non-anthropocentric system where it is believed that non-human entities have values intrinsic to them[18].

Regardless of the importance of the natural environment to traditional Africans, nature, to them, is seen as having an instrumental value; its value depends on its usefulness to man. For Africans, "the relationship between humanity and the surroundings is divided into different categories, depending on the use to which humankind puts them and on the beliefs that developed in the creation of myths"[19]. On this backdrop, it is imperative to note that the traditional African notion of complementarity and symbiosis is absolutely anthropocentric since the essence of it all is for the benefit of humanity (both future and present).

Some African scholars have been avoiding the term "ecocentrism" when proposing their view of African environmental ethics, but the central idea of their work points to an environment-centered ethics, for example, "ethics of nature-relatedness" by Ogungbemi and Tangwa's "eco-bio-communitarianism". This paper corroborates Chinedu and Samuel's assertion that African environmental ethics is duty-bound but rejects the argument that "although humans have a place in African

ontology, it does not translate into as anthropocentrism, as humans are only a part of an interconnected whole of being"[20]. Again, the paper repudiates his assertion that humans' duty to nature is to maintain ecological balance and protect nature's intrinsic value. From his logical explanation, Chinedu holds that African environmental ethics is not anthropocentric nor ecocentric. However, it is interesting to know that Chinedu contradicts himself by calling his view anthropoholism. The law of logic states that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time (A cannot be A and not be A). On this point, it is either Chinedu's "anthropoholism" is human-centered (the weak version) or it is environment-centered.

African Natural religious environmental ethics is indeed duty-bound – it holds that humans are duty-bound to nature on the premise that nature is a reflection of God (*natura naturanta*). At this juncture, we must understand that humans' duty to nature is not borne out of the recognition of nature's intrinsic value, as Chinedu wants us to believe. Africans believe that nature possesses only instrumental values. The idea of duty to nature lies in the religious belief that destroying nature implies destroying God or the abode of the divine deities or ancestral spirits. Therefore, we can invariably infer that the African concept of duty to nature is theocentric. [Traditional] African views all things as God's property, with the human being merely acting as a custodian of such divine property. This belief makes him careful about the dealings he must have with nature and the world around him"[21]. Again, the end product of his duty to nature (God) is the fear of the wrath of God, which is why we can also say that their motive is anthropocentric. If man destroys nature, he will be punished by God and his existence will be in jeopardy. Simply put, when humanity cares for nature, they are invariably caring for themselves.

The paper corroborates Chinedu's assertion that Africans see man as an integral part of nature, and they believe in the existence of a communal relationship among beings. One important thing to note about African ontology is that, regardless of the idea of a hierarchy of beings,[22] Africans believe in the spirit of complementarity or synergy amongst all beings (material or immaterial). The essence of the symbiotic relationship among all beings in the universe is to maintain ecological balance. The general notion is that the disruption of this ontological structure is to be tempered with the design of nature. The African religious view of human-nature relations holds that no being can exist independent of others. Each being has a unique function to play in the hierarchy of beings[22].

African Traditional Religion on Human-Nature Relation: The Response to Environmental Change: Environmental change is one of the global existential problems bedeviling humanity. This problem has generated heated arguments amongst scholars from diverse fields of study as to its origin and panacea. There are basically two dimensions to the discourse on environmental change, namely, environmental degradation and climate change. There are many problems with the climate, like ozone depletion, rising sea levels, rising temperatures (called global warming), drought, irregular rainfall, erosion, and so on. On the other hand, environmental degradation involves pollution (land, air, and water), deforestation, gas flaring, oil spillage, poor waste management, rural-urban migration, industrialization, to mention but a few. A plethora of scholars over the years have been using the terms "climate change" and "environmental degradation" interchangeably, as though they are one and the same. The truth of the matter is that these terms are closely linked but not the same. It has been observed that the resultant effects of environmental

degradation give rise to climate change. For instance, gas flaring, which is an agent of greenhouse gases, leads to air pollution (environmental degradation), and the end product of gas flaring is global warming (climate change).

The consensus amongst scholars as to the cause (s) of environmental change is that it is anthropogenic (human-induced). Prior to the current epoch of human civilization, ancient men lived in harmony with their surroundings because they saw nature as a reflection of God and a link between divinity and the human race[23]. Mankind never had an interest in the monetary value of nature; emphasis was placed on eco-spirituality. However, the advancement of science and technology heralded a new Copernican Revolution (a paradigm shift from an environment-centered to a human-centered view of reality). The disruption of the ecological balance by humanity (as a result of this paradigm shift) has generated a serious global environmental crisis, and the consequences are mostly felt by Africans.

In Africa, the quest for economic growth and development (through industrialization) has beclouded the reasoning and eyes of the people from recognizing the spiritual or better yet, religious duties humans owe nature (God). In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, most traditional religious beliefs, rites, and rituals have been abandoned as the religious or sacred places and objects of worship, such as sacred streams, rivers, evil forests, and shrines of the gods, have been degraded or polluted by the actors of artisanal crude refining[23]. The knowledge of Western science and technology has taken the place of African metaphysics and spirituality. "Westernization through urbanization and industrialization has far-reaching environmental consequences than pre-colonial Africa"[24]. The religious belief in the spirit of complementarity of being and the symbiosis between man and

nature, the physical and the spiritual, have been neglected. The view of reality in Africa has become absolutely humanistic (individualized) and if this continues in Africa and the world at large, the chances of survival for the human race (especially in Africa) will be very slim. It must be emphasized that the cause of environmental change as perceived by adherents of African Traditional Religion is not the anger of the gods (divinity) but the complete humanistic view of reality (man and man alone matter), a notion derived from the Western worldview and religion[25].

The pantheistic view of nature was a means by which traditional Africans controlled and managed the natural environment, a practice in tune with eco-spirituality and theology. African philosophy on [nature] utilization and environmental conservation is spiritually-based. Religious beliefs and taboo systems are at the center of life as a whole[26]. The worship of hills, forests, animals, and rivers was invoked by African spiritual perceptions of nature. The reason natural phenomena like rocks, streams, rivers, trees, and land were conserved is that these entities were believed to be the dwelling places of the local deities, a belief endemic to all ethnic groups and tribes in Africa[27]. The belief in the existence of river gods and goddesses is common amongst riverine communities in Nigeria. Speaking of totems and taboos in the African belief system, Prezi observes in Bayelsa precisely among the people of "Nembe" that it is taboo to eat Python. And in the Tuomo clan, people do not eat Iguanas (*Abeidi*). Also, in Oyiairi and Tarakiri, it is taboo for them to eat the crocodile (*Egere*) and the turtle (*Beni-Owei)* respectively"[23]. The people of Shona in Zimbabwe personify animals through the practice of totems. And they also personified water bodies, rocks, and mountains as living beings. For instance, the *shiri* (bird) totem, Shona people believe that individuals with

such a totem are not expected to eat all birds, and this applies to the *dziva* (water) totem, where natives are expected to revere water bodies, thereby preserving aquatic life[28]. In some parts of Eastern Nigeria, "Indigenes are not permitted to bathe or wash clothing in specific streams and rivers. Aquatic animals living in some of these rivers or streams were not killed, and special days were set aside when nobody was allowed to perform any activity in and around the stream or river"[29].

We have established that the Western pattern of industrialization is a major factor in the environmental crisis in Africa, but the fundamental question is whether Africa should discard the Western paradigm of growth and development? Culture is dynamic and not static. The idea of discarding the Western paradigm of growth and development as suggested by Gandhi would be a denial of the dynamic attribute of culture. Therefore, this paper proposed a synergy of traditional African religious beliefs on human-nature relations and the Western paradigm of industrialization. This implies a rational use of nature by respecting the spiritual connection between humans and nature. By adopting the traditional African notion of complementarity and seeing nature as the missing link, this will reduce the level of environmental degradation generated by industrialization. The plants and animals regarded as totems and religious taboos should be respected by entrepreneurs. Actors in industries should be made to understand that by degrading nature they are degrading God because God is nature. And degrading nature implies interrupting the ecological balance meant to exist. The response of Africans to environmental change is simple. Environmental degradation and climate change are as a result of the denial of the spiritual view of human-nature relations, that is, the symbiotic and complementarity between humans and nature. If this notion is restored, then this problem would be reduced to the barest minimum.

Conclusion: African religious views on human-nature relationships are anthropocentric, which means that humans are in charge of coordinating the complementary or symbiotic relationships between humans and nature. The African religious view of human-nature relations is human-centered but not as in the case of the Western worldview. The human race is seen as an integral part of nature—a missing link, in reality, saddled with the religious responsibility of caring for nature (god). By caring for nature (god), humanity is invariably protecting its own interests as its very existence depends solely on the condition of nature. In other words, man is duty-bound to nature (god) not out of his free will but out of the need to preserve the joy of being, as an exercise of his absolute freewill will result in the destruction of the ecological balance that serves as a threat to his existence. This brings to mind Sartre's argument that "a man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being"[30]. The discourse on human-nature relations in itself is human-centered; it begins with humans and ends with humans. Throughout the discourse on environmental ethics, the moral obligations of plants and animals have never been stated. Therefore, to say that the African religious view of human-nature relations is non-anthropocentric or to advocate for an ecocentric view of human-nature relations as a panacea to environmental change would be a mere utopia. The paper submits that African environmental ethics is anthropocentric and that the root of the environmental crisis in Africa can be traced to the adoption of the Western worldview promulgated through science, technology, and industrialization. Africans can avoid a disaster in the environment if they mix

traditional religious beliefs with Western-style industrialization.

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