



Mutual Coexistence and Stewardship to Nature: Exploring the Philosophical Foundations of an Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper uses environmental ethics to identify the role of indigenous ethical values for the protection of the environment in Ethiopia. Currently attempts are made to find sustainable ways of relating to the environment. Such a quest emerged with the recognition that dominant models of development and modernization in the world of globalization are founded in an ethical orientation that sees development as only being materialistic and instrumental and in the process treats nature as a thing and an object to be dominated through the latest achievements in science and technology. Recognizing that such anthropocentric or human centered ethical orientation is causing environmental destruction, attempts are being made to find alternative strategies that are more holistic and sustainable in their nature. Anthropocentric environmental ethics gives primacy to human values over other parts of the environment. One solution is found in exploring the role of indigenous environmental ethics in the protection of the natural world. In Africa, the moral ideals of ubuntu are being studied with an aim of showing how such a vision extends moral responsibility beyond human boundaries and sees life as a sphere of interdependence. Just like other developing nations, the environmental policy of Ethiopia sees the environment as an integral aspect of sustainable development, and is also aimed at formulating an environmentally friendly green economy. Despite such efforts, the environment policy of Ethiopia also needs to integrate insights from indigenous environmental ethics into the discussion of environment. There are traditional and indigenous ethical systems in Ethiopia among the Oromo and Gedeo people that emphasize oneness with nature, avoiding deliberately harming nature and the relationship of solidarity between humans and other parts of the environment. Furthermore, the inherent value of nature, protection of animal life and justice towards non-humans are major themes in indigenous Ethiopian environmental ethics. The paper as such demonstrates the vitality of such ethical values in comparison with modern ethical systems that are narrowly focused on the instrumental control over the environment.

Key words: *environmental ethics, sustainability, respect for nature, relationality.*

Introduction

In today's world of globalization, ensuring the integration of indigenous knowledge and the wisdom of local cultures in attempts to find more inclusive ways of relating to the environment happens to be a crucial task. Some major obstacles to such an attempt to incorporate indigenous knowledge, include, the Eurocentric bias that prioritizes the value of the Western world in the world of knowledge production, asymmetrical power relations which exist between the global North and the South and the colonial legacy and its ever presence both in social institutions and the academic world.

Brouwer (1998) contends that indigenous knowledge these days is seen as the solution to the contradictions of development through an emphasis on sustainable development and harmonious coexistence as a solution. It incorporates “academic (ethno science and human ecology) and development focused (farming systems and participatory development)” (1998, 351). In the process, it is redefining the very notion of development that is universalistic, consumerist and instrumentalist in its orientation. In considering the utility of indigenous knowledge, Morris (2010) argues that the essence of indigenous knowledge must be contextualized in the various practices of a culture towards the immediate environment. As such indigenous knowledge “simply means the knowledge that ordinary people have of their local environment: environs meaning what is around us” (2010, 1). For Derman(2003) the prospect of indigenous knowledge in Africa is presented in terms of the opposition between progress and tradition, modernity and culture. Thus, “development has overwhelmingly been viewed as antagonistic to indigenous peoples and knowledge” (2003, 68). Based on this, there is an emphasis on the peace and harmony brought by African indigenous knowledge which emphasizes oneness and solidarity with nature. This is sharply contrasted to the conflict and destruction brought on by Western technical knowledge.

In the world of philosophy, for a long time, the field of ethics was seen as a mental pursuit that originated in the Western soil and analyzes problematic that owe their existence in the Western world. Being part of the colonial paradigm, such an insistence led to the suppression of the ethical perspectives of the South. Particularly in the African context, attempts are made to critique such Eurocentric assumptions hand in hand with supplying elements for an African ethical orientation. Here the value of indigenous ethical systems in Africa and their role in addressing Africa's contemporary reality and existential predicament are emphasized.

According to Orobator, two ideals dictate African views on ethics. One is the need to conceive life as a sphere of interdependence and the second is the notion of a community as involving rational and non-rational actors. Thus, “as a general principle, in Africa, ethics turns on the notion

of life” (Orobator, 2011, 4). Diversity witnessed in different walks of life dictates views about African morality for Tangwa. Traditional African societies in particular emphasized inseparable relations between the natural environment and human community. Thus, “the precolonial traditional African metaphysical outlook can be described as eco-bio-communitarian” (Tangwa, 2004, 389). This radically differs from the emphasis on individual liberty in Western morality.

Alongside these lines, Munyaradzi Felix Murove expresses the need to go beyond Western secular and spiritual orientations that guide discussions in ethics, as a way of introducing the voices of post-colonial and traditional indigenous knowledge systems in Africa. Based on this, Murove tried to employ a comparative and applied perspective to extract valuable ingredients from African ethics which must be conceived in “devising lifestyles for a modern world” (Murove, 2009, xv). To this extent, ethics in Africa must be both specific and comparative. The specific effort resides in studying African moral teachings and wisdom, whereas the comparative venture is found in comparing African and other ethical traditions and in the process searching for analogous structural patterns.

In this paper, I will try to discuss the contribution of African ethics in general and indigenous Ethiopian environmental ethics in particular. My discussion is organized around three major sections. Section one introduces the conceptual foundations of African ethics. I will emphasize the primacy of Ubuntu in African ethics and also a comparison between African and Western ethics. Section two; analyzes the nature of African ethics and its role towards the protection of the environment. Finally, in section three, I will try to discuss some of the benefits of introducing indigenous environmental ethics in the environmental policy of Ethiopia.

Approach of the Presentation

The paper uses a conceptual approach that is focused on the discussion of the philosophical literature on indigenous environmental ethics. I will also draw my conclusion based on the discussion of the nature of African indigenous environmental ethics as generally expressed under the ideas of ubuntu. Applying such discussions, I will try to develop a philosophical exploration of indigenous environmental ethics in Ethiopia.

Results and Discussion

1. Conceptual Foundations of African Ethics and the Primacy of Ubuntu in African Social Life

Currently as part of efforts in decolonization, attempts are made both to deconstruct Eurocentric bias towards Africa and also to offer reconstructive efforts that demonstrate the value of African

teachings. Martin H. Prozesky claims that the spirit of hospitality seen in the historical encounter between Africans and European travelers is an aspect of moral goodness giving an insight into ancient African ethical systems. For Prozesky, what has persisted mostly in human history are “ethnic moralities” referring to cultures of relatively fewer contact based on language, territory and sense of kinship. (Murove, 2009, 5) It is 2500 years ago that a major transformation occurred in the history of moral systems. Here one witnesses the birth of the greatest moral teachings usually intertwining religion and ethics. Gradually such moralities were merged with new forms leading to “trans-ethnic moralities” (Ibid, 6). Currently secular global morality is emerging in the Western world and is dictated the ideals of science, Western philosophy, democracy and secularism.

In South Africa, the earliest form of morality belonged to the Khoi and San people. Then in the modern period, one finds introduction of “Christian ethics, initially in Calvinist form” (Ibid, 7). Here, one sees not just the introduction of Western Christian religion to the African soil, but also the realization of asymmetrical power relations and relations of domination and exploitation. Then on South Africa, one also sees the arrival of Islam. Islam didn’t exert a huge and a lasting impact here. One also sees here the introduction of Judaism. Added to this is the immense impact exerted by Hinduism and Buddhism. Other developments in the moral realm of South Africa include secular ideals in communism and humanism, as well as ideals on moral responsibility towards the environment, rights of women and a quest for universal ethical values.

Prozesky goes on to consider common ideals found within the moral thinking of Africans. Although, there is a huge skepticism regarding the attempt to identify general, equally binding and accepted principles in African ethics, still he believes that there is “the emphasis on human and, at times, environmental relationality, known best in southern Africa by the word Ubuntu” (Ibid,9). Ubuntu as such is used to capture relations of oneness, a common moral fabric and the primacy of community and being accommodating towards others. Currently, there is a need to incorporate African moral teachings in the global public sphere. To this extent, “the resilience of Africa’s traditional, still-living ethic qualifies it as a true survivor” (Ibid, 11). Most moral systems in the world are only temporal, but Africa’s moral teachings are resilient and one needs to rediscover their utility in today’s world. Strengthening such an assertion, Munyaradzi Felix Murove argues that in today’s world there is an increasing need to understand different ethical systems. Especially since one sees a proliferation of cultural backgrounds and normative systems, “it becomes imperative, therefore, that any genuine study or teaching of ethics must be comparative and applied in perspective” (Ibid, 14-15). Resisting the hierarchical prioritization of one ethical position over others, there must be horizontal relations amongst ethical systems. To this extent, one needs to

go beyond the three ways of conceptualizing African ethics. First, one has the idea that there is no such a thing as African ethics. Secondly, there is an attempt to explain and demonstrate the logic of African ethics taking western ethic as the ultimate standard. Thirdly, there is a strategy of degrading African identity saying Africans are primitive, pre-logical and emotively oriented. For such a reading, “African ethics served as evidence of the savage in the early human condition before the advent of civilization and modernity” (Ibid, 16). Above all the three approaches, there is “vindicationist approach” which argues that African ethics provided a platform for resistance against Western imperialism and that it’s resilient in its essence.

Once it was assumed that Africans had no genuine ethical teachings valuable for philosophical scrutiny, it was believed that Western religion and philosophy ought to be disseminated in the African soil. Thus, “the idea that Africans had no morals, or were amoral, became the justification for Christian religious teaching and the dissemination of colonial education under the banner of morality and civilization” (Ibid, 19). It was assumed that African ethics is reminiscent of pre-modern societies that are communal, mythological and uncivilized. Western scholars influenced by Darwinism sought to explain the transition from the group to the individual, community to the subject in the history of ethics. Based on this, “Africans were studied to discover the original state of ethics before the advent of western civilization and modernity” (Ibid, 20). It was the accounts of travelers and missionaries that were seen as the major source of knowledge about the life of Africans.

Amongst Western thinkers although Rousseau also appealed to the modern vs. traditional dichotomy, he still deviated from other thinkers in seeing primitive societies as ideals for moral virtue and perfection compared to corrupted modern culture. Freud argued that communal ethics is a path that western society has passed through in the development of subjectivity. Accordingly, “Freud convinced himself that the savage evidence ethic provided an authentic historical illustration of primitive morality” (Ibid, 23). Today it’s believed that Africa’s development is a movement towards individual freedom and realizing the rights of non-interference on the life of citizens. Against such view, some like Ali Mazrui argued that African modernization must take local values and tradition as a point of reference. The value of interconnectedness and solidarity in African ethics is also emphasized.

Ali Mazrui(2009) sees a great deal of dynamism existing between African thinking, Islam and Christianity in African ethics. In such an analysis, Ethiopia occupies a special place since both Islam and Christianity were introduced for the first time there. As such, “it might be said, therefore, that the two parents of Africa’s wisdom first communicated with one another on Ethiopian soil”

(Murove, 2009, 33). Mazrui particularly studies the consequence of the First World War on African knowledge systems. The war led to the downfall of the Ottoman and German empires. Still, this doesn't led to the liberations of Africans and on the contrary, "as with Arab subjects of the Ottoman empire, African subjects of German colonies fell out of the frying pan of one empire into the fire of an alternative imperial order"(Ibid,35). Although colonialism soon ended, a new form of hegemony and power under the US was beginning to emerge.

The internal celebration of democracy and individual rights in the US was not necessarily extended to external relations. In speaking of US hegemony Mazrui remarks, "at home, its system is still predicated on rights, internationally its behavior is predicated increasingly on might" (Ibid, 35). In such a world, it is Africans and Muslims that are the targets of US hegemony in military and economic angles. This necessitates a search for a new moral ground and the need to look for parallels among African, Islamic and western traditions.

Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi argue that there is currently a need to revisit our understanding of Ubuntu and also evaluate its contemporary significance. Although Ubuntu is identified as a trait of humans, still there is a disagreement regarding its essence. Among others they tried to investigate "the linguistic- origins of the concept Ubuntu"(Murove, 2009,64). In this definition, it refers to an origin that imparts essence to humans. Other attempts see "Ubuntu as a derivative of the word Muntu, meaning a person, a human being" (Ibid, 64). Ubuntu is also identified as a human virtue, ultimate goal or our being. There is also an argument that Ubuntu is societal coexistence and value imparted on the individual by the community.

For Munyaka and Motlhabi, the community in Africa is seen as the stage and platform where both our individuality and communal essence are recognized. This shows that, "the value and dignity of persons is best realized in relationships with others" (Ibid, 68). Rather than positing relations of otherness, everyone is considered as a crucial part of the community. Under Ubuntu individuals could be persecuted for damaging societal ethos and relationships, but they could be reintegrated with the spirit of forgiveness. As such, "Ubuntu is a philosophy of tolerance and compassion that also embraces forgiveness" (Ibid, 72). It is our compassionate relation with others that guides our ethical conduct. Our moral notions must promote the spirit of solidarity and belongingness with others. Above anything else, Ubuntu is an urge to actively participate in the world of others. This shows that, "Ubuntu is a call to participation. It demands service to humanity in practical way" (Ibid, 75). Africans in the past had ethical systems of accommodation and hospitality towards strangers. Such strangers include travelers, guests and those suffering under different conditions.

One must ask, if Ubuntu is such an influential moral guideline in Africans, then why one sees “xenophobic attacks on outsiders” (Ibid, 78). Here, one needs to remember that moral ideals change throughout history and that, “African culture has been threatened, challenged, misused and almost destroyed” (Ibid, 79). As such, through the colonial legacy, Africans lost not just material wealth but also their ethical teachings and ideals. One impact particularly on the moral ideals of South Africans was the system of apartheid and its institutions that realized racial discrimination. Another factor that marginalized the value of Ubuntu is urbanization and its values of consumerism, individualism and material culture.

Augustine Shutte contends that the idea of Ubuntu ethics could be situated as the spirit of African traditional ethical teaching and can sharply be contrasted with Western ethical principles. One way through which Ubuntu could be understood is through stories. These stories are of friendship, communal justice, sacrifice and compassion. Understanding the metaphysical status of the person is required to have a better understanding of Ubuntu. As such, “to get inside the idea of Ubuntu one must understand the world view and the view of persons in which it has its roots” (Murove, 2009, 89) Here it is a life force that characterizes African understanding of reality. Life force manifests itself at different levels of reality.

As we interact with others, our life force also increases. As such, “a person who is generous and hospitable who welcomes strangers to her house and table and cares for the needy, increases in vital force” (Ibid, 92). In western thinking, there are two ways of understanding personhood. One that gives ontological priority to the needs of the subject over collective identity and another one that subsumes individuals to a structure. Such views of liberalism and socialism “differ according to whether priority is given to the importance of the individual or to that of society as a whole” (Ibid, 93). In Africa, the individual sees the community as the higher self rather than an artificial entity. The community is a perfect embodiment of the ideals of Ubuntu and ethics is seen as a sphere of self-actualization and the community is the context in which virtue is attained. Thus, “everything that promotes personal growth and participation in community is good, everything that prevents it is bad” (Ibid, 96). The good of others and of the subject are one and the same.

Despite such ideals of ubuntu permeating African moral teachings, Barbara Nussbaum believes that the contribution of Africa to the rest of the world is inhibited by three major factors. These include, the fact that African wisdom is non-written and communal, the political ideology of African leaders that suppresses traditional wisdom, and negative images about Africa which exist in the Western world. Alternatively, one must reevaluate the inputs from Ubuntu which is “the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in

the interests of building and maintaining community” (Murove, 2009, 100-101). The interdependence, oneness and common destiny emphasized by Ubuntu must be emphasized further.

Under Ubuntu, its social relations rather than the isolated ego that is important. Such an ideal could be utilized in administration and management amongst others. It also holds immense potentials in the process of reconciliation. Ubuntu looks for common points rather than irreconcilable differences. One as such sees in Ubuntu “the desire for reconciliation and communication in the interests of not only harmony but shared understanding” (Ibid, 103). This could be a model for settling disputes and conflicts in other parts of the world as well. Particularly the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation is embodied in the lives of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. Thus for Nussbaum in eastern and Western cultures, the subject is of a paramount importance, whereas the south, “is the primary source of inspiration for the communal spirit that shapes ways of being and living in community” (Ibid, 107). Currently, even in areas like physics, the West is beginning to recognize reality as a whole.

2. African Ethics and the Environment

Applying African ethics to diverging issues of everyday life and communal existence, it was shown that African ethics primarily preaches togetherness and relational ethics. Here my analysis will focus on the themes of protecting the environment and human emancipation that are the cornerstones of traditional African ethics. For BenezetBujó, one finds an inclusive and friendly relation towards the environment being emphasized by ethical teachings in Africa. In such a conception “there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular” (Murove, 2009, 281). The person is seen as one component of the dynamism of human existence. Based on this, “one commonly save oneself by saving the cosmos too” (Ibid, 282). In both African religions and Christianity, the way in which individuals relate to God is a result of divine order and the will of God. As such, “destruction of the cosmos from both African and biblical perspectives, implies destruction of life from God” (Ibid, 287). Since the will of God is also manifested in its creation, an ethically sound relationship must be developed towards the environment.

The effects of environmental degradation are more witnessed in third world nations particularly in Africa where one sees the loss of vegetation and animal life. In such a reality “the imbalances in nature in contemporary Africa imply that its relationship with cosmic vital forces is badly out of order” (Ibid, 291). Africans need to revisit their relationships towards the environment. There is also a need to introduce a new global ethic inspired by African and other traditions. Bujó here tries

to consider two Western oriented arguments regarding human responsibility towards the environment from religious and philosophical perspectives.

The religious dimension argues that humanity is created as the protector of nature by God. Here, “non-human living beings, especially, should be fraternally treated as co-creatures within a divine world order” (Ibid, 293). The philosophical dimension assumes that all rational persons must extend moral responsibility towards the non-human parts of the environment. An argument forwarded by Jürgen Habermas assumes that, although not rational actors, animals are part of the intersubjective world which we share with others. As such, “because animals interact with people a kind of intersubjective relationship is brought into existence which is expressed through non-verbal gestures” (Ibid, 294). Mainly the African worldview focuses on relations, interdependence and preserving others.

For Prozesky, we are living in a world where there is a need to reexamine the relationship of “organism and their environments” (Murove, 2009, 298). Currently in South Africa large areas of natural reserve, forest land and tourist attractions exist whereas poor black South Africans are still living in poverty being deprived of their natural resources. Prozesky remarks, “The poor damage the environment out of need, and it is not for the more fortunate to point the finger at their behavior. Things are different for the greedy. Not only are they the root cause of the problem but they have choices about what to do that the destitute do not” (Ibid, 301). Whether utilized by the rich or poor, the natural environment is more damaged in the process. What is the solution out of this predicament?

One way out is to explore the philosophy of Ubuntu which emphasizes communal interdependence and its implications for the natural world. One need to ask, is it a human or non-human centered view that Ubuntu and other communal philosophies engender or critiquing western individualism, they still end up exploiting the environment for the sake of gratifying human needs and wants. Prozesky believes that “African valuation of human solidarity and mutual concern, plus- process teaching ---give some clues as to how to work towards and even achieve that emancipator practice”(Ibid,304). From Ubuntu one could learn that change is possible only working within a community.

According to Mogobe B. Ramose, there is an idea that the essence of humanity relies on mutual recognition and affirming the intrinsic value of others in African ethics. Here, “it is bitho(humanness or humanity) and a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards other human beings which constitute the proverb’s core or central meaning”(Murove, 2009,308). Rather than asserting only the value of the solitary subject or a group, there is interdependence between the

two. Such an ideal of Botho or Ubuntu for Ramose radically differs from humanistic ideals that have developed in the west. Ubuntu and Botho are understood as a process of change and the way we continually relate to Being.

The application of Ubuntu ideals to contemporary areas like global ethics for Chuwa(2014) shouldn't focus on a comparison with other ethical traditions but on using Ubuntu to better understand African social life. As such, "the culture of Ubuntu can provide insights about relationships with communities" (Ibid, 12). In African ethical teachings, human commerce and divine order are mediated through intermediaries and different levels of reality. Everyday life and individual conduct forms a part of communal life which is itself a manifestation of the metaphysical order. In Ubuntu the intrinsic value of all individuals is affirmed since individuals owe both their essence and everyday life on other persons. Individuals also grow seeing the society as the extension of their personality rather than an outside force which imposes its values on others. Because of this, "From the moment of conception a child starts growing more into becoming a child of the society rather than of its immediate parents."(Ibid, 22) In Ubuntu individual liberty and the inherent value of others, private pursuits and communal ideals cannot be separated from one another.

Applications of ubuntu as a guiding moral system focus on dependence on non-humans and harmony witnessed different parts of reality. There is still a problem of directly applying Ubuntu to animals since it's assumed that Ubuntu "indeed cannot, concern animals directly – obviously not as moral agents, but not as moral recipients either" (Horsthemke, 2015, 83). Following the arguments of Ogungembi, attempts can be made to extract African ethics to protect the rights of plants and animals. Here, the notion of care in Africa extends to other parts of the environment, whereas feminist in the west perceive care as only being applicable to the rights of women. Hence, "Ogungbemi acknowledges that the African ethics of care is different from the feminist ethic of care in that it is essentially human-centered: humans are taken necessarily to rely on the nonhuman world for survival."(Ibid, 95) Restoring the natural order and preserving the environment entails caring for life in general.

One underlying theme that could be appropriated from such a discussion is the relation between different generations and our moral obligation to future generations in particular. Metaphysically this is signified in the unique place given to ancestors in the ontological structure. In such a context, it is regarded that all generations are causally linked to one another and also that humans and non-human parts of reality are dependent on one another. It is further assumed that the behavior of the ancestors is to be imitated and that they also dictate our normative presuppositions. Behrens

supports such an observation when he contends that in African ethics, “the ancestors are to be treated with respect, and this necessarily entails that the living owes certain obligations towards them” (Behrens, 2012, 181). Within the moral realm all the dead, the living and future generations are given due considerations. One needs to be thankful for the dead from whom our current horizons are inherited and the future generations to whom we should also furnish a better and suitable environment.

3. Mainstreaming Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Ethiopian Environmental Policy

On the previous sections, I tried to discuss the nature of African indigenous morality and its visions towards regulating the relation of humans towards the environment. In this section, I will try to discuss the viability of an Ethiopian indigenous environmental ethics and its benefits by taking the studies on the indigenous environmental ethics of the Gedeo people and the Oromo as examples.

Like most developing nations of the world the environmental policy of Ethiopia is an attempt to situate the environment as a major cornerstone in the discussions of development. This emerges from the realization that the Ethiopian economy is still agrarian and that there is a need to locate the environment not as being separated from the world of everyday relations but serving as a crucial foundation of development. Through the adoption of proclamation No. 9/1995, the Ethiopian Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) developed the institutional, legal and regulatory frameworks through which issues of the environment could be incorporated formally into the discussion of development in the Ethiopian context. Subsequently efforts are made to introduce laws that are environmentally friendly, policies that take sustainable development as being founded on the environment and procedures to implement laws regarding the protection of the environment. Also, the development of institutions and directives is said to be grounded on the need to protect the environment and introduce a green economy. There is also a huge attention given to sustainable relations and meeting the needs of future and current generations. This shows that intergenerational responsibility is one major cornerstone of the Ethiopian environmental policy.

Generally, the Ethiopian Environmental Protection Authority is given the task to manage, protect, conserve, and sustain the environment and the natural resources of the country. Some goals of the Ethiopian Environmental Protection Authority include, trying to protect the biotic community and relations of interdependence between human beings and other parts of the environment, conserving natural life and resources, looking for new strategies and alternative energy solutions, developing a non-exploitative relation towards the environment and seeing development not only as technical and materialistic but a holistic effort that posits the environment

alongside political, economic, social and cultural considerations. In its strategic objectives, the Ethiopian Environmental Policy does not include strategies for rigorous implementation, monitoring, or evaluation” (Ibid, 5) This shows that institutional reform, strict regulations and commitment is needed to put the provisions in the Ethiopian environmental policy to practical application. It must be applied in all sectors of development and initiatives. Also, looking at the current environmental policy of Ethiopia we need to ask, what is the positive contribution of indigenous environmental ethics in Ethiopia and how one could integrate indigenous moral ideals in Ethiopia pertaining to the environment into the development of environmental policy? Here I will use research studies carried out by Tadie Degie among the Gedeo and Workineh Kelbessa among the Oromo to demonstrate the viability of an indigenous environmental ethics in Ethiopia.

Tadie tried to carry out a research that tries to identify the structural foundations, essence and utility of an indigenous environmental ethics among the Gedeo people. He as such tried to investigate the, “moral duty that human beings show towards the environment (plants and animals)” (2017, 2) The Gedeo people emphasize the dynamic and ever evolving relation towards the environment. Also they see human life not as a sphere that is immune to the environment but as a gradual encounter between the human and non-human parts of the environment. The issue of the environment is a matter of survival for the Gedeo people and this emerges from the fact that the environment is what makes human life possible. Still although human beings obtain a pragmatic value from the environment, they should also strive to maintain the natural order more tranquil.

As Tadie sees it, the Gedeo environmental ethics is primarily geared towards the protection of “plants and animals and the relation between plants and animals with their community. “ (Ibid, 3) For the Gedeo people, building a green environment is conducive for the survival of humanity and it also has an aesthetic value since it strives to maintain the natural order. The Gedeo believe that the environment is one part of human nature, and destroying the environment out of greed results from a corruption in human nature. According to sage informants “the moral duty of protecting nature is more like a motto for the Gedeo’s” (Ibid). The idea that life is a sphere of interdependence and destroying one part of the environment is going to damage others is reflected in such a moral system.

For the Gedeo, God gave moral authority to human beings to use the environment to satisfy human needs. This still doesn’t justify destroying the environment and practicing over exploitation of the environment since human beings have a moral duty to care for others and to sustain the perfect order in the environment. This shows that “the concern of environmental ethics is not the

concern of choice rather it is the issue of survival. Without harmonious relations between the people and the environment life will be difficult since the environment is the source of everything” (Ibid, 5).

Generally, the Gedeo environmental ethics for Tadie is made of both pragmatic as well as ecocentric considerations. The utilitarian element emerges from the need to use the environment to satisfy human needs and the belief that human beings have the highest moral authority. The non utilitarian element on the other hand emerges from the need to avoid overexploitation and recognize the moral status and dignity of the other non-human parts of the environment. What is more interesting is that “the Gedeo Community recognizes some plants as sacred trees based on what are essentially spiritual values. These sacred trees in the community are called ‘*Adbar*’. These holy trees are anointed with butter for worshiping activities. Cutting down sacred trees violates the law of *Megeno*(God)” (Ibid, 7). Generally, the principles of harmonious coexistence and avoiding overexploitation and deliberate exploitation of the environment are the key lessons that could be extracted from the indigenous environmental ethics of the Gedeo people.

Workineh Kelbessa tried to study the indigenous philosophy and ethical orientations of the Oromo towards the environment. For him, just like any other societies, the Oromo primarily see the environment in terms of its instrumental and practical value. Workineh argues, “For the Oromo, wild animals are a source of meat, hides and ivory. The oral information I gathered from the study sites reveals that wild animals contribute little directly to the daily living requirements of individual Oromo people. The Oromo hunt very few wild animals for food, and those mostly during famines and festivals”(Workineh, 2010, 20). But does this mean that the Oromo indigenous environmental ethics doesn’t recognize the rights of the nonhuman parts of the environment?

For Workineh, the Oromo have a well elaborated and highly sophisticated system of environmental ethics. He contends, “The critical examination of Oromo worldviews, for instance, suggests that some Oromo groups have developed strong indigenous environmental ethics “(Ibid, 21). For the Oromo, there is not just an instrumental but also a divine and ethical relation between human beings and other parts of the environment. For the Oromo, “land is not only a resource for humans’ utilitarian ends, but also it has its own inherent value given to it by *Waaqa*(God). *Waaqis* is the guardian of all things, and nobody is free to destroy natural things to satisfy his or her needs. The Oromo believe that the law of society is based on the laws of *Waaqaas* given in nature “(Ibid). This shows that spirituality is not just a matter of divinity and transcendence but of taking part in keeping the perfect balance and harmony which exists in nature. Destroying the environment based on this logic amounts to violating religious principles.

Humans should treat other non human parts of the environment not just as mere things which do not have a moral status and recognition, but as of having an intrinsic value in nature. Such a moral vision I best expressed in the Oromo conception of *saffuuor ceeraafokko*. Workinch argues “*Saffuunis* an important concept in the beliefs and practices of the Oromo people. *Saffuunis* a moral concept that serves as the ethical basis for regulating practices in order to ensure a high standard of conduct appropriate to different situations “(Ibid, 23) The Oromo see Saffuu as a mediating moral category which dictates every aspects of human life. It operates in every aspects of human life and seeks to regulate human and other relations. It resides in respecting others, refraining from immorality, recognizing and upholding one’s spirit and the spirit of others, as such, “The Oromo believe that *saffuu* involves avoiding embarrassment, bad conversations, lying, stealing, working on holidays, and so forth. *Saffuunis* respecting one another and respecting one’s own *Ayyaana*(spirit) and that of others. According to the Oromo, *saffuunis ulfina*(respect). We need to show respect to our father, mother, aunt, uncle and our mother Earth. Knowing *saffuu* helps us maintain our culture and revere *Waaqa*“(Ibid, 24). Generally, the discussion of environmental ethics and the need to incorporate indigenous values must be seen as major cornerstone in the development of environmental policy and attempts to develop developmental programs. Just like other African societies, the moral ideals of oneness, affirming the value of others and recognizing the relationship of interdependence serve as major guidelines dictating the relations of humans towards the environment. This serves as an alternative model of development compared to the Western environmental ethics that sees the environment as having no intrinsic value and uses the latest achievements in science and technology to exploit the environment. As such, a well elaborated discussion needs to be carried out regarding the role of African and indigenous Ethiopian environmental ethics in the protection of the environment.

4. Conclusion

Studying indigenous environmental in Africa helps to expose the colonial bias that degraded African traditional wisdom in the world of ethics and in turn saw the imitation of Western ethical values as the only way forward. Contesting and questioning the notion that there is a universal ethics motivated by selfish human nature, material production and that the free market economy is the only human horizon that is available, African ethics presents an alternative strategy. Such a strategy focuses on the ethics of Ubuntu and the interrelated ideas of relationality, oneness, communal solidarity and a common destiny. Being applied to different areas, Ubuntu and African ethics represent alternative ways of relating to the natural world. The complexity of Africa’s

historical past, the resilience of Africa's wisdom as well as Africa's existential predicament all influence the attempt to develop such a system of ethics in the African context.

Within the Ethiopian context a study of indigenous environmental ethics among the Gedeo and the Oromo people reveals the existence of an indigenous environmental ethics which emphasizes the value of the environment. This serves as an alternative policy foundation, sustainable ground for the discussion of development and a way of challenging developmental models that are simply narrow and materialistic in their nature. As such in institutional and policy efforts towards the protection of the environment in Ethiopia, there is a need to consider the role of indigenous environmental ethics and the values which affirm the value of nature, preserving ecosystems and extending moral status and recognition to other non human parts of the environment as well.

5. References

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