

## UKAMA AS AN AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

**Mark Omorovie Ikeke**  
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

The *Shona* word, *Ukama* implies close relationship and interdependence. This interdependence is not only that between one human and another human, it involves the reality that all things, including the nature are closely related and depend on one another for existence. Humans exist in a community that embraces not only the physical humans, but also the community of ancestors, and the natural world of plants, animals, and other elements in the universe. To adopt western environmental values without adapting them to viable aspects of African environmental ethics amounts to another form of neo-colonialism. This paper uses a critical analytic method to argue for the need to highlight African environmental ethics, citing *Ukama* as a case in point. It interprets what *Ukama* and its import. It also examines how it can help to curb environmental pollution. It concludes that Africa is not bereft of environmental ethics.

### **Introduction**

It is important to state right away that the environmental question is an important one facing humanity today. There is no place in the planet that is exempted from environmental challenges. If there is any place that has suffered more environmental damage than any other on planet earth, one of such places will be the African continent. Though environmental degradation has taken place in Africa in pre-colonial times, it took a very damaging phase during the era of colonialism. Colonialism has no respect for the African natural environment and its people. The essential concern of colonialism was how to harness and cart away African natural resources to the metropolis of Europe. African human resources also were also taken away in the era of the slave trade. Africa is also affected by the brain-drain to the western world in which thousands of Africans who could have developed Africa and protected her environment have migrated to the West. While the West gained through this process, Africa lost.

In a search for viable ethical ecological solutions to the world's environmental problems and that of various regions of the world, African ecological ethics (the term ecological ethics will be used interchangeably with

the term environmental ethics here) have often been neglected and rejected. Eurocentric and Amerocentric scholars have often attacked the African worldview as totally anthropocentric. The idea that non-western environmental ethics are often neglected is echoed clearly in the following statement:

One of the greatest dangers of an environmental ethic is that it will reflect only those voices that are easily heard, our own. Justice, not to mention pragmatism, require that a new environmental ethic be plural-voiced. At a deep level, it needs to reflect the world of diverse places and peoples (Curtin ix).

It is important to recognize this fact for, “Most of the world’s biological diversity, as well as most of the world human biological and cultural diversity, exist outside the first world” (Curtin ix). The world’s peoples and cultures who are outside the Western world have managed their natural environment for thousands of years based on their own eco-centric worldview. This worldview does not have to be totally in consonant with the western environmental viewpoint. This is why it is fundamentally wrong for anybody to consider non-western ecological worldviews as not an environmental ethic especially that of Africa. It is on this note that this paper disagrees with the viewpoint that Africa lacks a viable environmental ethic as espoused by Callicott (156).

This work fundamentally asserts that the African worldview is not thoroughly anthropocentric even though humans are placed at the centre of creation, they have a responsibility to make prudent use of the things of nature. In the African worldview, nature is deeply revered and humans have seen themselves as part of nature. By the way, it is important to ask, what is environmental ethics that African should be denied of it? Without answering this question, it is difficult to speak of an African environmental ethics. For without understanding a thing, how do you know what to classify into its domain? It is to this question of what is environmental ethics that the research now turns.

### **What is Environmental Ethics?**

The term, “environmental ethics” is made up of two words, “environmental” and “ethics”. The term “environmental” is derived from the word, “environment.” The term “environment” is defined by Patrick Hook as follows:

In modern times, the environment refers to the entire global system. That is, everything from the outermost riches of the atmosphere to the Earth’s inner core. Inherent within this are all the factors that influence the environment, from the

geology to the fauna and flora as well as the prevailing climate. (77)

The environment has to do with the entire universe that is in existence that surrounds humans and humans inclusive. The following statement by Patrick Bellamy makes what the environment is clearer:

That which surrounds an individual or a community; at any point in his life circle both physical and cultural surroundings. Environment is also sometimes used to denote a certain set of circumstances surrounding a particular occurrence, for example, environments of deposition. Also single term for the physical and cultural elements in which life beings live. The environment includes air, water, soil light, temperature and the presence or absence of other organism. (153 -154)

It should be clear what the environment is. "It is the sum of all the external conditions and influences affecting the development and lives of organism" (Micheals 71). The term "environment" is often used interchangeably with the term, "ecology". Though they are not exactly equivalent they are used to denote the entire universe and everything in existence including their interactions, for ecology is the interactions and relationships between organisms and their environment. Without going into the technical differences, they will be used interchangeably in this work. It has become apparent from the above that the environment is the entire natural world which includes plants, trees, mountains, rocks, rivers, oceans, animals, the atmosphere, and the soil. The environment also includes humans for humans are part of nature and they are not independent from nature. The life and sustenance of humans is derivable from the earth. Only human consciousness and the capacity to think could be said to be above nature and is attributable by some to a higher power. That debate will not be entered into here as it is not the focus of this paper.

The next question that must be asked then is what is ethics? Ethic is rational enquiry into issues of right and wrong. Ethics in some instances is described as moral philosophy. Ethics is the study of the moral dimension of human behaviour. It is important to realise that ethics has no one definition but as a branch of philosophy, it could be seen as the morality of human actions or the study of the issues of human behaviour, discourse on the moral law or even the science of human conduct (Omoregbe 2-4). As it is, ethics deal with the norms of human behaviour and conduct.

For a long time in the history of western philosophy, ethics was understood from a humanocentric perspective; it has to do with human behaviour in regards to other humans in the human community. Human

behaviour with regards to nature and how humans treated the environment was not a central subject of discussion in ethics. If it ever featured at all, it was with regard to the human interest not the interest or consideration of the ecosystem. Indigenous cultures have always seen nature and all that inhabits it as within their circle of ethical behaviour. With regard to the western philosophy just mentioned, it was only in the late 50s and early 60s that serious attention and philosophical thinking about the environment will come into consideration. This will give birth to the discipline of western environmental ethics. In that epoch, it became clear that human behaviour to the natural world is an important question; that humans have responsibility to nature and this is why it is important to develop an earth ethic (Rolston xi-xiii). With the emergence of environmental ethics, it came to be defined as, "The field that investigates the question of which ethical norms are all appropriate for governing human interactions with the natural environment" (McShane 1653). It is clear that environmental problems became the focus of concern to philosophers such as Rolston, Callicott, Routley and Routley, Regan and Regan (McShane 1653). Environmental ethics raises questions about the environment and the need for humans to be concerned about environmental wellbeing. The following definition is quite helpful in clarifying the concept of environmental ethics further. It is the one that affirms that "environmental ethics is a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment. Environmental ethics assumes that moral norms can and do govern human behaviour towards the natural world" (DesJardins 12). Depending on the viewpoint from which the environment is studied, there can be anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, humanocentric or ecocentric environmental ethics, animal right centred ethics, rights for trees centred ethics, eco-feminism and many others. These will not be focused on here.

As noted in passing, it should be realized that it is not only the discussion of the human relationship and practice with regard to the earth as found in the western world or western philosophy that should be studied. Indigenous people have always interacted with the environment. They have various beliefs and practices with regard to the earth that were eco-friendly (Grim 198). If environmental ethics deals with human behaviour with regard to the earth, then Africa has an environmental ethics. The various African beliefs that have to do with the sacredness of the earth, human relationship to the earth and cultural practices in forms of taboos, religious rights and rituals with regard to the preservation of nature are all aspects of that environmental ethics. They were codified in proverbs, wise sayings, axioms, names, sculptures, carving, and inscriptions on landscapes, folktales and oral traditions. If not for anything, the contemporary critical reflection of some African philosophers and scholars on African cultural beliefs and practices with regard to nature is an environmental ethics. Though it should be acknowledged that more needs to

be done in this regard and hundreds of works and researches of African scholars on this issue need to be brought to the limelight. One of the vital African beliefs and practices that has informed the African way of life, especially in southern Africa is the concept of *Ukama*.

### **African Environmental Predicament**

Before examining the African concept of *Ukama*, it is imperative to recognize the context in which *Ukama* should be operational. Africa has not always remained the same. There is the Africa of the slave trade era. There is equally the Africa of colonialism. There is the Africa of the post-colonial era. There is the Africa that is affected by globalization. The Africa of the present day era is facing enormous environmental problems. Using the term, “environmental problem” in an extensive manner, it includes the ravages of war and violence, the violent struggle over natural resources, drought and famine, oil spillage and pollution of the land, atmospheric pollution with gas flaring, soil erosion, land degradation, the consequences of urbanization and industrialization, the environmental influence of rural-urban migration and much more.

In a more specific manner, a place like eastern Nigeria is constantly plagued with erosion. Nigeria’s Niger Delta is experiencing the pollution of land and streams as a result of oil pollution and spillage and northern Nigeria is plagued by the violence of Boko Haram that impacts the land surface. The Horn of Africa is often plagued with drought and famine. Thousands of human lives and livestock have been lost. War and conflicts over natural resources have raged in the past in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia. Wars and conflicts over natural resources currently rage on in the Democratic Republic of Congo and some other Central African countries. Endangered species of animals such as the elephant, buffalo, tiger and lion are often poached upon in places like Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, and other countries in Southern Africa. In all of these, there is also the onslaught of globalization and its forces. While globalization in itself may not be evil; if it is not managed ethically, it can result in lots of evils. These evils include destruction of authentic cultural values, exploitation of the environment by multinational mining companies, intrusion of unhealthy sexual values from the West, etc.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the African continent is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis. African people need to respond to this crisis. One way to respond to this crisis is to re-arm ourselves with the cherished African value of *Ukama*. It is right to note as follows that:

While industrialized countries are responsible for massive pollution, much of the African continent is experiencing a level of environmental degradation and wildlife depletion equally alarming for the welfare of future generations. Yet traditional African ethics recognizes the essential bond

between people and the environment, the debt any generation owes its forebears and its consequent responsibility to posterity.

Environmental degradation is an ethical problem that should therefore look to ethics for its solution. Distrusting contemporary western ethics, which has failed to halt pollution in technologically advanced countries, Africa yet possesses its own traditional culture the roots of an ethical paradigm to solve the current environmental crisis. This is an ethic of the interdependence of individuals within the larger society to which they belong and to the environment on which they all depend. This ethic is based on the concepts of *Ukama* (Shona) and *Ubuntu/Botho* Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana). (Murove 315).

### **Ukama as an African Eco-Worldview and Practice**

The point made by Munyaradzi Felix Murove on *Ukama* as an antidote to environmental degradation is a relevant one. Though *Ukama* comes principally from the Shona people of Zimbabwe, it is akin to the African worldview seeing all of reality as interrelated. Briefly it should be noted that the Shona people can be found across Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana. The Shona people are a Bantu speaking people and they number about nine million and share a common language.

It is important to note that the Shona worldview is not essentially different from the African worldview that perceives the presence of spirits and the divine force in all of creation. In the strict sense of it, there are no inanimate things in the universe. All things, including rocks, rivers, mountains, trees, animals and humans are carrier of the same life principle in various degrees. What is applicable to other indigenous people world over is also applicable to the Shona people and Africans. Note that: “Within indigenous environmental philosophies, there is an acknowledgement that all of life is related and that all of our actions and choices have impacts on other living beings” (Simpson 127). The following is also true of Shona and African peoples

Our traditional teachings tell us that we must treat our earth with respect and humility, and that we must change our unsustainable ways to ones based on traditional values. They warn that the consequences of greed, exploitation of natural resources, and consumerism will not make us healthy or well. If we listen to their teachings, then we should be terrified by the expanded economic growth and global development promised by trade agreement driven solely by corporate interests. (Simpson 132)

The African concept of *Ukama* is concerned about the earth and human relationship with the earth. The concept affirms human relatedness with the earth and all life. Human relatedness is not simply with humans but is seen as totally interdependent with all of reality (Murove 316). The human person is related not only to present human persons but to past and future generations. The human is related to all other things who are seen as kin. This is why human behaviour that has adverse effects not only on humans but on other elements in the universe is taken into consideration. Every form of human behaviour such as greed, profitierism, consumerism, exploitation of natural resources and lack of respect for mother earth are all considered as evil and condemned. The various taboos and rituals that Africans have with regard to various evil behaviours were all aimed at preserving the earth. They may not make sense to a modern scientific mind but they were deeply helpful to Africans in protecting the earth.

African people never saw themselves as separated from the earth and its environment. They existed within a network that was related to everything in existence. *Ukama* implies one is only a person because of the rest of reality. It means one becomes a person only because of nature. *Ukama* implies that human persons were to live in mutual coexistence with the cosmos. They were to live knowing that they were related to their ancestors. They were to recognise they have the earth entrusted to them from their gods and from their ancestors. They were to live in preserving the earth for present and future generations. *Ukama* is a holistic ethic that saw the wellbeing of an individual in relationship to the entire network of cosmic existence. The implication of all these is that “Among Africans, *Ukama* provides the ethical anchorage for human, social, spiritual and ecological togetherness” (Murove 317).

Another issue that is important to note and clearly shows and proves *Ukama* as an eco-relational ethic is the practice of totemism. Totemism as should be realized is the practice of indigenous cultures of seeing an intricate relationship between them and some animal species, plants or other natural elements especially as it has to do with the origin of their ethnic group. A classic definition of totemism sees it as:

... the intimate relations supposed to exist between an individual or group of individuals and a class of natural objects, i.e. the totem, by which the former regard the later has identified with them in a mystical manner and in a peculiar sense their own belonging, so that they bear the name of the totem and show this belief in certain customs.” (Driscoll par.2)

It is the plants, animals or things that are called totems. Totemism helps Africans to be connected to the earth, and also helps humans to see

themselves as connected to the past and the future (Murove 320). It is evident that totemism arises and is furthered by the Africa belief in *Ukama*, you are a person and your life makes meaning because of the environment or the cosmos. *Ukama* is an African form of holism that sees that life is a complex interdependency. Expressed in African philosophic manner, it goes as follows:

The world interacts with itself. The sky, the spirits, the earth, the physical world, the living, and the deceased all act, interact, and react in consort. One works on the other and one part can't exist nor be explained without the other. The universe, the spirit world and man are all part of the same fabric. Each needs the other to activate it. (Steyne 58)

The question that becomes necessary to ask then is, can this concept of *Ukama* that sees all of life as inter-relational, integrated, intergenerational still be relevant in modern times? There is no doubt that this African concept and other concepts in other indigenous cultures have been deeply challenged by modern forces such as that of westernization, the evangelistic endeavours of Christianity and Islam, economic globalization, wars and conflicts, urbanization, nationalism and the likes (Ferguson 31). In the midst of the challenges that the concept faces, this paper vividly asserts that the philosophy of *Ukama* is still relevant and that it is a viable aspect of African and environmental ethics. It should be realized that human behaviour with regard to the environment is informed by beliefs about the environment. It is beliefs that inform practice. This is the case, for people live by what they believe and the more those beliefs are reflected upon, the better for the planetary good. DesJardins is right to enunciate as follows:

Environmental problems raise fundamental questions of ethics and philosophy – about the ends we should pursue. At best, science and technology can provide us with some means for attaining these ends. Western philosophy was born 2,500 years ago with Socrates' questioning of Athenian society and an individual's role within it. "We are dealing with no small thing," Socrates said, "but with how we ought to live." Environmental issues, even seemingly innocuous issues such as fertilizer and pesticide use, raise philosophical questions about how we ought to live. For example, do we have any ethical responsibility to preserve the various life-forms around us? Is there anything wrong with defining some living organisms as pests and working to eradicate them? Philosophical assumptions are involved wherever we stand in this debate. Again, should pesticide be proved safe before they are used, or should the burden of proof rest with those who predict danger? Answering this

question also involves issues in ethics and political philosophy. (7)

This is where the role of African philosophers and scholars come in. They should be beacons of critical thinking on African beliefs and practices. No matter the limitations that African beliefs and practices may be plagued with, they still hold some nuggets and gems of truth that can contribute to resolving the environmental crisis. After all there is nothing wrong in doing critical thinking over cultural beliefs and practices. This is one of the reasons why Africa philosophy exists. Africa philosophers cannot be true to their identity if they fail to reflect over cultural beliefs and practices that have helped their people in times past and can still help their people to navigate through the challenges of the present day. All that this paper asks for is the need not to deny Africa of her rich values but at least reflect on it. Africans should not be in a rush in the desire to implement industrial technology from the west by throwing away their cultural heritage. Some points made by Bujo are helpful here: Nature including plants and animals carry vital energy and were made available by God to be used by humans but they should not be used arbitrarily; reconciliation with the universe is necessary when the universe has been harmed; animals and plants should not be endangered by money and profit making; Africans should recognise that they are in total relationship with the sacred universe; humans can only have harmonious life if nature is healthy (221-224). For Africans, what matters is the unity of the whole which *Ukama* emphasizes. It is proper then and right to assert that:

The cosmic community with all beings, including those that are not animals, is an essential foundation on which African ecological ethics is based. On the basis of this community, it will be judged which priority should be given to the unity of the entire universe in dealing with nature. Instead of ignoring or minimizing this rationality, dialogue from the side of western rationality is urgently recommended. (Bujo 225)

### **Conclusion**

In this research, the central thesis has been that Africa is not bereft of an environmental ethic as some western or Eurocentric scholars think. It has a vital and rich environmental ethic in the concept of *Ukama*. *Ukama* was shown to be a philosophy or ethics of relationality. All things in the universe are interrelated and in a network of mutuality. The concern for the wellbeing of all including rocks, mountains, trees, birds, rivers, oceans and not just of humans should become the norm in measuring human behaviour. Since environmental ethics is either an extension of ethical questions about human behaviour towards the earth, or a probe into the wellbeing of all life forms;

then, African beliefs and practices such as *Ukama* that respects the earth and has various taboos and ritual practices to preserve the things of nature cannot but be considered as an environmental ethic.

### Works Cited

- Bellamy, Patrick. *Academic's Dictionary of Environment*. New Delhi: Academic (India) Publishers, 2007.
- Bujo, Benezet. *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.
- Callicott, J. Baird. *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Curtin, Deane. *Environmental Ethics For a Postcolonial World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2005.
- DesJardins, Joseph .R. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2006.
- Driscoll, John T. "Totemism." *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 11 Mar. 2014  
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14789a.htm>>.
- Ferguson, Duncan .S. *Exploring the Spirituality of the World Religious: The Quest for Personal, spiritual and Social Transformation*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.
- Grim, John. "Indigenous Knowing and Responsible Life in the World" Ed. Laurel Keearns & Catherine Keller. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 196-214.
- Hook, Patrick. *The Little Book of environmental Principles*. London: New Holland Publishers, 2008.
- McShane, Katie. "Environmental Ethics" *The International Encyclopaedia of Ethics: Volume III*. Ed. Hugh LaFollett. Malden: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013.1653-1665.
- Micheals, Fredd. *Lotus Illustrated dictionary of Environmental Studies*.new Delhi: Lotus Press, 2004.
- Murove, Munyaradzi Felix. "An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu" Ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009. 315-331.
- Omoregbe, Joseph. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1993.
- Rolston, Holmes. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988
- Simpson, Leanne. "Listening to Our Ancestors: Rebuilding Indigenous Nations in the Face of Environmental Destruction" *Every Grain of Sand: Canadian Perspectives on Ecology and Environment*. Ed. J.A. Wainwright. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004. 121-134.
- Steyne, P.M. *Gods of power: A Study of the beliefs and practices of animist*. Houston: Touch. 1990