

*AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE QUESTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL
CONSERVATION, REVIEW ON TWO ESSAYS*

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On the 16th December 2016, I heard from Rebecca Brennan, the commissioning editor for environment and sustainability books at Roudledge. The following is what she told me, verbatim:

“I have recently received a proposal and two sample chapters for an edited collection provisionally entitled *African Philosophy and the Question of Environmental Conservation* from Jonathan Chimakonam and Thaddeus Metz. Given your expertise in this field, your views on this Project would be extremely helpful. I was hoping that you might be able to review this proposal to help us in our publishing decision.”

Ms. Brennan came into contact with me on the kind behalf of Dr. Bénézet Bujo, who had advised her to do so (as he himself had written to me before). Of course, Dr. Bénézet Bujo is an eminent African theologian and professor at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. He is the head of African theological research and editor of the *Théologie Africaine au XXIe siècle*, volumes 1, 2 and 3, and author of many books between them: *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, Academic Press Fribourg, 2008, and *Le credo de l'Église en dialogue avec les cultures*, with the same publishing company, 2016.

On receiving Ms. Brennan's letter, I accepted the responsibility of reviewing the proposed book, explaining to her that it would take me two or three weeks, perhaps a month. The collective book is composed of 17 authors, here are their names and the titles of their essays:

1. Prof. Bruce B. Janz (University of Central Florida, USA), “Peripherality and Non-Philosophy in African Philosophy: Gender, the Environment, and Other Provocations.”
2. Prof. Alexander Animalu & Mr. Jeff Unegbu (University of Nigeria Nsuka, Nigeria), “Gaya Hypothesis from an African Perspective.”
3. Prof. Taddeus Metz (University of Johannesburg, South Africa), “How to Ground Animal Rights on African Values: A Constructive Approach.”
4. Dr. Kevin Behrens (University of Witwatersrand, South Africa), “An African Account of the Moral Obligation to Preserve Biodiversity.”
5. Prof. Betty Wambui (State University of New York at Oneonta, USA), “Seeking Sustainability: Afro-feminist Responses to Eco-challenges.”
6. Dr. Jonathan Chimakonam (University of Calabar, Nigeria), “Ohanife: An African Account of the Ecosystem.”

7. Prof. Workineh Kelbassa (Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia), "Women and the Environment in Africa."

8. Prof. Oladele Balogun & Dr. Fayemi Kazeem (Olabisi Onabanjo University & University of Lagos, Nigeria), "Women's Identities in African Environmental Ethics: A Conversational Engagement."

9. Prof. Ebunoluwa Oduwole & Dr. Fayemi Kazeem (Olabisi Onabanjo University & University of Lagos, Nigeria), "Animal Rights vs. Animal Care Ethics: Interrogating the Relationship to Non-Human Animals in Yorùbá Culture:"

10. Prof. Angela Roothaan (Free University Amsterdam, Netherlands), "Hermeneutics of Trees in an African Context: Enriching the Understanding of the Environment for the Common Heritage of Mankind."

11. Mr. Victor Nwele (University of Calabar, Nigeria), "Global Warning as an Ontological Boomerang Effect: Towards a Philosophical Rescue from the African Place."

12. Dr. Ralph Madu (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria), "Laudato Si and the Ecological Crisis."

13. Dr. Michael Onyebuchi Eze (University of Cambridge, UK), "*Eco-Humanismus* (Eco Humanism): An African Environmental Theory."

14. Dr. Anke Graness (University of Vienna, Austria), "Ecofeminism in Africa: The Contribution of Wangari Maathai."

15. Dr. Ada Agada (University of Nigeria, Nsuka, Nigeria), "Catalysing Climate Change Action In Nigeria: Moderate Anthropocentrism and the African Perspective of the Cosmos."

16. Dr. L. Unchenna Ogbonnaya (University of Calabar, Nigeria), "*Ihenile di, bu Mma Ndu*: The Essence of Ecological Equilibrium."

17. Prof. Fainos Mangena (University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe), "Zimbabwe's Environment Crisis: Questioning Ubuntu?"

Editors: Jonathan O. Chimakonam (University of Calabar) and Thaddeus Metz (University of Johannesburg).

The two essays to be reviews are:

1. Prof. Bruce B. Janz (University of Central Florida, USA), "Peripherality and Non-Philosophy in African Philosophy: Gender, the Environment, and Other Provocations."

2. Prof. Taddeus Metz (University of Johannesburg, South Africa), "How to Ground Animal Rights on African Values: A Constructive Approach."

Upon finishing the concerned work, I contacted Rebecca Brennan, saying:

“Thank you very much for sending me the texts, I have just finished read them. As promised, I am able to give you my point of view about the collection, provisionally entitled ‘*African Philosophy and the Question of environmental Conservation*’.

First of all, in point number **1. Blurb**,

The authors must explain why “the issue of environment is still very much neglected by governments corporate bodies and academics in the sub-Saharan Africa”. To do so they shall also need to explain the paralysis of African Development due to the weight of Neo-colonialism. On this topic there exist two very reliable monographies: ‘*Neo-colonialism the last stage of imperialism*’ and ‘*Consciencism, philosophy and ideology for the decolonization and the development*’, by Kwame Nkrumah.

In the same text, it is said that “the entrenched traditional world-views which privilege men over women and humans over the environment make it difficult for the modern-day challenges posed by the neglect of these issues to become obvious. In a continent where deep-rooted cultural and religious practices as well as wide-spread ignorance determine human conduct toward the environment, it raises challenging puzzles why women in Africa are the ones to plant the trees and men are the ones to fell them.”

Here we can see how, without first examining the values of traditional African Society, the authors are starting to shape an exceedingly vague idea of its world-views; confusing the relationship between men and women and their environment. This is the result of simple cultural prejudices. The writers seem unaware, for instance, that, in some of the more traditional African religions, the environment is respected as a sacred entity. They also appear not to acknowledge the positive effects of Thomas Sankara’s four-year revolution in Burkina Faso. In order to amend this, they should consul the following essays: “Sauver l’arbre, l’environnement et la vie tout court”, in *Oser inventer l’avenir*, by Thomas Sankara; and “L’impérialisme est le pyromane de nos forêts et de nos savanes”, *Discours de la Révolution au Burkina Faso, 1983-1987*, by the same author. I would also like to note that in paragraph **10. Reviewers**, they have referenced *African Environmentalism*, by Prof. Bénézet Bujo (Université de Fribourg, Switzerland). They must explore it, and they can see some of his main ideas in the section entitled *Le credo de l’Église en dialogue avec les cultures* (p. 53-58).

In point number **2. Statement of Aims**, it says:

“This book is a collection of exciting essays on the environment from an African Philosophical perspective. It is an incisive philosophical engagement with forms of marginalization that are common in the African place... There is little academic attention from other disciplines and not much more from African philosophy addressing

environmental concerns in the sub-Saharan Africa. In an age where the environment is a serious issue and Africa with its poverty and lack of requisite infrastructure (being virtually indifferent) would be worse hit by environmental crises as is presently the case in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, African philosophers should not keep quiet and do nothing. Ecofeminists for example are those who hold that humans mistreat the environment just the same way men mistreat women, believing it to be a mere means rather than an end.”

Here we have to continue with the discussion of *Neo-colonialism*, and we need to be made aware of three things: African philosophers’ ideas on the matter; the methodology applied by African Universities; and the fact that the political regimes, supported by foreign Western Powers, are not wholly accepting of the progressive ideas pioneered by modern African intellectuals – many of whom are working abroad. In this last point, it seems that the ideas of African thinkers are considered to be very dangerous. However, I hope that the professors Victor Nweke (University of Calabar, Nigeria) and Dr. Michael Onyebuchi Eze (University of Cambridge, UK) can explain this problem in their respective essays: “Global Warning as an Ontological Boomerang Effect: Towards a Philosophical Rescue from the African Place.” And “Eco-Humanism (Eco-Humanism): An African Environment Theory.”

The following text, offers no explanation as to what is really happening in Africa:

“There are also some scholars who believe that the way we conceive the environment is at the heart of its abuse. What then are the likely scenarios in the sub-Saharan Africa? Do the Niger Delta people for example who struggle for compensations from the oil corporations do so for the sole reason that their environment which serves as means has been damaged, or do they also fight for their environment as an end in itself? Should they? Why is logging/deforestation a problem for Cross River State of Nigeria and many other places in Africa? What about animal poaching in Kenya, Botswana, South Africa, etc.? What is the nature of relationship between African peoples and their environment/forests? Why do Africans, in light of their characteristic values, need to conserve their environment? Do African cultures reflect the positions of biocentrism, ecocentrism, animal rights and Gaia hypothesis, or what do they say in connection to these positions? What about our obligations to posterity? Do Africans of today owe any obligations to future generations with respect to the way they treat their environment? If so, might duties to previous generations, including ancestors, have something to do with it? What is the level and need of awareness and environmental education? What roles can and should African philosophy/philosophers play to save the African animals and environment from destruction?”

As can be seen, the author is only asking questions without attempting to give any answers. It is evident that the same, powerful enterprises which are destroying the environment in the Europe and the West, are doing so all over Africa – and at an increasing rate. We know also that animal poaching in Africa is a popular business and source of entertainment for European capitalists and “l’hommes d’affaires”. Juan Carlos

I of Spain himself has travelled to Africa to experience this “sport”. To clarify some thoughts on the subject, I would like to refer the author once again to the essays of professors Victor Nwele and Michael Onyebuchi.

Concerning the book,

I would like to suggest to you that the proposed book should be preceded by an objective essay studying African philosophy, not by a superficial collection of ideas.

After reading the essay: "Peripherality and Non-Philosophy in African Philosophy: Gender, the Environment, and Other Provocations", from Bruce B. Janz (University of Central Florida), I can only say, sincerely, that this is not an essay on African Philosophy; the author does not know what he is talking about in terms of African or Greek Philosophy. That is why the main points of the essay are based on three concepts: Ethnophilosophy, Peripherality and Non-Philosophy in African Philosophy, and these concepts are simply not valid for the study of African Philosophy specifically.

By separating the elements of the word Ethnophilosophy (p.1), we can see that the word *ἔθνος* (ethnos) in greek language means: race, culture and people. So, if Bantú Philosophy, Yoruba Philosophy, Wolof Philosophy, Fang Philosophy, etc. are all ethnophilosophy, then logically the entire history of Western Philosophy must also be dubbed ethnophilosophy, because we are talking about the Milesian (Ionian) Philosophy, Greek Philosophy (the mother of western philosophical thinking) and Roman Philosophy. Then, in the modern day, we have: English Philosophy and English Empiricism, in which we find Scottish Philosophy; on the continent: French Philosophy (Cartesian Rationalism, “le Siècle des Lumières”, French Existentialism); German Philosophy (Objective and Absolute Idealism, German Existentialism); etc. So, it is easy to see that Ethnophilosophy is a very vague concept invented by those who cannot understand the fundamentals of African Philosophy or Greek Philosophy.

Regarding “Peripherality” (p. 6), research on the universal history of philosophy proves to us that this concept cannot be applied to the philosophy of Africa because it is the model from which Greek Philosophers had learnt in Black Egypt. Black Africans came from the great lakes following the borders of the River Nil, and arriving in Kemit (Kemet), known later as Egypt, where they built the first empires. And then, after the beginning of the decline of the New Empire - following its attack from Asurbanipal (661 B.C.), Perses (525 B. C.) and Alexander the Great (333 B. C.) - these same Black Africans began to return back to Africa to remain in the territories where they are living today. The characteristics of the philosophy that the Greeks had learnt in Egypt persist in Wolof Philosophy, the majority of these peoples living in Senegal, Mali and Guinea; in Yoruba Philosophy, practiced by more than 19 million people living in Nigeria; in Fang Philosophy, existing predominantly in Kenya, Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo Brazza, Sao Tomé and Prince; and lastly in Woyo Philosophy, split between Katanga and Zambia. From the beginning of the XX Century up to now this topic has

been a significant chapter in the research of not only African Philosophy but also European Philosophy. On both matters we have an abundance of very competent specialists like E. Amélineau, Ch. Anta Diop, A. Bourgeois, Th. Obenga, G. Biyogo, etc.

Finally, on the concept of Non-Philosophy (p. 7), the author is getting their information from the African philosopher Theophilus Okere, in the section entitled *African Philosophy: A Historic-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Condition of its Possibility*, from the chapter “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy: Lessons from the History of Philosophy”. His focus in that chapter, however, is almost exclusively on philosophy outside of Africa. But Prof. Janz does not appear to have understood Okere’s critique of Hegel’s Philosophy, and only believes that “Peripherality and non-philosophy are necessary to think about womanist philosophy and environmental philosophy in Africa.” Clearly this is not the case. The main problem here is that the Hegel’s Absolute Idealism has been strongly criticized by Arthur Schopenhauer, Karl Marx, Cheikh Anta Diop, and others in the same way that Okere has done. I myself have also carried out a severe critique of the theory, and we have all come to the same conclusion that Non-Philosophy in Hegel’s work never can be applied to African Philosophy.

On Hermeneutics, Prof. Janz states that:

“In the West, hermeneutics arises in tandem with the rise of modernity, with questions about the place of technology and science in relation to human experience and meaning. It is an answer to a specific threat, a specific non-philosophy. In answering as it does, it privileges some kinds of texts, some kinds of philosophical pursuits, and ignores others.” (p. 16). This seems to be a complete misconception of hermeneutics, because the discipline arises from Aristotle, in the V Century B. C, and since that time it has had to deal with all manner of texts. In African Philosophy, from the Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Black Orpheus* (1948), the *Nations nègres et culture I et II*, by Cheikh Anta Diop (1954), to Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume’s *Mvett épopées Fang* (1970) and *L’homme, la mort et l’immortalité* (1993) and many other authors, we have several great contemporary hermeneutical texts, but apparently B. Janz hasn’t heard of them.

Lastly, in his text there is no clear analysis of Womanist Philosophy in Europe in order to help cast a wider perspective over the topic in Africa.

So, with these significant mistakes, I propose that an essay is written on African Philosophy which concludes with a message about the environment. I suggest that you explain to professors Jonathan Chimakonam and Thaddeus Metz that you know someone who can speak knowledgeably about African Philosophy, and that you can ask him to write an essay on it. In view of my difficulties in English, I can write it in Spanish to be translated.

At the same time, I would like to praise Prof. Thaddeus Metz, as, in the essay “How to Ground Animal Rights on African Values: A Constructive Approach”, he has managed to find the metaphysical and humanitarian foundation of ‘African Values’ while making

a reasonable criticism of Kai Horsthemke - who, in his book *Animal and African Ethics*, has, in vain, refused to acknowledge them.”

I wrote the above report in an article with the title: “Review on Two Essays of the Project of *African Philosophy and The Question of Environmental Conservation*”, and I sent it, in PDF format, to Rebecca Brennan on the 26th of January 2017. In reply, and in addition to her “Thank you” message, she asked me to send her a second copy of the same article as a Microsoft Office Word document, because she had to send it anonymously to the Commission for proposal of that edition of the book. I did so, and after nine months, on the 10th of November 2017, I got in touch again to find out about the matter. Then, on the 21st of the month, she told me that my report was given to the team, but they had decided to correct the concerned text themselves. She also sent me the revised introduction. However, upon reading, I realized that they had made no amendments. Finally, on the 26th of November, I wrote a last letter to Rebecca Brennan asking her to explain if Professor Bruce Janz’s text had been eliminated. I have still not received a reply.

In conclusion, it is extremely important to recognize that, even though this proposed book has some interesting essays on the African thematic, the authors’ starting-point of view (made bias by their cultural prejudices) show us that, at this point in the 21st century, the education system in African universities is, from any perspective, neo-colonial.

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Leon, 18th February 2018.

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