

Environmental Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa: Possible Solutions

Michael Kakaire Kirunda

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Michael Kakaire Kirunda

Abstract

Departing from John Herbert Michael Agar's contention that "the truth that makes people free is for the most part the truth which people prefer not to hear," I focus this article on two all too often implied, although not explicitly formulated, major triggers of Africa's predicaments – including environmental degradation.¹ I argue that while the ruling elites (Africans and non-Africans alike) have been, and still are, the major players in the development and exacerbation of the myriad of problems facing Africa and its people, this elemental dimension has not received sufficient academic attention. I also ascertain how the challenges facing Africa and its people – ranging from environmental degradation to cultural putrefy, and from political paralysis to economic stagnation, are, while inseparably interlinked, largely stem from the denial of agency and humanity to the vast poor and struggling segments of society by the ruling elites.² Linking these two dimensions, I marshal evidence from across diverse fields and different academic disciplines that indicate:

- (a) How the many institutions put in place by the ruling elites, and the alien and alienating policies and programs they have repeatedly promoted, have driven populations living in poverty and squalor to destroy the environments where they live, that surround them, and depend on for their livelihood.
- (b) How the failure by African and non-African academics, international and

¹ This quotation, attributed to John Herbert Michael Agar, can be accessed online at: <<http://www.wfs.org/Q-abc-htm>> February 17, 2004

² Lately, this dimension is increasingly beginning to capture the attention of most environmentally inclined students and scholars of Africa and policymakers – thanks, in part, to the resurgence of the communitarian political discourse of environmental and economic sustainability.

development agencies and policymakers to listen (and hear with respect) and accordingly respond to the priorities and needs of the poorer segments of society has intensified the on-going systematic breakdown of Africa's institutions of socialization and destruction of crucial life support systems.

Although in a very different context, Mark Taylor, quoting Derrida, offers a glimpse of what I systematically investigate in this article. That is, as he notes, how “every structure – literary, psychological, social, economic, political, religious, etc – that organizes human experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else is inevitably left out. These exclusive structures [in turn] can become repressive – but that repression comes with consequences. ...What is repressed does not disappear; it always returns to unsettle every construction.”³

³ Mark C. Taylor. 2004. “What Derrida Really Meant.” *The New York Times*, October 14.

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Introduction

Upon reading, and there is indeed a lot to read, a sizeable number of books, journal articles, Internet commentaries, newspaper editorials and other reports on Africa, one cannot fail to notice at least two seemingly emerging consensus. The challenges confronting the continent of Africa and its people, especially its vast poor majority, are all well too known by African academics, national, regional and international development agencies and even policymakers. Their root causes and the solutions that are required are also well documented and widely recognized.

This common-place knowledge notwithstanding, two major triggers of Africa's crises – including environmental degradation – have thus far, as already noted, received insufficient academic attention. Although a lot has been written on what the underlying causes of Africa's problems are and the solutions that are required, little has been written about the role that the ruling elites (African and non-Africans alike) have played in the development and exacerbation of Africa's predicaments. In fact, this elemental dimension has to the present remained unregistered on the academic radar. The extent and degree How Africa's vast challenges are intricately intertwined, and how they are to a greater extent connected to the intermittent denial of agency, humanity and input of especially Africa's women, rural peasants and urban poor by the ruling elites (both African and non-Africans), has also remained largely unexplored.

It is, therefore, upon these two dimensions that I mainly focus this
However, moving in this direction, I also open up (for further debates and reflection) two other important challenges, which, I believe, require immediate and extraordinary investment of resources (time, labor and capital) if Africa and its people were to

ameliorate not only the accelerating environmental crisis but also other pressing challenges as well. One is the indispensability of addressing Africa's challenges through interdisciplinary approaches, contexts, and collaborations. The other is steering clear of the stupendous temptation – most notably exemplified by many intelligent and thoughtful students and scholars of Africa, higher-ranking bureaucrats, development partners and political elites – to prescribe quick-fix answers and solutions to Africa's otherwise complex, heterogeneous, yet crosscutting problems. Following are the reasons why, I believe, these two somewhat overlapping concerns merit a lot more attention.

Interdisciplinary approaches, contexts and collaborations

Thus far, in Africa — as it is the case elsewhere in the world — the accelerating environmental crisis, for example, has been examined through diverse academic lenses. Historians, Anthropologists, philosophers, theologians, legal scholars, artists, writers, literary and art critics, journalists, political scientists, sociologists, economists, scientists and even lay persons have, based on their training and experience, variously shed light on what each consider the primary root causes of Africa's predicaments to be and the answers and solutions that are required.

Of course, insights and ideas from each of the aforementioned disciplines have a distinctive role to play especially in terms of enlarging our understanding of Africa's problems. However, considered in isolation, independent of one another, the findings and insights from the aforementioned disciplines cannot conceivably help prevent, let alone resolve, the legion of life-threatening conditions that all too often drive poorer, struggling segments of society in Africa to destroy environments where they live, that surround them and that they depend on for their livelihood.

An effective strategy should and must involve a lot more than merely drifting as most scholars and policymakers all too often do into their supposedly “comfortable zones” of academic specialization and fields of competency. Granted what we now know, or rather profess to know, about the root causes of Africa’s widespread problems and how such causes could be effectively addressed, those who advise and influence the direction of Africa's recovery in virtually all facets of human life should now shift their focus elsewhere. As a first step, they need to begin investing considerable resources (time, brainpower, labor and capital) in contexts that are far more likely to produce a unifying framework. A framework through which, and from which, the many competing scripts and roadmaps to Africa's recovery that are spelled out in the humanities, social and natural sciences could ultimately be harmonized. This goal, it seems to me, should and must now become one of Africa's top priority agendas. As Donna Maher reminds us in her paper, “Re-visioning Development in a Changing Environment:”

To comprehend the extremely intricate interactions between human societies (which constantly deconstruct and reconstruct themselves) and the evolving ecology that sustains us, we must explore a variety of different and emerging fields of study and research. Our new world requires of us a new perception, and multidisciplinary collaboration is vital to tackling the complex array of issues concerning the ‘environment’ and our relationship with it...Cross-pollination and the sharing of ideas [should be encouraged over the still-reductionist education systems, growing specialization, and the sheer increase of ideas and information that is seldom synthesized.¹

The World Commission on the social dimensions of globalization arrives at a similar conclusion in its report, “A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities For All,” of 2004.² Among other concerns, this report – compiled by eminent scholars drawn from

¹ Maher’s article is available on line at: http://www.acdi.cida.gc.ca/cida_ind.nsf/0/c/d2a4210ae541318526a4c007b14b3?openDocument March 13, 2003.

different parts of the world and working in different areas of expertise – accentuates the importance of actively and consciously promoting “multi-stakeholder dialogues, bringing all relevant actors together to work toward agreement (and authentic consent) on key policy issues.”³

However, as important as this goal may be, in the burgeoning body of literature on Africa there are, to the present day, only a few isolated works that incorporate the plurality of voices and insights gleaned from the many fields and diverse academic disciplines and especially from Africa and African academics. I therefore see this article as a first step in not only bridging this lacuna but also stimulating more focused research in this hitherto unexplored vineyard.

Shunning quick-fix answers and solutions

With respect to the latter concern of steering clear of the stupendous temptation to prescribe half baked answers and solutions to Africa’s otherwise complex, heterogeneous, yet crosscutting challenges, a closer reading of the existing literature,

² The International Labor Organization commissioned this study. The fully report can be accessed on line at: <[Http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/pr/2004/7.htm](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/pr/2004/7.htm)> March 13, 2003

³. Benefits likely to accrue from such an undertaking abound. First, such a move might minimize duplication of research efforts and organizational fragmentation. Second, if judiciously undertaken, it will make the multiplicity of voices expressed in the diverse fields of study and research easily accessible to interested and relevant parties. Third, it may help in breaking down the current impasse which, as the World commission on the social dimension of globalization rightly notes, has regrettably fostered “parallel monologues” and a “dialogue of the deaf” among and between academicians, public agencies and private researchers. Last, and perhaps most important, such a move may provide relevant actors – Africa’s ruling elite and the host of international consultants based in Africa – with a clear sense of purpose when translating the many proposed ideas from diverse fields of study into more integrated and synergistic policies.

especially on Africa's environmental crisis, point to a nearby unanimous consensus. And that is, the view that the panacea whereby to effectively address – or, failing that, to reduce to a minimum – Africa's monumental challenges, including environmental destruction, largely lie in formulating and implementing integrated and synergistic solutions. Such solutions must, however, according to Chinua Achebe, come out of Africa's own roots and also accommodate the priorities, legitimate needs, hopes, dreams and goals of local communities. They must, additionally, neither compromise environmental protection goals nor lose sight of the fact that sub-Saharan Africa is, as any other region in the world, not an island unto itself. Africa is, has always been, and will continue to be, an integral part of the world that is now, for good or for worse, becoming increasingly too small, too overpopulated and that its resources are exceedingly shrinking in direct proportion to the ever increasing power of human destruction.

However, in spite of this knowledge, many students and scholars of Africa – not to mention development partners, senior civil servants and political elites – continue, and quite lamentably, to prescribe quick-fix answers and solutions to Africa's complex, heterogeneous, yet crosscutting problems. In the relatively new field of environmental ethics, which is the focus (or is it the goal?) of this article, spectacular examples include the works of, among other distinguished deans of environmental ethics, J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston III. Their obviously dissimilar environmental recovery roadmaps, clearly elucidated in their respective articles "African Biocommunitarianism" and "Feeding People Versus Saving Nature," gravitate toward prescribing quick-fix answers and solutions to the myriad of challenges facing Africa and Africans. See chapters one and two for more details on these two articles.

Structure and outline

Using these two articles and the responses they have thus far generated as my entry point into the on-going environmental recovery debates, I defend my already laid out thesis in three broad parts.⁴ Part one, examining how Callicott and Rolston frame their discourse on Africa's environmental predicaments and how they then proceed to determine what would be pivotal to ameliorating the run away environmental crisis, is divided into two chapters. These two chapters demonstrate how, contrary to Callicott's and Roston's suggestions in the aforementioned articles (which I will explain shortly), the melioration of Africa's monumental environmental crisis will require much more than merely seeking to realign Africa's environmental recovery discourse to (a) the parameters of the anthropocentric versus nonanthropocentric debates and (b) organic views in which humans and nature are connected. This is how I proceed.

Chapter one, "Callicott's African Biocommunitarianism Revisited," critically examines Callicott's take on African traditional religious worldviews and intellectual traditions in two moves. In the first move, I provide a recapitulation of Callicott's argument, which simply stated goes as follows: Since traditional African religious worldviews and intellectual traditions tend to promote a homosapiensphilia outlook, they cannot then provide conceptual resources from which to reconstruct a non-human, nature-

⁴ I have selected these two articles as my ideal case studies for two reasons. First, generating as it were long drawn out debates in Western environmental circles, Callicott's and Rolston's articles provide an excellent point of entry into the on-going debate in environmental ethics while also calling for renewed reflection. Second, while these two article have had a wide coverage in the existing literature on environmental ethics in the West, not one of them, at least to my knowledge, has captured the attention of environmental students and scholars in Africa. Hence, I consider my take on both and the discussions that each has generated thus far as a preface to the extension of this debate beyond Western environmental circles.

centered, ethic.⁵ Precisely for this reason, Callicott therefore counsels that Africa's environmental recovery initiatives ought to be necessarily realigned within the context of Aldo Leopold's land ethic.

In the second move, challenging Callicott's position that African traditional religious worldviews and intellectual traditions could not in their current form provide the raw materials from which a nonanthropocentric, nature-centered, ethic might proliferate, I focus my attention on at least four neglected aspects in his narrative. These are Africa's indigenous land ethic; diverse relationships that humans in traditional African settings had with each other, with one another, and with the physical part/s of the natural world; traditional Africa's subsistence practices and, finally; the rainbow of kinship networks of solidarity in traditional African settings.

My intension in zooming in on these four aspects, which are conspicuously missing in Callicott's narrative, is not as it would seem to appear to eulogize Africa's past heritage. To the contrary, I hope to show how despite Callicott's laudable efforts of attempting to open up the Western environmental discourses to non-Western intellectual traditions, including those from Africa, his treatment of traditional African religious worldviews and intellectual traditions is narrow in its discursive scope. It does not grapple with the mosaic of environmentally supportive systems, resources and practices (which I will shortly examine) gleaned from traditional African settings. It also fails to accommodate the priorities, dreams and goals of the growing pool of formally educated Africans who, as it were, show ambivalence toward their respective ancestral traditions and cultural heritage. In the company of their Western compatriots, for example, the

⁵ I define homosapiensphilia as an affectionate concern for human welfare, for human concerns and interests

majority of Africa's formally educated class tends to passionately defend their respective ancestral traditions. But in the company of the not formally educated rural kinfolks, who still cherish their respective ancestral values and traditions, they never hesitate to remind them why they should and must abandon many of their traditional ways of life, values and belief systems in favor of modern (read Western) ideals and modes of living.

Chapter two, "Holmes Rolston: Feeding People versus Saving Nature"

concentrates on a more immediate dilemma especially facing affluent nations, but whose resultant ramifications are mostly felt in Third World countries – including Africa, that Holmes Rolston attempted, albeit unconvincingly, to settle in his widely reprinted and discussed article: "Feeding People Versus Saving Nature." Here, I first provide a summary of how Rolston frames his argument in favor of, first, protecting the little remaining wild nature before feeding the hungry, malnourished populations who are disproportionately found in Third World countries. I then delineate and discuss some of the reasons why I am persuaded that Holmes Rolston's position, in this particular article, borders on the sphere of social irrelevance or malice. Vindicating, as it certainly does, early European conservation mentality of protecting the non-human part/s of the physical world "to the relative and sometimes absolute neglect of legitimate human needs," as Ramachandra Gupta points out, Rolston's position, if adopted in Third world countries, could further drive the poorer and struggling segments of society between a rock and hard place. It also cannot conceivably enlist the vast majority of Africa's poor into supporting environmental protection and remedial goals. More substantially, failing as it does to sufficiently grapple with: (a) Africa's development challenges and dilemmas; (b) the many survival needs and other legitimate concerns of that the poor and struggling

segments of population; (c) the major players and actors who perpetuate the many challenges facing Africa and its people, Rolston's recommendation will be of little value to Africa. What's more, his suggestion that environmental protection goals ought to come first before feeding the vast hungry, malnourished, segments of population is unmistakably at variance with the increasingly spreading mantra of developing more equitable, culturally sustainable and environmentally supportive livelihoods.

Part two, "illuminating the folly of addressing Africa's environmental crisis in isolation from the many other pressing challenges facing Africa and its people," clearly brings to light how both Rolston's and Callicott's dissimilar roadmaps to Africa's environmental recovery (in their aforementioned articles) speak to a miniscule component of Africa's environmental predicament. Two chapters suffice to vindicate this assertion.

Chapter three, "A Catalog of Africa's Problems," draw attention to how the accelerating environmental crisis in Africa cannot be decoupled from the systematic breakdown of encompassing systems of morality, rapidly collapsing economies, recurrent depressing cycles of political paralysis and widespread corruption to mention a few. To respond more effectively to the run-away environmental crisis in Africa, I here then argue, those who advise and influence Africa's roadmap to environmental recovery should and must abandon the mentality of compartmentalizing what could be said to be political, economic, moral, environmental, et cetera. All these spheres do intersect in more ways than we are often prepared to admit or know how to work with.

In fact, chapter four, "Prominently Identified Root Causes of Africa's Predicaments," supports this assertion – the folly of treating the environmental crisis as if

it were isolated from the many other pressing challenges facing Africa and its people. In this chapter, I mainly demonstrate the extent and degree to which Africa's crises, including environmental degradation are, while historically constituted by different forces and for different reasons, largely exacerbated by the ruling elites (Africans and non-Africans alike). To confirm this claim, I specifically turn the spotlight onto:

- (a) The persistent crisis of self/cultural identity in Africa
- (b) The rapacious plunder of Africa's wealth and resources by European colonialists, Africa's ruling elites and their cohorts, and multinational corporations and industrialized nations
- (c) Failures of development interventions
- (d) Africa's marginal integration in the global economy, and, finally
- (e) Africa's burgeoning population growth rates and its impact on the physical environment.

Two conclusions strongly emerge from this chapter. First is the undeniable fact that the environmental crisis in Africa cannot be resolved only by appropriating insights emanating from either the anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric approaches or both. Second, it is clear that, while other forces have in fact compounded Africa's problems, the ruling elites (Africans and non-African alike) are the major players in perpetuating the vast challenges facing Africa – including the raging environmental crisis.

Part three, “In Search of African Solutions,” further explores how the ruling elites are the major players in perpetuating Africa's widespread crises. It is divided into three sections. Section one investigates a little more critically the proposal that is increasingly gaining currency in Africa. This is the claim that solutions to Africa's problems lie not in

emulating alien and alienating Western systems and models but rather in the active recovery and utilization (where necessary) of Africa's previously immobilized cultural sensibilities, resource management skills, practices, moral values and knowledge systems. Section two concentrates on the suggestion that what in fact Africa and Africans mostly require, in order to successfully restore rapidly eroding human-to-human and human-to-nature relationships, is investing substantial resources (time, brainpower, capital and et cetera) in building a foundation for a new moral republic. The third and final section focus on the claim that inducing sweeping (not cosmetic) reforms in Africa's existing institutions of governance, law regimes, policies and leadership is what ultimately will get Africa going in the right direction. Clearly, in these three sections, the targeted audience is not the rural "uneducated" folks. It is Africa's formally educated class, and especially ruling elites who decide and influence the direction and path of Africa's regeneration in all facets of human life.

Concluding this study, I not only reiterate the main argument/s arising from the preceding chapters but also identify areas that require further investigation.

Chapter One: Callicott's African Biocommunitarianism Revisited

1. A curious paradox

Callicott begins chapter eight, “African Biocommunitarianism and Australian Dreamtime,” of his book by first highlighting at least two paradoxical views that are especially expressed in the West about Africa.⁶ “The mere mention of Africa,” Callicott points out, “conjures up in the mind’s eye a charismatic mega-fauna.”⁷ For many people in the West, Africa is, among other racially loaded stereotypes, a wild jungle teeming with an infinite number and incredible variety of both fauna and flora. Theodore Roosevelt offers perhaps a more standard Western dreamscape picture of Africa as a place that is mostly inhabited by awe-inspiring and frightening marauding wild beasts. In his book, *African Game Trails* (1910), he notes, for example:

The land holds the fiercest of ravin and the fleetest and most timid of those beings that live in undying fear of talon and fang. It holds the largest and the smallest of hoofed animals. It holds the mightiest creatures that tread the earth and swim in its rivers; it also holds distant kinsfolk of these same creatures, no bigger than woodchucks, which dwell in crannies of the rocks and in the treetops. There are antelope smaller than hares, and antelope larger than oxen. There are creatures, which are the embodiments of grace and others whose huge ungainliness is like that of a shape in a nightmare. The plains are alive with droves of strange and beautiful animals whose like is not known elsewhere and with others even stranger that show both in form and temper something of the

⁶ J. Baird Callicott. *Earth Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994: 156-184.

⁷ 2 Ibid. p.156

fantastic and grotesque. It is a never-ending pleasure to gaze at the great herds of buck as they move to and fro in their myriads; as they stand for their noon-tide rest in the quivering heat haze; as the long files come down to drink at the watering places; as they feed and fight and rest and make love... The wanderer sees the awful glory of sunrise and sunset in the wide waste spaces of the earth, unworn of man, changed only by the slow change of the ages through time everlasting.⁸

Concurrent with this view of Africa, in which human beings are remotely (if hardly ever) mentioned, Callicott points out, is the mind-boggling assumption in Western environmental circles that “traditional African cultures – unlike Zen Buddhism, Taoism and American Indian thought – evoke no thoughts of a nonanthropocentric, nature-centered, ethics.”⁹ In the West, many environmental ethicists are in fact largely persuaded that “African thoughts and practices orbit seemingly around human interests and concerns.”¹⁰ Precisely for this reason, Callicott conjectures, “the popular new environmental movement and scholars in the newer field of comparative environmental ethics have simple neglected indigenous Africa’s intellectual traditions when casting about for conceptual resources from which to reconstruct an exotic (whatever this means) eco-philosophy.”¹¹

1. 1. Gesture politics

This combination of circumstances, Callicott regrets, is at once paradoxical and

⁸ Cited in John Murray. ed. *Wild Africa: Three Centuries of Nature Writing From Africa*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁹ J. Baird Callicott. *Op.cit.* p. 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.158.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 156.

discomforting.¹² As he quips: “how could African peoples be blessed with such a wonderful complement of fellow voyagers in the odyssey of evolution and yet failed to have mirrored in their respective worldviews an explicitly articulated nonanthropocentric, nature-centered, ethic?”¹³

Up to this point, Callicott is obviously skeptical about the reasons that are invoked by Western environmental ethicists to justify the exclusion of Africa’s indigenous intellectual traditions when prospecting for raw materials from which to reconstruct a nonanthropocentric ethic. His skepticism notwithstanding, Callicott opts – and quite understandably – to hold his judgment in abeyance with regard to whether Western environmental ethicists are justified or not in shunning Africa’s indigenous intellectual traditions until he has familiarized himself with the relevant literature that would speak to his research agenda.¹⁴

1. 2. African traditional religions

To this end, Callicott first turns his focus on the religious worldviews of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, the San of South-central Africa, and the Lele of Congo. Focusing on these three ethnic groups in particular, and by extension other African communities, Callicott hopes to investigate whether or not their religious worldviews harbor the seeds from which a nonanthropocentric ethic might proliferate. However, upon evaluating what seem, at least to me, arbitrarily selected and tangential ethnographic accounts especially concerning the Yoruba’s religious worldview Callicott concludes with an air of finality:

¹² Ibid. p. 156.

¹³ Ibid.p.156.

¹⁴ Interestingly, the predominant culture of orality in Africa does not capture Callicott’s attention

Indigenous African religions tend to be both monotheistic and anthropocentric. Most posit the existence of a high God, both literally and figuratively speaking who created the world... Most hold that the world was created with all its creatures for the sake of humanity ... Reinforcing anthropocentrism is ancestor worship – the belief nearly ubiquitous in Africa that the spirits of dead relatives haunt the living and must be ritually honored, served and propitiated.¹⁵

This view, as I will shortly explain, is one of the many interpretations of African religious worldviews. It is, nevertheless, not a particularly enlightened view. For persons like Callicott, whose knowledge of Africa's cultures is chiefly (if not exclusively) inferred from written sources, indigenous African religions will of course appear to promote a human-centered ethic. But for persons like this author, who have had access not only to written works on Africa but also firsthand knowledge of the mosaic of Africa's oral traditions, Callicott's assertion (above) would at best seem preposterous. Contrary to his claim, and my argument on this issue will become clearer as this chapter unfolds, in traditional African settings indigenous religions are inseparably intertwined with virtually all aspects of life. As Ambrose Moyo notes: in traditional African settings, "religion permeates all aspects of society. It is a way of life. In fact, it is identical with life itself."¹⁶ Not only does religion invest all facets of life with meaning and significance but it also ensures that specific non-human species and natural entities are bestowed with a sacred mystique and, as a result, protected through supernatural and other kinds of sanctions. This being the case, it would seem plausible to argue that in traditional African settings

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 157.

¹⁶ Yale Richmond and Phyllis Gestrin. *Into Africa: Intercultural Insights*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc, 1998:30.