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Ubuntu is Not Only about the Human! An Analysis of the Role of African Philosophy and Ethics in Environment Management

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ABSTRACT A Marxist discourse on metabolic rift is used to examine the alienation of Africans from their environment and religious connections by capitalism and urbanisation. The paper emphasises the understanding of *Ubuntu* as an intimate relationship between humans and the natural environment. Indeed, the epitomisation of *Ubuntu* centres on the consolidation of the human, natural and spiritual tripartite. The paper shows that such a tripartite relationship allows Africans to transpose their *Ubuntuness* (humanness) and moral obligations not only to their fellow human beings, but also to the surrounding natural environment, including wildlife. Despite the usefulness of *Ubuntu* in the conservation of natural environments, the paper questions its effectiveness particularly in a capitalist and urbanised society where Africans are continually alienated from the natural environment.

INTRODUCTION

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is generally construed within a framework of humane relations, where one's being is tied to that of another. *Ubuntu* is commonly understood to mean that the humanity of an individual is only complete if it re-affirms that of others (Ramose 2002). In recognising the humanness of others, an individual activates a sense of collective personhood that imbues ethos of respect, tolerance, sharing, empathy and love for a fellow human being (Broodryk 2005). However, this paper argues that this common confinement of *Ubuntu* to human relations is problematic, since it negates the intimate relationship that the African humanity has with the natural and wildlife environment. It is perhaps important to mention that the very essence of *Ubuntu* hinges on consolidating the human, natural and spiritual tripartite (Museka et al. 2012). This tripartite that forms the foundational base of *Ubuntu* has been crucial in the preservation and conservation of the environmental. The conservation of the environment in African societies rests upon a deliberate and conscious dove-tailing of cultural and social identities with the natural and wildlife environment. This paper shows that the transference of *Ubuntu* into environmental management practices and ethics has depended on the adoption of indigenous knowledge systems. It goes on to argue that environmental conservation in traditional societies of Africa has been effectively achieved through the epitomes of *Ubuntu* such as taboos, totems, clan names, folklore and proverbs.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is in three parts. Firstly, it interrogates the philosophical underpinnings of community based natural resource management within the context of *Ubuntu.* In this section, an analysis of the modes of African ethics used to conserve the environment is conducted. Secondly, the paper questions the intimate relationship of African humanness and that of the environment, particularly how it has been deliberately left to collapse from the time of the colonisation of African ecologies by European powers. This section is guided by the works of Plumwood (2003) who argues that human-environment pact has been separated by extended periods of colonialism and subjugation of African ecologies through processes of anthropocentrism. Lastly, the paper utilises a Marxist discourse on metabolic rift to examine how capitalism and urbanisation continues to alienate Africans from their environment and devaluing the religious connection they have with nature. The following section presents the results and discussion of the paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ubuntu Not Only a Human Affair

When the great novelist Chinua Achebe died in March of 2013, his death was likened to that of a fallen *iroko* tree. This association of the writer and the *iroko* tree seem to mirror an interconnectedness of African life and existence with

nature. Conversely, the writings of Chinua Achebe immensely contributed his humanness to his fellow Africans and his literature. He was able to forge strong human relations among his countrymen. Interestingly, he did not only lend his existence or being only to his human counterparts but also to the environment and wildlife that surrounded him. In his *magnum opus*, 'Things Fall Apart' there is a passage where the character Okonkwo likens his humanness of humility and hard work to that of a "…lizard that jumped from the high *iroko* tree to the ground" (Achebe 1995) and fended itself.

By characterising Okonkwo as a lizard, Achebe reveals how African ontology is informed by the natural wildlife and the environment. Similarly, in his captivating "I am an African" speech delivered in May of 1996, Thabo Mbeki attributes his being, 'Africanness' and existence to the natural environment (Mbeki 2015). In this soul searching speech, he recites, "I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land".

He further considers his existence and nationhood as equal to that of wildlife that populates his native land. This is captured in these candid words: "At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito" (Mbeki 2015). Mawere adds on Mbeki's argument, reiterating that the pre-colonial methods of conserving the environment were based on the religious belief that humans and the environment are an inseparable entity (Mawere 2012). These assertions find their roots in the writings of John Mbiti who argues that the natural environment (plants, animals and rivers) forms an important element of African religious ontology and identity (Mbiti 1969). Mbiti provides practical insights of how the humanity and existence of Africans is intertwined with that of plants, animals and rivers. For instance, he gives an example of the *Akamba* and the *Zulu* people that hold that cattle, sheep, goats and men come from the same spot and are equal before the Supreme Being. While the Herero people of Namibia regard cattle as sacred and originating from the same 'tree of life' as men.

The *Dinka* people of Southern Sudan consider their cattle as gifts from God not different from children. They pray to God for the protection of the cattle in a similar way they pray for their children (Mbiti 1969). This humane interrelationship does not only extend to domestic animals, but also to wild animals. Mbiti (1969) further gives the example of how African religion regards the African python as an immortal and sacred snake that should not be killed. In some African cultures, snakes are believed to embody the "…human spirits and (are not killed) but given food and drinks when they visit people's homes" (Mbiti 1969). The exchange of spirits between Africans and animals is well-documented in Shoko's study of the *Karanga* people of Zimbabwe (Shoko 2007). He mentions that in the Karanga religion, a person can be possessed by *Shavi regudo* (the spirit of a baboon). The host of the *Shavi regudo* imitate the behaviour of a baboon. According to Shoko, such a person "assumes the animal's behaviour of eating raw maize, overturning stones presumably in search of scorpions" (Shoko 2007: 40).

By possessing the spirit of a baboon, the *Karanga* people argue that a human being becomes analogous to the baboon. It is not surprising that sometimes the Karanga people give the baboon the same amount of respect they would convey to human beings. Baboons are also considered by the Karanga people as sacred animals which must not be killed. Animals appear to play a pivotal role in African religions particularly when communicating with the dead (Galaty 2014). In the *Zulu* culture for instance, *inkomo yamadlozi* (ancestral/spiritual cow) is used to communicate with the spirits of the dead when conducting the socio-cultural ceremony of *ukuthethelela* (appeasing of ancestral spirits). In this ceremony the spiritual cow is elevated to the level of a human being and it is entrusted with the duty of relaying messages from the living to the dead (De-Heusch 1985). The transference of spirituality between humans and animals speaks to the notions of *Ubuntu*, where the wholeness of an African can only be complete when the human-spiritual-nature tripartite is achieved.

For Mawere, these religious beliefs ensure that humans co-exist and co-relate with the environment and animals in a respectful and not exploitative manner (Mawere 2012). The same religious co-existence humans have with animals

is also seen in the way their spirituality is exercised through plants, mountains, hills and water bodies. In the case of Zimbabwe, the *muchakata* tree (*Parinari mobola Oliv*) is not only a source of nutritious fruits, but is used as an assembling point when performing *Shona* religious rituals. Tampering with the muchakata tree is shunned upon and sanctioned by the Shona society (Shoko 2007). Similarly, in Tanzania the fig tree is generally regarded as a spiritual and sacred tree that is used as a meeting place when resolving conflicts in the community. The fig tree then stands to symbolise forgiveness, tolerance and understanding among community members. Local Tanzanians are thus discouraged from cutting it down (Wilson and Wilson 2013). In rural Cameroon, the same fig tree is commonly used as a site of family worship and a haven to shelter gods that protect the local people from harm. Therefore, felling of the fig tree goes against indigenous religious beliefs and is highly forbidden.

Water bodies such as pools, waterfalls and rivers also contribute to the existentiality of African spiritualism. There is a general consensus in African cultures that spirits dwell in some parts of rivers and sacred pools. As such these areas have had less human interference. For instance, the Shona people hold that some rivers are inhabited by a spiritual creature called *Njuzu* (mermaid) which captures a person that draws near its inhabitant. However, Shoko states that the *Njuzu* grants its captive healing powers that may enrich the spiritual life of the community. The fear and respect of the *Njuzu* spirit by the Shona people is supposedly transposed to the rivers and this prevents them from fishing and doing laundries at these rivers (Shoko 2007). Consequently, this leads to the conservation of fisheries and mitigates pollution of the water bodies. The commitment of African people towards environment conservation and wildlife preservation is further inculcated in the core being of an African and indigenous knowledge system which is transmitted through taboos, proverbs, clan names and folklore.

The 'Ethos' of African Conservation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

African indigenous knowledge systems have been critical in rationalising environmental conservation as part of Africans' collective identity and morality. To achieve this end, they conveniently utilise cultural beliefs and norms embedded in taboos, totems and proverbs to promote human tolerance towards plants, animals, mountains and rivers. While Western philosophies on environmental conservation such as that of Kant, promotes an individualistic moral obligation to conserve non-humans, African philosophy encourages a collective sense of responsibility to conservation. Indeed, the practice of meshing animal identities with that of clan names which creates a sense of human/animal similitudes encourages a communal commitment to conservation of animals (Galaty 2014). It is perhaps necessary for this paper to provide specific examples of how clan names in Zimbabwe are used to avert the depopulation of wildlife.

Clan Names

In the African context, clan names sometimes referred to as totems represent the history and origins of a clan (Shoko 2007). In most instances, the clan name can be used to indicate the ethnicity to which one belongs, thus it informs one's identity (Lindgren 2004). Clan names play an essential role in African religion, as they are used to conjure and communicate with the spirits of the dead during rituals (Opland 1998). In many parts of Zimbabwe, the name of a clan is derived from the identities and mannerisms of wild animals. This sharing of clan names with animals stimulates a sense of affinity between the people and wild animals, such that the personal and social identities of individuals become signified by a certain type of an animal (Galaty 2014). It is common among the Shona ethnic group of Zimbabwe to name their clans after animals. Shoko mentions some of the clan names which are; *Mhofu* (Eland), *Samanyanga* (Elephant), *Simboti* (Leopard) *Shumba* (Lion), *Dube* (Zebra), *Hungwe* (African fish eagle), *Hove* (Fish), *Soko* (Monkey) and so on (Shoko 2007). The Shona custom follows that it is the collective duty of the clan bearing the name of the animal to keep that animal from harm and extinction. The Shona people like many other African ethnic groups construe the harming or disappearing of the animal as having a similar effect to their clan name (Macgonagle 2007). If the animal is edible, the clan that carries the name of such an animal are forbidden to consume it. The Shona people believe that consuming one's to-

tem may result in loss of teeth, and may also invite bad luck (MacGonagle 2007). The identification of clans and totems through wild animals allow humans to convey some degree of respect to the animals. This respect of animals results in wildlife conservation. The naming of clans or totems after animals permits humans to transmit their humanness and personhood to animals, while the animals bring the identity of the African into being (Galaty 2014).

Proverbs

The African humanity is as old as its proverbs and folktales. Proverbs are a necessary form of indigenous knowledge for addressing some of the moral and ethical challenges facing modern African societies. As such, they occupy an important space in finding possible solutions to reducing environmental degradation since they provide a platform for problem solving, raising awareness and moral guidance in an entertaining and invigorating manner (Malunga 2011). There are a number of Ndebele and Shona proverbs that speak directly to environmental ethics and conservation. The Ndebele proverb *"ihloka liyakhohlwa kodwa isihlahla asikhohlwa"* (an axe forgets but the tree doesn't forget), although used to discourage ill-treatment of a fellow human being by another, it reveals the empathy the Ndebele people have towards trees. This proverb also resonates with the Zulu proverb *"isihlahla asinyelelwa"* (a tree is not defecated upon). While, the proverb in question is used to encourage people to be contented what they have, it also calls for the same people to show dignity and respect for trees.

Furthermore, the Ndebele proverb *"inkomo kayisengwa ngokwehlisa"* (Do not continuously milk a cow until there is nothing to milk) is used in a context where one shuns exploitative and selfish behaviours that put fellow human beings at a disadvantage. For Ndlovu and Ncube, the afore-mentioned proverb shows how the Ndebele people despise an individual that …milks a cow until it runs dry, forgetting that a calf survive on the same milk" (Ndlovu and Ncube 2014). The compassion that is given to both the cow and the calf leads to the realisation that *Ubuntu* is not only extended to humans but further to animals.

The Shona people also have proverbs that raise awareness on the depletion of environmental resources. The proverb *"aiva madziva ava mazambuko"* (what used to be pools are now crossings) goes a long way in sensitising people about disappearing water bodies in a planet where climate is constantly changing. This proverb challenges the misconceptions created by modern knowledge systems that local communities are not aware and care less about the depletion of environmental resources. It further reveals that Africans have an intimate relationship with the environment and observe its changes.

Taboos

The term taboo is derived from the Polynesians' culture and concept of *tapu*, which means ban or prohibit (Colding and Folke 2001). The concise Oxford Dictionary defines a taboo as a "social or religious custom placing prohibition or restriction on a particular thing or person (South African Oxford Concise Dictionary). Colding and Folke (2001) identify six typologies of taboos, each serving a specific conservation purpose, these include; *Segment taboos* (they regulate resource withdrawal), *Temporal taboos* (they regulate access to resource in time*), Method taboos* (regulate method of resource withdrawal), *Life history taboos* (regulate withdrawal of vulnerable life history stages of species), *Specific-species taboos* (total protection to species in time and space) and *Habitat taboos* (restrict access and use of resources in time and space).

Segment taboos are vital in environmental conservation as they prohibit the utilisation and consumption of specific species for a certain period of time by persons belonging to a particular sex, gender, and age (Bobo et al. 2014). These types of taboos are commonly encoded to cultural norms and social values prevailing in specific ethnic groups. For instance, the *Aka Pygmies* of Central Africa Republic disallow married couples and pregnant women to consume mushrooms, while children are forbidden from eating the white-bellied duiker (Colding and Folke 2001). Similarly, inhabitants of the Fianarantsoa rain forests in Madagascar proscribe pregnant women from eating cray fish and fresh water crabs as it is believed that the consumption of these aquatic species leads to miscarriage (Jones et al. 2008). The temporal taboos permit humans to have access to natural resources at specific pe-

riods, days, months or weeks. In most rural communities of Zimbabwe, there is a specific day to which hunting, fishing and collecting of firewood or wild plants is restricted.

The method taboo on one hand restricts people from using certain hunting, fishing or farming methods that may lead to a rapid depletion of natural life. An example of a method taboo is the ban of drawing fish nets by the fishing communities of *Tema* and *Tesie* living at the Sakumo lagoon in Ghana (Ntiamoa-Baidu 1991). The abovementioned taboos help in reducing hunting and harvesting pressures on plants and wildlife.

On the contrary, life history and specific-species taboos place a restriction on the use or hunting of species that are in a certain vulnerable stage of life history based on age, sex and reproductive status. For example, the prohibiting of hunting down pregnant and lactating animals or that of young animals is highly upheld in the *Zulu* culture (Lippe-Biestefeld et al. 2007). Lastly, the habitant taboos are often placed on sacred rivers, pools, forests and mountains in which access to these natural environments by the ordinary community members is barred. The aforementioned taboos are a vital conservation component as they function to ensure a "stock recruitment of species… maintenance of biodiversity and ecological services" (Colding and Folke 2001).

This paper however observes that with the advent of colonialisation and the intensification of globalisation under the neo-liberal project, the intimate relationship Africans had with nature was seriously threatened. Adams and Mulligan (2003) argue that the capitalist and mercantile society of Europe thrived by systematically alienating colonial subjects from their natural environment. The next section examines how colonialism and later, imperialistic forces of globalisation deliberately disjointed the human-nature pact that informed traditional approaches to environmental conservation.

The next section attempts to unpack how colonialism extracted the African humanity *'Ubuntu'* from the environment through anthropocentric processes that denied the commonalities between Africans' existentiality and nature (Murombedzi 2003). The section further examines how the 'commodification' of nature through game reserves and parks and the exclusion of Africans from nature and wild life impacted on the way Africans are ecologically represented.

Colonialism and the Extraction of Ubuntu from Nature

The subjugation of Africans and their nature by European powers depended on the anthropocentric rationality which viewed humans as being separate from nature (Plumwood 2003). Borrowing its ideas from the discourses of 'Enlightment' and 'civilisation', anthropocentrism challenges the African philosophy that views humans and nature as a singular unit. In contrast, it contends that humans and nature are separate and dual entities. Anthropocentrism mandates human beings as "primary and central in the order of things" and this includes dominion over nature (Steiner 2005). While the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* attests to humans and nature as equals, colonial ideology and reasoning suggested that in order for societies to achieve civilisation and modernity the uncoupling of humanity from nature was necessary (Murphy 1994).

This colonial discourse complemented the rationality of anthropocentric to put humans as the sole valuer of nature. On the other hand, nature was relegated to mean nothing more than just a resource to be utilised for human advancement (Plumwood 2003). For Evernden (1985), anthropocentrism creates a culture of 'resourcism' where the intimate and tolerant relationship humans once had with nature is re-ordered and transformed into an exploitative one. He sees capitalism as the driver of the drift of human and environmental bonded existence, as it treats the environment as a utility that can be converted into capital and profits. It is important to note, how the Western philosophy's ideation of nature as a means to an end differs from that of African philosophy which depicts it as an end in itself. These diverging views of the two philosophies in understanding nature impact on how Europeans and Africans relate with the environment.

The Western concepts of ecological ethics moralise human beings to be elevated to the status of 'lords of nature' licencing them to exercise their "'lordship' over animals and other created things" (Steiner 2005:1). Evernden (1985), is concerned with how such a moralisation of humans as superordinates of nature gives them the impetus to exploit it. This exploitation is further accentuated by the rationality that nature, particularly animals are inferior when compared

to humans (Plumwood 2003). Rowe (2002) warns on the eroding effect anthropocentrism has on the human's empathy towards animal and plant life. He regards the practice of anthropocentrism through capitalist culmination of what he calls 'homocentrism. This is the adoption of homocentric approaches to nature by colonialists pre-emptied humans' respect and compassion for nature, upsetting the equal relationship Africans had with the environment.

The burning questions this paper seeks to answer are "How did colonialism succeed in removing the element of *Ubuntu* from African ecology"? "Why is it that the current understanding of *Ubuntu* negates the tranquil relationship humans ought to be having with nature"? To tackle these questions, it is crucial for this paper to shed light on how racial supremacy instituted by Europeans interacted with colonialism, capitalism and the alienation of African from nature. According to Plumwood, colonialism and institutionalised racism managed to alienate Africans from their natural environment through distinct but six mutual anthropocentric ecological strategies (Plumwood 2003). He identifies the six strategies as follows; *Radical exclusion, Homogenisation or Stereotyping, Polarisation, Denial Backgrounding, Assimilation and Instrumentalism*. The paper briefly looks at how these anthropocentric strategies contributed to suppressing the extension of *Ubuntu* to the environment and wildlife.

Devaluing the African, Civilising the Savage

The 'radical exclusion' of the African from nature epitomised the highest stage and manifestation of the colonisation and racialisation of ecology. Radical exclusion rationalised humans as "empathically separate from nature and animals" (Plumwood 2003: 51-78). Consequently, nature and animals were treated as being inferior, dead and lacking agency, thus requiring intervention and control from humans [colonialists] (Steiner 2005). Radical exclusion strategies worked together with those of 'homogenisation/ stereotyping' to extend the negative characterisation of nature and animals to Africans whose being and social identity was intertwined with that of nature and the wild animals.

Indeed, colonialism exaggeratedly re-constructed the social identities and activities of Africans that were closely inclined to the natural environment and animals to create images of savagery. To achieve this, the economic and social activities of Africans that were intimately linked to nature and animals such as hunting and gathering, farming and herding of cattle were represented as being 'backward', 'primitive' and 'unhygienic' (Burke 1996). On one hand, the colonialists [Europeans] assumed the role of a civiliser tasked with the duty of enlightening and assisting the savage [African] to transcend from a supposedly primitive life to a modernised and civilised one. Accordingly, Said (1978) notes that through a process of 'orientalism', the Western world [White race] presents itself as a superior, rational and mature homogeneous group, leading to the discounting of the ingenuity and cultural standing of other racial groups. A good case of operative 'orientalism' is well captured in Macmillan's (1929) poem where he recites, "Bantu people are unchanging; they are as they used to elementary, of small brain capacity…All their buildings have been hutments, all their towns but kraals and camps" (Ranger 2010: 36).

Devaluing of both the African and his ecology thus created a room for intervention from the coloniser. It further allowed the coloniser to construct the presence of Africans in the natural environment as problematic. To effectively separate humans from nature and ensure that nature remains pure, European powers utilised the anthropocentric rationality of 'polarisation'. In this rationality "nature is only nature if it is 'pure', uncontaminated by human influence, as untouched 'wilderness' (Murombedzi 2003). To break the intimate bond Africans had with the environment; colonial conservation methods such as fenced game parks were introduced. The fencing of the natural wild inhabitant signalled the advent of commodifying wild life and restricting direct access of African hunters to wild animals. The introduction of game reserves as a method of keeping humans and nature apart also affected the way Africa hunters were represented in the ecological space they used to occupy. MacKenzie notes that the appropriation of nature through conservation game reserves systematically transformed hunters into poachers, trespassers and criminals (Mackenzie 1988). Drinkwater (1991) echoes a similar argument stating that the colonial administration of Zimbabwe was bent at discrediting and criminalising the farming methods of the local Shona people. He writes that the colonial government per-

ceived "Shona production methods as not only inefficient, but also damaging to the environment, and therefore entitled to be considered criminal".

The criminalisation of African hunters seems to relate to the anthropocentric rationality of denial and backgrounding identified by Plumwood (2003). The rationality of denial and backgrounding sought not only to separate Africans from nature but to pose them as inessential and a 'danger' to the environment and wild life. This misrepresentation served the purpose of reinforcing a 'false reality' that Western conservation systems were superior to that of the colonised. It went as far as providing a space for the construction of White Europeans as 'good caretakers' and less- exploitative custodians of the environment. Emeagwali and Sefa-Dei argue that Eurocentric constructions of African livelihoods and moral understanding of nature as primitive, static, culture-based and harmful to nature functioned as a ploy to privilege European identity (Emeagwali and Sefa-Dei 2014). The anthropocentric method of denial and backgrounding interacted with rationalities of 'radical exclusion' and 'homogenisation /stereotyping' to form an ecological hierarchy which placed whites at the top and the savages [Africans, animals] at the bottom.

The racialisation of ecology was achieved by establishing a hegemonic relationship between the ruler and the ruled. To deny and discredit indigenous knowledge systems, the scientific knowledge held by the Westerners was institutionalised as the only reliable and objective form of interpreting the relationship between humans and nature. Organisational bodies of scientific knowledge such as international development agencies and non-governmental organisation (NGOs) were ever important in the standardisation of modernist knowledge systems and ecological ethics and subjugation of indigenous environmental practices (Shivji 2007). To this effect, present day international agencies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate (UNFCC) still serve as mediums for emitting discourses of 'managerial environmentalism'. Indigenous knowledge systems *(totems/clan names, proverbs, taboos)* that once informed the harmonious and respectful relationship humans had with nature and animals is scantily recognised in current conservation debates and engagements that are normally conducted at international conferences and in the ivory towers.

Consequently, the lack of interest in Afro-based environmental ethics has profound effects of how its bearers are treated or valued. Indeed, important figures in traditional based conservation methods such as 'rainmakers', 'herbalists', 'traditional healers' and 'elders guarding forests' are replaced by the so called experts such as 'marine biologists', 'climatologists', 'botanists' and so on. It is this expert professionalisation of conservation processes that have set man apart from his humanity which in the African context translates to the natural environment and wild life.

It is interesting to note that even some of the greatest pan- Africanists fell victim to this anthropocentric discourse of environmental management which has fostered the alienation of locals from nature. A good case would be that of Julius Nyerere, a pan-Africanist and former President of Tanzania. In his ambitions to bring development and improve the welfare of the ordinary Tanzanian, his government implemented a hegemonic *ujamaa* village project. This ambitious project had grave repercussion on the environment. The *ujamaa* village project was implemented between 1973 and 1976. It involved the massive relocation of the population to newly created villages by the state. The relocations were implemented in a colonial fashion, in which the State gave less consideration to the how local ruralites interacted with their natural environment. Scott (1998) attests that the massive relocations initiated by the *ujamaa* project distanced humans from the environment.

The selected sites for relocation were usually far from natural resources like firewood, water and grazing land. Moreover, the relocations were ideally supported or supplemented by agricultural technical expertise that undoubtedly undermined the knowledge and connection pastoralists and cultivators had with their immediate natural environment. For instance, the *Masaai* ethnic group were sceptical about relocating to newly found villages as they argued that it will disrupt their "patterns of periodic movements that were finely tuned adaptations to an often stingy environment which they knew exceptionally well" (Scott 1998). They further perceived the massive relocations as not only environmentally unsound but threatening their identities of

being a 'people of the cattle' and a 'people of the soil'.

In the Masaai pastoral community, cattle are used as symbols of everyday human interaction and identification. This is noted by Galaty who writes that in the Masaai ethnic group "livestock… are human metonyms that serve as especially convincing metaphors and allegories for society and personal identity" (Galaty 2014:44). He further explains that;

The Maasai reciprocally address another person by an appellation drawn from the type of domestic animal they have exchanged. One person gives the other a particular animal, then waits for the other to "call" him by the appropriate exchange name in the address form: Pa-kiteng—my ox; Paashe— my calf; Pa-ker—my sheep; Pa-kine—my goat; Pa-en-tawuo—my heifer (Galaty 2014:38).

The removal of the indigenous people from their natural space during both the colonial and post-colonial era paved way for their assimilation into a capitalist society. The dispossession of natural resources such as land and cattle, guided the anthropocentric strategy of 'assimilation' and 'instrumentalism', which pre-emptied the identities of Africans aligned to their natural cosmology. As Plumwood (2003) indicates, colonial and modernist rationalisation of conservation denied recognising indigenous people as effective ecological agents who were able to actively manage natural resources. They were thus required to occupy a passive role in the management of biodiversity. The African act of extending *Ubuntu* to nature through clan names, taboos and so on was therefore construed by Europeans as somewhat illogical since in their understanding the nature and animals lacked compassion and agency to reciprocate back. In this context, the human compassion and understanding towards the environment and animals inculcated in indigenous knowledge systems was systematically subsumed and trivialised. On the other end, the dependence of Africans on their natural resources was disrupted by the expansion of capitalist accumulation. It is this expansion and the increasing need for labour that compelled colonialist-cum-capitalists to destabilise the African traditional economy through dispossession of nature and animals from the indigenous people. The dispossession of land and preventing of Africans from accessing their ecology did not only create reserves of labour but destroyed the moral and religious connection they had with the nature.

The Commodification of Nature and the Metabolic Rift

Karl Marx's writings have been misunderstood as only focusing on class struggles existing in a capitalist society. Much interpretation of his work has centred on the antagonistic relations that exist between capital and labour and how the working class will eventually overthrow the exploitative bourgeoisie class. This narrow reading of Marx has grossly overlooked his contribution towards the fields of ecology and environmental ethics. It is worth noting that Marx was one of the earliest philosophers to interrogate the role of materialism in the degradation and exploitation of the environment (Marx 1963). Additionally, he tackled matters on environmental sustainability in his early writings on capitalism. Indeed, in his work entitled *The Poverty of Philosophy* published in 1847, Marx (1963) raised his concern on how the capitalist and market-based agriculture of that time was likely to endanger the environment and the 'chain of human generations'.

Marx traces the root of the ecological crisis to the commodification of both labour and the environment. According to Marx (1976), the advancement of capitalism through labour alienates humans from the natural environment. This alienation disrupts the traditional and indigenous forms of social metabolism and leads to a metabolic rift, since it incapacitates humans from utilising the environment for the purpose of social production (McClintock 2010). Wage labour, becomes an important instrument used by the capitalist system to legitimise the dispossession of indigenous people from the land. Such dispossessions and commodification of communal property trigger a process that Marx identifies as 'primitive accumulation'. Primitive accumulation is the systematic proletarianisation of those dispossessed from land, for instance rural farmers or pastoralists. With no land or animals to base their livelihood on, the ruralites undergo a metabolic rift that forces them to migrate to urban centres and join wage employment. Marx (1976) puts it succinctly, that primitive accumulation is: "the systematic theft of communal property was of great assistance…in 'setting free' the agricultural population as a proletariat for the needs of industry".

Disallowing the practice of subsistence agriculture a mainstay of the African traditional economies and livelihood, ensured the survival of the capitalist system. Its repression became necessary in driving Native Africans into wage labour and also in expanding capitalist agriculture (Van Binsbergen and Gechiere 1985). This paper contends that the metabolic rift that followed primitive accumulation and the commodification of nature disturbed the reciprocal relationship indigenous people had with nature.

For instance, the embracing of wage labour in Zimbabwe after the Land Tenure Act of 1969 resettled black Africans in infertile areas, led to Africans abandoning their *'mwana wevhu'* (child of the soil) identity that had for long informed the existence of the Shona people. The *'ivhu'* (soil or land) soon replaced by the cash economy and capitalist-urban consumerism lost its significance in the formation of identity among the Shona people (Chibvongodze 2013).

In worst case scenario, urbanising Africans consequently shunned traditional livelihoods based on eking the land. This disconnection of Africans from the land and the larger environment particularly in a rapid urbanising society threatened the understanding, tolerance and respect they have for nature. Under such conditions of metabolic drift and alienation of Africans from their natural environment, transferring the practice of *Ubuntu* to the environment is compromised. In conditions that Africans have been distanced from the environment that once formed part of their identity, it is thus not surprising that *Ubuntu* is understood only within the context of human relations, for the intimate relationship with the nature in a capitalist and urbanised society is minimal.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu is generally conceptualised within the context of human relations, yet African Traditional Religion points to the fact that the existence of an African is that which treats nature as equal to human beings. Why then is it difficult to apply *Ubuntu* to human-environment relations? This paper uncovered that the colonisation and racialisation of both human and nature in Africa through anthropocentric strategies of conservation has systematically driven a wedge between the Africans and the environment devaluing their humanness and empathy towards the environment. The paper further interrogated the works of Karl Marx on metabolic rift to interrogate how the processes of wage labour and 'primitive accumulation' interact with nature. The paper argued that capitalism alienates the indigenous people from having an intimate and harmonious relationship with nature since it dispossess them from their land, driving them to urban centres only to be assimilated in wage employment. The separation of people from nature has been responsible for devaluing the religious and spiritual connection Africans have with nature and animals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ubuntu should be reclaimed as an effective environmental conservation tool through indigenous knowledge systems encapsulated in proverbs, African religion, taboo and clan names.

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