

INDIGENOUS AND MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

Although the philosophy of nature is at least as old as the pre-socratics, the natural environment has not been given due attention until recently in the history of philosophy. The main concern of moral, political and social philosophy has been the social environment rather than the natural environment (see Attfield and Belsey, 1994: 1).

The major theories of morality, whether virtue based, utilitarian, contractarian or rights based, have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that things other than human beings have a place in our moral thinking in their own right despite some noteworthy exceptions. The majority of Western philosophers have tried to show that humanity has a central place in the universe.

More recently, however, environmental problems, in both advanced and developing countries have attracted the attention of many philosophers. Environmental philosophers have tried to explain the ethical responsibilities of human beings for the natural environment.

Meanwhile, local systems of land management and indigenous knowledge of the environment have received relatively little systematic attention until recent years, and overall they have been peripheral to modern conservation systems. Currently, however, some

Western and non-Western scholars have tried to show that an implicit environmental ethic has existed in the environmental knowledge of indigenous peoples around the world. Most of the related research has centered on Asia, native American Indians, and Australian Aborigines with little attention being paid to most of Africa. Many writers have assumed that the African “is a man without a past. Black Africa — Africa south of the Sahara desert — is on this view a continent where men by their own efforts have never raised themselves much above the level of beasts” (Davidson, 1970: XIV). Contrary to this claim, the world view of many African societies has included an environmental ethic that can serve as the basis for modern environmental ethics.

The objective of this paper is, therefore, to explore the linkage between indigenous and modern environmental ethics by examining the Oromo environmental ethics as an example. The Oromo constitutes one of the largest ethnic groups in Eastern Africa. They belong to a Cushitic group in East Africa. Other Cushitic speaking groups include Somali, Konso, Afar, Sidama, Kambata, Darassa, Agau, Saho, Beja, Burji, and others. In this paper, I use the terms “indigenous” and “traditional” interchangeably to mean something handed down from generation to generation. Indigenous knowledge is constantly evolving, and involves both old and new ideas and beliefs. The rural people do not slight imported values and

stick solely to their ancestral custom. Instead, they have tried to improve their tradition in line with the new circumstances and thereby adapt foreign values to their way of life. Therefore, indigenous knowledge embodies both internally generated and externally borrowed and adapted knowledge. Indigenous knowledge tells us how people conserve trees, revere wild animals and transmit knowledge from one generation to another generation. Indigenous knowledge is embedded in community practices, culturally based value systems, systems of production and consumption, institutions, relationships and rituals. Indigenous knowledge is the body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and intimate understanding of their environment in a given culture. Indigenous environmental knowledge is based on local resources and time-tested environmental management practices. Accordingly, indigenous knowledge is local, tacit and not easily codifiable, transmitted orally, experiential rather than theoretical, learned through repetition, constantly changing, and shared to a much greater degree than other forms of knowledge (adapted from Ellen and Harris by World Bank, 1998: 2).

Some people might debate whether there is such a thing as indigenous environmental ethics. The evidence at our disposal confirms that indigenous knowledge is not just a static passing on of folk wisdom from one generation to the next. Peasants do not passively follow the course of nature. Many peasants critically and rationally evaluate the commonly accepted opinions and practices of their people and thereby develop their own independent views about society and the natural environment. When they are affected by what is going on in society, they come up with quotable proverbs which

originate from their reflective remarks. There are principles of thought in peasants' knowledge. In Oromo society, people revere trees and some wild animals in a different way from the people of Western countries. It is on this basis that one can talk about indigenous environmental ethics. In fact, it would be unrealistic to argue that indigenous environmental ethics and modern environmental ethics that largely relies on theory have similar status and range of influence. Some comparisons remain possible and instructive.

This paper is limited in its scope. It is not aimed to present details of the Oromo environmental ethic in all fields or of the relationship between indigenous and modern environmental ethics in all respects. It will give some examples that will point to the general principles governing the Oromo people's attitudes towards the environment and discuss the views of major environmental ethicists whilst ignoring the views of many other interesting philosophers, although their views are equally important. It will show that there are some prospects for collaboration and mutual exchange.

The first section discusses what environmental ethicists can learn from indigenous environmental ethics. The second section discusses the significance of environmental ethics for peasants.

What Environmental Ethicists can learn from Indigenous Environmental Ethics

In their search for ancestors, some Western and non-Western ecological thinkers have delved into ancient traditions for a model of a harmonious relationship with mother Earth. They aimed to derive conceptual resources for the new environmental ethics (Marshall, 1995:4; see also Callicott, 1982: 293 and 318). According to Callicott,

“Eastern philosophy has historically shaped the gradually emerging environmental consciousness in the West” (1994: 11). Many environmental ethicists have tried to base themselves on non-Western traditions. In particular, they have pointed out that Eastern thinking is holistic in the sense that the human and the natural worlds are inextricably intertwined within an organic whole. Culture and nature are inseparable. For instance, Buddhism and Hinduism have developed the principle of compassion for all sentient beings (Clarke, 1993). For the Hindu, nature “is an expression of the Godhead, not something created but something poured out of the divine essence. As a result it too is ‘good,’ and should be treated with reverence” (Ferkiss, 1993: 135).

Taoists also revere nature. Tao is defined as “the way.” According to Taoists, “the way to live is according to nature—external nature and one’s own” (Ferkiss, 1993: 140). Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism emphasise that humans are linked to the natural environment (see De Silva, 1993; Ip, 1993). De Silva believes that the notion of living in harmony with nature, the aesthetic appreciation of nature, as well as the Buddhist contemplative attitude may help human beings to promote conservation. Japanese Zen Buddhism influenced the emerging contemporary environmental movement in the mid-twentieth century (Callicott, 1994(b): 11). Although Sarre (1995) inserts the qualification that Hinduism and Buddhism seem to be ineffective in a society compelled by mass poverty to pursue economic growth and technological development, they have values which are consistent with environmentalism. Chinese Taoism is a mystic teaching and recognises the essential unity of humanity with nature, and the fundamental harmonisation of all things through balancing of yin and yang (Clarke, 1993: 22). Po-Keung Ip (1993)

argues that Taoist philosophy can provide the necessary metaphysical underpinnings upon which an environmental ethics should rest, since it teaches that everything is inherently connected to everything else, and recognises the intrinsic values of the natural environment.

Moreover, some philosophers have appealed to animism. It is worth noting that Animism has been practised by native Americans. The followers of animism regard the natural world as having certain human qualities and containing sacred objects that command respect or worship. For many native Americans all of the Earth is sacred. They regard the Earth as a living being, sacred in all her parts. They do not strive to conquer nature but to live in harmony with it. Callicott (1982) confirms that American Indian representation of nature is more animistic and symbolic than mechanical. Traditional American Indians regard all features of the environment as inspirited. The native American conceives nature as an element in which he exists (Mommaday, 1994). All humans and the non-human natural entities possess a consciousness, reason, and volition, and are co-equal members of a natural social order. They all have personalities. People belong to a human community and a community of all nature as well. “Existence in this larger society, just as existence in a family and tribal context, place people in an environment in which reciprocal responsibilities and mutual obligations are taken for granted and assumed without question or reflection” (Callicott, 1982: 306). All creatures are believed to be the children of one father and one mother. The bonds of kinship, mutuality, and reciprocity bind diversified and complex world together. Callicott maintains that the traditional American Indian attitude toward nature provides the foundations for ethical restraint in relation to non-human nature. Further, Callicott

stresses that “the world view typical of American Indian peoples has included and supported an environmental ethic, while that of Europeans has encouraged human alienation from the natural environment and an exploitative practical relationship with it” (Callicott, 1982:293).

Similarly, the Hawaiian people conceive the earth as the ancestral mother of each person and the sky as father. They believe that to mistreat any aspect of the biosphere, of the extended family, is to mistreat ourselves (Gruver, 1994:304). The Australian aboriginal peoples also believe that human beings are united with the land and with the other forms of life on the land (see Callicott, 1994: 172-184). They “believe that human life exists within the broader context of a living and conscious cosmos. Humans’ responsibility lies in actions that nurture and enhance human life, the life of other species (plants and animals) and the relationships among humans and between humans and others. Other animal species are believed to be acting responsibly. People, other animals, and other categories of beings are moral agents. The whole cosmos is maintained through the conscious and responsible actions of different forms of life“ (Rose quoted in Callicott, 1994: 179).

Likewise, The Maori people in New Zealand conceive of the environment as a community of kin rather than as resources to be exploited. Patterson (1994) contends that the Maori traditions can be considered as symbolic representations of an ecological principle. Similar to other indigenous groups, the Kuna people of North-east Panama symbolise the Earth as mother, for it gives the inhabitants all the necessary resources for their existence and survival. They have designated some places, which are the sources of a great biodiversity of species of plants and animals, as sacred places. They believe

that life and nature are interrelated (see Inatoy, 1995).

Other writers seem to assert that some Eastern traditions do not lead to the establishment of a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural environment. Yi-Fu Tuan, for instance, doubts whether attitude and values determine behaviour. He says that Western humanists appreciate the virtues of Oriental’s quiescent and adaptive approach towards nature. In China, the philosophical-ethical precepts of Taoism and later, Buddhism served as the basis for an adaptive attitude towards nature. Although Tuan (1968) recognised that old traditions of forest care existed in China, he lamented that both Mediterranean Europe and China have engaged in a gigantic transformation of environment that has led to deforestation and erosion. Forests were depleted for the making of charcoal, export and for the construction of old Chinese cities, and to deprive dangerous animals of their hiding places. He adds that although Buddhism is responsible for the preservation of trees around temple compounds, it has contributed to the depletion of the timber resources by introducing to China the idea of the cremation of the dead. He underlines that there are intractable discrepancies between environmental behaviour and attitude. In other words, what people think is less closely related to how people live than we usually assume (Tuan, 1968: 188).

In contrast to Tuan, Callicott argues that the environmental impact of Greek and Roman civilization was consistent with the general thesis that worldview substantially affects behaviour. He states that “[a]mong the Chinese before Westernization, the facts which Yi-Fu Tuan presents, indicates as many congruencies as discrepancies between the traditional Taoist and

Buddhist attitude toward nature and Chinese environmental behaviour” (Callicott, 1982: 308). White also states that “[w]hat people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (White, 1994: 48-49).

I share the view held by Callicott and Ames that “[b]ehaviour does not flow exclusively from attitude and values; but neither are attitudes and values simply irrelevant to what people do and how they live” (Callicott and Ames, 1989: 285). Callicott and Ames seem to argue that the present environmental crisis had its roots in both Eastern and Western civilisations. “Reflection on the ancient record of human depredation and environmental destruction suggests that the roots of our ecological crisis reach far beyond the variable topsoil of intellectual history, whether Eastern or Western, into the common substrata of human nature itself” (Callicott and Ames, 1989: 282).

Ferkiss also states that “[d]espite their theoretical respect for nature, the Chinese like the native Americans, mistreated nature as much as the Westerners did ... China’s land-use practices were not really in harmony with basic Chinese philosophy” (1993: 141). Some studies also show that various species of terrestrial and maritime fauna were depleted by the Maori prior to European contact. They also destroyed large areas of native forests by overburning (see Perrett, 1998). One contemporary leader of the Maori forwarded a similar idea. “I am not going to suggest to you today that this [environmental damage of the south Island] is all the fault of perfidious Pakeha [European] culture, because I shudder to think what my own tupuna [ancestors]

would have done had they bulldozers” (quoted in Perrett, 1998: 379).

One also might want to look at how things developed in Japan where the dominant religion—Shinto—is basically animistic and would, therefore, be expected to have had a more positive impact on human-environment relations. Shinto is a form of nature worship and related to the concept of *Kami*, sacred spirits that are believed to be found in natural objects. “As seen in Shinto mythology the *Kami* express their sacredness and power through their embodiment in nature” (Ferkiss, 1993: 146). People are encouraged to live in harmony with nature. But, Shinto has, in fact, hardly prevented Japanese industrial development from being exceedingly destructive. According to Sarre, “[t]he problem as in India, came from adoption of Western style industrialisation and economics” (1995: 121).

Although in some cases theory and practice, belief and people’s actions may fail to correspond, modern environmental ethicists may derive some environmentally friendly principles from the religious beliefs of various cultural groups. That is why many environmental ethicists have appealed to non-Western traditions. However, as Rolston has noted, it is not easy to import non-Western views into the secular West (1999:417). “What they have to say can perhaps be recovered by the monotheists listening to them, using them to correct their own tendencies to anthropocentrism and to forge a better ethic” (Rolston, 1999(a): 418).

Despite the fact that advances have been made through recent discourse on the environmental concern of non-Western traditions, most of the related research has centred on Asia, native American Indians, and Australian Aborigines, with little attention being paid to most of Africa.

From 1979 to 1999, for instance, only one article about Africa by Burnett and Kamuyu (1994) appeared in the journal *Environmental Ethics*, which is considered as a forum for diverse interests and attitudes. Those who have studied non-Western religions and philosophies (see, for instance, Callicott, 1982; Hargrove, 1989; Ip, 1993; Patterson, 1994; Mommaday, 1994; Marshall, 1995; Sessions, 1995; Kwiatkowska-Szatscheider, 1997 and others) have overlooked the contribution of Africa to environmental ethics. They either kept quiet or what they said about Africa was rather thin compared with what they said about native Americans, Asians and Australian Aborigines. Hargrove, for instance, did not say anything about African traditions when he boldly asserted that “[a]n open-minded comparative study of Eastern environmental attitudes and values will enable Western environmental philosophers better to recognize and criticize their most ingrained and otherwise unconscious assumptions inherited from the long and remarkably homogeneous history of Western thought” (Hargrove, 1989: xx). Similarly, Rolston writes: “what seems more realistic to expect is that representative Eastern convictions will, in encounter with the West, provoke the West to reassess either its own theory or practice, resulting, for example, in a less anthropocentric framework and in a more sensitive ability to value nature” (Rolston, 1987: 174).

On the other hand, Callicott reviewed some works on the Lele of Congo, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the San, South-central African people often called “bushmen” and other indigenous African religions, and came up with the conclusion that in Africa indigenous religions tend to be both monotheistic and anthropocentric. By referring to the works of some anthropologists he boldly derived the conclusion that

[a]pparently, therefore, Africa looms as a big blank spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics for a very good reason. African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interests. Hence one might expect to distill from it no more than a weak and indirect environmental ethic, similar to the type of ecologically enlightened utilitarianism, focused on long-range human welfare... Or perhaps one could develop a distinctly African stewardship environmental ethic grounded in African monotheism. . . from the core belief of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth (1994 : 273).

According to many African cultural groups, individuals are not detached from social groups. Personal identity is associated with community. In reference to Yoruba religion, Callicott states that the germ of an African environmental ethic may be found in the notion of embedded individuality—of individuality as a nexus of communal relationships. Add to the intense sense of social embeddedness an equally vivid sense of embeddedness in the biotic community, and anthropocentric African environmentalism might then be transformed into a nonanthropocentric African environmentalism (1994 : 167).

He further asserts that only the San seem to develop responsible environmental attitudes and values, although there is no evidence that shows that their attitude towards fellow members of the biotic community is similar to that expressed by the North American Ojibwa. The San believe that human and non-human beings have similar behaviour. The cosmogony of the San suggests that they “regarded themselves as one with the other fauna and practiced a quiet policy of live and let live with their nonhuman neighbours”

(Callicott, 1994(b): 172). However, the San did not develop elaborately articulated paradigms of interspecies relationships and failed to attract the attention of contemporary environmentalists (1994: 173). Although Callicott tried to show that the San have shown positive relationship with their nonhuman neighbors, he committed the fallacy of hasty generalisation. He should have studied the worldviews of other cultural groups to support his conclusion. Contrary to Callicott's assumption, the Oromo consider not only the well-being of humans but also other non-human creatures.

I would like to underline that anyone who believes that there is nothing to be learned from Africa is terribly ignorant of Africa or is probably a racist. They could have learned a lot from those who are sufficiently familiar with the ecological insights of African peasants. In whatever way, an environmental ethicist who overlooks African environmental ethics will make his or her subject incomplete.

One may object that Africa has the worst environmental record on Earth and has no contribution to make to global environmental management. Africans, perhaps, cannot overcome their own environmental and developmental crisis. As it stands, this seems to be the correct assessment of the African environmental record. But the real issue is not as simple as that. One has to examine how and why Africa has faced an environmental and developmental crisis before concluding that Africans are environmentally unfriendly.

It is worth noting that some studies show that the Oromo people ascribe important value to the natural environment (see Knutsson, 1967; Bartels, 1983; Hultin 1987; 1994). Kassam and Gemetchu (1994) argue that the Oromo have some of

the finest principles and codes of behaviour towards nature. They stress that the Oromo maintain a perfect balance between nature and culture. They have further outlined how the Boran pastoralists protect the natural vegetation and manage pasturelands through a combination of different mechanisms. Religious attitudes, values and practices force peasants to revere nature and natural places. As I have argued elsewhere (1997 a and b), it is in the name of religion that peasants preserve certain kinds of trees, animals, and sources of water. Therefore, traditional leadership and local religious institutions have contributed much to save the natural environment.

The critical examination of Oromo world views thus suggest that some Oromo groups have developed strong indigenous environmental ethics. On the one hand like anthropocentrists the Oromo protect their environment for utilitarian reasons. They think that the value of the environment lies in human use. Trees are a source of capital, investment and insurance against hard times. Trees protect soil from erosion and provide the supply of timber, wood and food. Peasants are conscious that, when their environment deteriorates, their life and future generations of humans will be harmed. The Oromo consider the cycles of nature, the coming of the rainy season, the movement of the stars, solar cycles, the movement and the cries of birds, the nature of entrails, the behaviour of domestic and wild animals and the condition of trees in order to grapple with practical problems of everyday life and future problems. From their practical experience, they know the growing characteristics of each crop and tree, suitable environments, number of months of rain required, planting and harvesting times, crop care and crop labour requirements. As Kwiatkowska-Szatzscheider noted, for indigenous people, which I also think applicable to

many peasant farmers in the world, “[t]he apparent manifestation of reverence toward the forces behind the natural scene is rooted more in the need to assure one’s own survival than in regarding all natural entities as possessing inherent value by virtue of their interrelation to the surrounding world” (1997 : 275).

But the Oromo are not exclusively pragmatists. The bonds between the environment and the rural people are not only material but also spiritual and moral. Normative principles are implicit in the thought and practice of the Oromo people. For them, land is not only a resource for humans’ utilitarian ends, but also it has its own inherent value given to it by *Waaqa*. It is interesting to reiterate that for the Oromo, *Waaqa* (God) is the guardian of all things, and nobody is free to destroy natural things to satisfy his/her needs. The Oromo believe that the law of society is based on the laws of *Waaqa* as given in nature (Gemetchu, 1993). As Gemetchu correctly observed, “[a]cceptance of the law that regulates Oromo society implies acceptance of the Oromo creator” (1996: 100). Accordingly, like non-anthropocentric modern environmental ethics, the Oromo religion restricts the freedom of human beings in their dealings with nature. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the Oromo world view has fostered a responsible attitude towards nature, plants and animals (Workineh, 1997 (b), 1998). The essence of this religious tradition is to live in partnership with the natural environment.

The Oromo conception of *Saffuu* is an interesting example to consider. *Saffuu* is an important concept in the beliefs and practices of the Oromo people. *Saffuu* is a moral concept that serves as the ethical basis that helps individuals to avoid morally wrong actions. *Saffuu* is “knowing how to relate natural laws that are given

by *Waaqa* and to act according to them”. The Oromo believe that *Saffuu* involves avoiding embarrassment, bad conversations, lying, stealing, working on holidays, and so forth. *Saffuu* is respecting one another and respecting one’s own *Ayyaana* (spirit) and other’s *Ayyaana*. The Oromo said *Saffuu* is *ulfina* (respect). We need to show respect to our father, mother, aunt, uncle and our mother Earth. Knowing *Saffuu* will help us to maintain our culture and revere *Waaqa*. *Saffuu* can also refer to expression of astonishment, fear, pain, pity, shame, etc. (see Tilahun, 1989 : 511).

Saffuu also refers to the existence of an attitude compounded of both distance and respect between all things. As Bartels rightly noted, *Saffuu* “implies that all things have a place of their own in the cosmic and social order, and that they should keep this place. Their place is conditioned by the specific *Ayyaana* each of them has received from *Waaqa*. . . *Saffuu* implies both rights and duties” (Bartels, 1983 : 170).

Therefore, the Oromo conception of *Saffuu* consolidates the argument that the Oromo pay due attention to the moral status of both humans and non-human things. Violation of *Saffuu* will affect the positive relation between individuals, humans and the natural environment.

It should be noted that their harmony with the natural environment does not rule out the fact that the Oromo have been using it for centuries. Like other people in the world, the Oromo strive to know the mystery of the world and to control the uncontrollable. To put matters another way, my studies of the life histories of peasants in Borana and Ilubabor show that besides their reverence for the natural environment, they have all along been actively manipulating the natural

environment. The fact of the matter is that most of the Oromo people do not abuse nature's generosity by consuming more than what is needed. The Oromo religion may thus indicate the proper relationship between humankind and nature.

In this connection, although some writers have mixed feelings about the environmental impacts of the Jewish and Christian doctrine of creation, some Churches in the West call for a relationship of respect and care in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This is a promising move and does not contradict the general principle of Oromo religion. As Attfield has suggested, "[i]n the United States, most of the Churches are nowadays strongly environmentalist and strong enough to exercise considerable political influence, and even philosophers and ethicists committed to the independence of ethics from religion may need to take all this into account, if only on pragmatic grounds" (1998 : 79). It is imperative that the dialogue between traditional and modern religion serve as the basis for constructive borrowing to the benefit of both peasant farmers and environmental theorists.

The foregoing discussion about Oromo attitudes towards the environment thus suggests that Oromo environmental knowledge can offer a good foundation for modern environmental ethics and science. One may argue that this claim would not stand up well for people who do not share Oromo beliefs. Although this could be a valid criticism, my intention is not to suggest that Oromo environmental ethics can generate universal principles by which worldwide environmental problems will be put under control. What I am suggesting is that modern environmental ethicists can make use of the wealth of biological and ecological insights and sustainable resources management systems developed by the Oromo people and other cultural

groups in order to effectively deal with environmental problems.

To put matters another way, Oromo attitudes towards the environment may offer insights for redirecting the behaviour of neotechnic societies towards a more sustainable path. It is worth noting that "there is considerable impressionistic evidence of IK [indigenous knowledge] transfer from traditional societies to industrial countries (e.g., acupuncture, herbal medicine, dehydration salts, etc.)" (World Bank, 1998 : 2). Many successful Western medicines were based on traditional Chinese medicine. Moreover, "of the 119 drugs with known chemical structures that are still extracted from higher plants and used in industrial countries, over 74 percent were discovered by chemists attempting to identify the chemical substances in plants used in traditional medicine" (Farnsworth, 1988).

Modern environmental scientists can enrich their knowledge by making systematic inquiry into environmentally sound Oromo and other cultures' practical experiences and religious beliefs. Peasants employ different methods such as progressive adaptive learning, curiosity, hypotheses, observation, empirical testing which are germane to conventional, positivist empirically based scientific approaches for solving environmental problems (Chambers, 1989 : 95). What is interesting is that "[m]any activities undertaken by rural people and scientists are similar: they distinguish, name and classify entities in their environments: they observe, compare and analyse: they experiment; they attempt to predict" (Chambers, 1989 : 93). As Nandy persuasively (1987) argues, today the choice is no longer between traditionalism and modernity in their pure forms but an enlightened middle way between the two.

Although moral and empirical claims seem to be of logically different sorts, empirical facts about the natural environment are important for modern environmental ethics. In fact, David Hume asserts that we cannot rightly infer any normative claim from any set of purely empirical premises (1969). He was concerned with the distinction between fact and value. He seemed to imply that science cannot be a basis for ethics, and normative policy recommendation cannot be grounded on science. However, experience confirms that “empirical suppositions play a crucial role in moral argument” (VanDeVeer and Pierce, 1994 (a): 9). Science is useful in the exploration of particular issues in applied ethics. “Thus, many explorations in environmental ethics must make good use of the results of biology, botany, chemistry, geology, climatology, marine science, forestry, and so on (both basic and derivative and mixed fields)” (VanDeVeer and Pierce, 1994 (a): 9). Likewise, modern environmental ethics and science may make use of peasants environmental and agricultural science.

As I have argued elsewhere, modern environmental scientists can derive the following lessons from traditional versions of the Oromo environmental ethic: the ethics of preservation, an ethic of production — the fact that without production and transformation of nature human life is unthinkable; the fact that the green environment is a *sine qua non* for the survival of all living things; the positive relationship with the environment and an appreciation of the Earth as a mother of life (see Workineh, 1995, 1997 a). Likewise, other peasant farmers who overexploit the natural environment in the world can learn positive attitudes towards the natural environment particularly from the Boran Oromo.

Western and other modern scholars should also take cognizance of the fact that knowledge, which comes from communing with nature, is equally significant for the health of the environment, for it is based on experience. Hence, “[o]ne thing Western man must learn from the African is that mental analysis and generalizations must come last rather than first in our knowledge of anything, we must first live and tangle with that thing” (Kaboha, 1992: 76).

Moreover, modern environmental ethicists and theorists can learn about the nature and specific features of the local flora and fauna, climates, diseases and other threats to health, pharmacological remedies, bee-keeping, agricultural and fishing practices from Oromo peasants and other local communities.

The foregoing discussion about Oromo environmental and agricultural sciences suggests that protection of the environment and promotion of economic development are complementary; they are the basis of sustainable development. Peasants use various sustainable methods that enable them to secure food, income, employment, social welfare, diversification of crops, and preservation of animal and crop species. As a matter of fact, the social and economic activities of traditional societies correspond to many key goals of sustainability. The evidence indicates that many regions of the South contain the seed of their own sustainable future (Norberg-Hodge and Goering, 1995 : 23). Furthermore, many writers have confirmed the positive role of indigenous knowledge in sustainable agricultural development (see Brokensha *et al*, 1980, Thrupp, 1989, Ahmed, 1994). Thus, it is advisable to critically study indigenous environmental ethics rather than totally ignoring it.

What Peasant Farmers can learn from Modern Environmental Theorists

Peasant farmers can make use of the knowledge of environmental ethicists. Environmental theorists may alert peasants to understand the long range effects of environmental degradation that are beyond the purview of local peasants and otherwise unavailable. Environmental theorists with varied backgrounds can join peasant farmers who have multidimensional knowledge of the natural environment and help them develop further knowledge of it. Research oriented traditional institutions may encourage peasants to carry out their own research.

Moreover, peasants by themselves may not meet the growing demands of the growing population by restricting themselves to local knowledge. Modern science and technology are required to increase productivity and to satisfy the growing demands of population. Peasants should enjoy the material benefits that come from novel economic changes. Peasants need support from the government to improve their agriculture, to maintain biodiversity, to adopt new varieties, to manage their bees in a more efficient way than using traditional hives and thereby to optimise yields of honey and beeswax and to improve indigenous environmental science.

As Chambers observes, “neither rural people nor outside scientists can know in advance what the others know. It is by talking, traveling, asking questions, listening, observing and doing things together that they can most effectively learn from one another” (1989 : 100).

Mutual understanding between the rural people and scientists can generate many common principles and areas of cooperation.

Conclusion

The seriousness of environmental problems has attracted the attention of environmental ethicists. Some philosophers have treated nature in a utilitarian way as a means to the best consequences. Others have tried to extend morality to the natural environment. They argue that the natural environment has inherent or intrinsic value.

Most environmental ethicists have pretended that environmental and developmental problems can only be solved if human beings accept their theory. But this claim is practically untenable, and philosophically unsound. This paper suggests that environmental problems cannot be solved by one single approach or theory alone. Each school has its own positive contribution to the development of environmental consciousness. Better said, global environmental problems can be tackled through more cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches.

The foregoing discussion also reveals that Oromo traditional attitudes towards the environment have enabled the Oromo to consider themselves as part of the natural environment and take care of it. It is believed that the Earth is the mother of all living things and demands a proper care. The rationale behind Oromo traditional religion has an important message for modern environmental ethicists. In many respects, Oromo traditional religion is environmentally friendly, and fosters positive relationship with the environment. The preceding discussion makes it clear that for the Oromo, land is not only a resource for man's utilitarian ends, but also it needs care because it has been given to them by their ancestors, and has its own value given to it by *Waaqa*. Accordingly, the present generation is obliged to preserve it and hand it over to future

generations. The Oromo thus believe that the natural environment and human beings are linked together in a web of relationships. There is no unbridgeable gap between humans and supra-humans, *Waaqa* and the Earth.

Not all practices of peasants are environmentally friendly. Some practices should be changed in order to avoid their negative effects on the natural environment. The negative attitude towards women and the attempt to exploit the people in the name of Oromo traditional religion are destructive and must be changed.

I would like to argue that peasants should play a role in environmental protection and development efforts. Only by involving peasants at the grassroots level will we have the political strength and will to implement serious changes needed to address serious environmental and developmental problems. Peasants should be encouraged to use appropriate and alternative technologies, renewable resources, organic farming practices rather than chemical based agriculture, drought resistant crops and the most productive species, and perennial herbaceous vegetation, to maintain biodiversity, adopt new varieties, improve indigenous environmental science and to manage their bees in a more efficient way than with the traditional fixed-comb hives and thereby optimise yields of honey and beeswax.

This study suggests that we can overcome the dichotomy between indigenous and modern environmental ethics. The either/or of indigenous knowledge against modern knowledge is an ideological construction. Some western scholars and modernising groups consider modern knowledge as the

universal horizon for humanity. On the other hand, they marginalise and disenfranchise indigenous knowledge. As Callicott suggests, “[t]he world’s indigenous and traditional systems of thought must create a network of environmental ethics — each a jewel, with its own unique color and composition, reflecting the light of all the others” (Callicott, 1994(b): 234). The combination of indigenous and modern environmental ethics may facilitate cross cultural understanding and thereby enhance the process of development and local and global environmental management. Isolated attempts of the rural poor or modern technicians and environmental theorists alone hardly avoid threats to the environment. Thus, there are many things that the rural people know and environmental ethicists do not, and vice versa. In some cases peasants who live on and by the land are far more resourceful and innovative than modern technicians and environmental ethicists in the area of environmental control and soil conservation. Thus modern environmental scientists and the rural people can learn from one another. I would argue that peasants’ knowledge should be linked with modern environmental ethics and technology. I would argue that the kind of ethic embodied in indigenous beliefs and values does not contradict the kind of ethic found in modern beliefs and values. But these kinds of ethics complement each other, and in some instances one is superior to the other.

This study specifically recommends that African and non-African scholars should critically study the vast amount of unrecorded and rapidly disappearing indigenous environmental knowledge.

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